

 MENU

 PRINT VERSION

 HELP & FAQs

# Student Growth During an Intensive English Program: Not Just Language Skills

Scott Menking

Shimane University

*This study examines Japanese students' growth during an Intensive English Program (IEP). This paper explores data that verifies how students obtained both knowledge of themselves and of the host culture in addition to learning the English language. Questionnaires administered before and after the program as well as direct observation of the students provided the data for this study. At the end of the three-week program in the United States, the students indicated that they had acquired more than just language skills. This paper includes the students' perceptions of what*

*they gained during the IEP and what part of their learning will be most helpful in the future. The changes in students' impressions of the United States after they attended the Intensive English Program are also discussed.*

この研究は、日本人大学生が英語の集中的な学習訓練—Intensive English Program (IEP)を受けてどう成長したかを検証したものである。本論文では、学生がIEPを経ることで、たんに英語を学ぶだけでなく、自分自身について、また英語を取り巻く文化について多くを学んだかを、データにとって探求する。これらのデータは、IEPの開始前と終了後に行ったアンケート調査および期間中直接の観察から得たが、それによると、学生たちがアメリカ合衆国における3週間の集中訓練を終えて、単なる言語技能以上のものを習得できたことが分かる。本論文において、IEPで習得したことを学生たちがどう受け止めているか、得たものの内でどんなことが将来役に立つと思っているかについて述べた。また、IEPを経ることで合衆国に対する印象がどう変わったかについても述べた。

Over 13,000 Japanese students journeyed to the United States to study in Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in 2002 (Institute of International Education, 2003). In spite of the large number of participants, there have been few studies that focused on what students learned about themselves and the discoveries the program participants made about the culture and the people in the country they visited. A study by Tanaka and Ellis (2003), for example, reported on proficiency and on how students' beliefs about learning English were positively affected by participation in an IEP, but they did not examine other educational aspects beyond learning the English language. Program design and the benefits of short-term

English studies, in terms of linguistic skills and confidence, have also been addressed (Bodycott & Crew, 2000). Beamer and Sasaki (2003) discussed sources of students' satisfaction and dissatisfaction with an IEP. Similarly, Drake's study (1997) focused on successful curricular and extra-curricular aspects of the IEP under consideration without discussing how students themselves felt they had grown. Because one of the benefits of IEPs that has rarely been examined is what students discover about themselves, this paper explores data substantiating how students in an IEP obtained knowledge of themselves and the host culture.

## Program

The three-week Intensive English Program was conducted in the United States at a university that has continued an exchange relationship with the Japanese university for 20 years. The American university is located in a small town in a wide mountain valley in central Washington state. Both the classroom instruction and the afternoon activities were organized by the host institution for this group of Japanese students; there were no other participants in the IEP.

Every weekday morning, the students had three hours of classroom instruction with a native English-speaking instructor. The classroom instruction focused on verbal communication and included, among other things, small talk etiquette, conversations about feelings, and differences in cultural norms between Japan and the local area. The students became aware of and talked about the Amish in the community and the history of the Native Americans who lived in the area prior to the European immigrant settlement.

Some afternoons, students spent time in two different groups, each with a conversation partner. The conversation partners were integral in helping the students mingle with American university students. Time spent with the conversation partners and other university students was important for the Japanese students because they became involved in conversations that do not naturally occur in the classroom. Throughout the IEP, students were repeatedly observed to be enthusiastic about the time spent with the conversation partners because the Japanese students learned about Americans and their culture, using English to accomplish it. The Japanese students were also observed to have the same reaction and expressed a sense of accomplishment when they were involved in activities with other university groups, including other international students who were staying for a longer period of study.

Other opportunities that allowed the students to interact in natural settings with people from the community included a two-night homestay, horseback riding, river rafting, and a visit to a chimpanzee language research facility. All of these activities made the program enjoyable, providing an environment for the Japanese students to interact with others and to actively learn in the target language culture. Interaction in real-life conversations is important since "the opportunity to produce comprehensible output in meaningful interaction seems to be a crucial factor" (Yule, 1996, p. 196) in developing second language abilities.

## Program participants

Seven students (5 female, 2 male) participated in the three-week Intensive English Program. One student was in the first year of university. Three students were in their second year, and

three were third-year students. Only one student was majoring in English. The other areas of major academic study were chemistry (2 students), law (2 students), economics (1 student), and mathematics (1 student). This is in contrast to most recent studies of IEPs whose participants were English majors or students studying to teach English as a second language (e.g., Bodycott & Crew, 2000; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003).

## Data collection

To compare pre- and post-IEP impressions and thoughts, the students were given two questionnaires in English. Questions were developed to explore students' perceptions of their gains and achievements, the difficulties encountered, and the most significant potential usefulness of the program. Questions were also designed to determine how students' impressions of the United States changed after participation in the program. The first questionnaire was administered before the students departed for the United States, and the second was given on the last day the students were in the United States. Answers from both questionnaires were compared individually and collectively. Even before departure for the United States, the students expressed a desire to accomplish as much as possible in English. Consequently, it was determined to administer an English questionnaire. The students' English ability was adequate to read and answer both questionnaires in English, but they were instructed that if they felt they could not express themselves in English, they could answer in Japanese. In addition to gathering data with questionnaires, the author accompanied the students and collected data by close observation during the planned activities as well as the impromptu activities.

The study is limited by two main factors. First, because the students paid to participate in the program, there is the possibility that students were reluctant to admit negative experiences. This potential bias in the students' self-reported answers was considered. For example, throughout the IEP, the author took detailed notes after observing the participants. These notes were consulted during the analysis to confirm whether the students' written comments accurately reflected their actions. There were no instances where the comments contradicted the observations. The second limitation of the study is the number of participants. With only seven participants, the conclusions cannot be generalized to the IEP participant population in Japan, although the study provides direction for future studies.

## Findings

### *What students gained*

On the pre-departure questionnaire, the students were asked what they planned to gain from participation in the Intensive English Program. Although one student did not write anything and student B gave a less definitive answer, "*I want to gain positiveness,*" the other five students anticipated gains associated with meeting people and/or experiencing the culture. Student G wrote, "*I want to see different culture people. I have never done experience.*" In addition, student A noted, "*I want to communication with a lot of people in English.*" Along with student A, student F mentioned language-related goals.

On the post-IEP questionnaire, the students were asked if they had gained anything from the program, and if so, what. Another question asked them to explain what they had accomplished. The questions were deliberately vague to allow for a broad range of responses. Throughout the IEP the author witnessed

the students accomplishing their general pre-departure goals. This was further reflected in the post-IEP comments of all of the students, who mentioned staying in the United States, experiencing a foreign culture, and communicating with Americans. For example, student C noted, *“I accomplished everyday life in America. And I talked with people in English.”* Similarly, student A wrote, *“I gained language is not the only means of communication. Communication is very important for people. I could experience some American family and American country side life.”* As this example demonstrates, the students were often more specific in answering the post-IEP questions.

Post-IEP comments also reflected personal change that had not been anticipated in the pre-departure goals. Student D wanted to *“Experience in foregn culture, foregn friends,”* but at the end of the IEP, she reflected on her reevaluation of her life. *“This trip give me chance that I know myself more. I gain another dream after graduation college.”* In a similar manner, prior to the program, student F wrote, *“I have never been to foriegn country. So I want to go to America and experience American culture. And I want to study English a lot.”* After three weeks in the United States, he commented, *“I gain extensive eyes. I gain confidence for my life later. I gain courage for getting over wall language.”* The result was a change in his direction in life; this will be discussed in the next section.

### **Most helpful in the future**

When asked on the post-IEP questionnaire what experiences during the program will be the most helpful in the future, student A wrote, *“Everything!! Because I think every experience are mental food.”* At the beginning of the program, she expressed her desire to learn as much as possible during the three weeks. Because of this attitude, the IEP experience gave her more

knowledge and insight for her collegiate studies and post-graduation career. Furthermore, five students’ comments specifically reflected how they felt their perspectives broadened as a result of participating in the IEP. While student D wrote, we *“met many people. I heard many opinions from them,”* student B noted, *“This trip broaden my horizons.”* International communication requires not only a common language but also sociolinguistic competence to better understand one another’s utterances (Canale & Swain, 1980). Without an understanding of cultural assumptions implicit in communication, understanding is greatly hindered (Wardhaugh, 2002). Examining these responses, one can conclude that the students grew sociolinguistically. Because the American university is in a small town, the students had more opportunities to explore and to meet people than they would have had at a large university in an urban environment where it is more difficult to meet and talk with people. Consequently, these participants’ personal encounters during the IEP allowed them to more clearly understand how some Americans perceive Japan. This, in turn, reduced the likelihood of future miscommunication with other Americans.

Student F, on the other hand, had a reflective discovery about his life in Japan. *“To have lived I can’t speak Japanese. I feel small that I have my back to the wall in Japan.”* Speaking with him later to clarify what he wrote, he explained that he now more clearly understands how he was limited and how he was limiting himself before participating in the IEP. As a result, after returning to Japan, this student spoke with his faculty advisor and has been accepted for a master’s degree program in chemistry. He said that before the IEP he did not have a clear idea of what he wanted to do after graduation, but from his experience in the program, he now has a broader perspective of his own life and of the world around him and he feels he can achieve more.

### **Impressions of the United States**

On the pre-departure questionnaire, students were asked to briefly write their impressions of the United States. Four students gave pre-program impressions using the words *free*, *freedom*, or *liberty* (e.g., student B: “*I think the United States is very freedom country.*” and student D: “*liberty, danger, abundant nature*”). Three students mentioned *big*, *wide*, or *strong*, and two students noted the expanse of America’s nature. Student F commented, “*I think that American people have a broad mind and America has broad lands too.*”

As these learners chose to participate in this IEP and expressed their desire to learn outside of the classroom, they were self-directed. By discussing and experiencing various aspects of American culture, the students were involved in dialogic learning which is concerned with “ideals, feelings, and abstract social, political, philosophical and educational concepts” (Bittel, 1989, p. 9). Consequently, at the end of the program, the students were asked to write how their impressions of the United States had changed. Since firsthand experience often does change thinking, the answers to these questions are important for discovering whether their time studying in the IEP resulted in a change in their impressions of America.

Student F’s impressions did not change as much as the other students’ views. While student F discussed his decrease in anxiety about travel to other countries, all of the other students’ views shifted from broad stereotypes of the United States to impressions that were based on personal experiences. In his post-IEP impressions student F wrote, “*The first I felt scary against America because I have never been to foreign country. But now I feel relax, and want to stay here more.*” On the other hand, student E expressed her discovery that “*I*

*didn’t think American is kind like this time. But they were very kind.*” Student A revealed her realization that Americans know more about Japan than she previously thought. On the pre-departure questionnaire she wrote, “*There are beautiful nature, many mountains, rivers, animals etc.,*” but after participating in the IEP, she wrote, “*Ellensburg is country side, but a lot of Americans know about Japanese things. There are many people they are interested in Japanese.*” Because one of the local industries produces a special hay for export to Japan, the student did, therefore, realize that some people in the United States do have a connection to Japan. This new understanding and insight will be helpful in the future because she is majoring in international economics.

### **Homestay**

One factor contributing to the students’ changed impressions was the homestay. The homestay was three days and two nights, encompassing the second weekend of the IEP. While two families hosted two students each, three families hosted one student each. All of the homestay families had previously hosted Japanese students.

Homestays provided the students with opportunities to have meaningful communicative interaction with families, further developing their sociolinguistic competence. This was reflected in the responses to the question, “What did you learn from your homestay experience?” None of the students gave negative comments. Student D, for example, wrote, “*I felt difference of culture between America to Japan about foods, religion, and so on.*” This student mentioned food. During most of the IEP, the students ate in the university cafeteria. The type of food served at the cafeteria matched their stereotypes of what Americans eat every day, but during the IEP they said that the quantity was

even more than they expected. Cafeteria dining may not be a good example of eating habits in the United States, but it is a part of the American university culture. During the homestays, however, the students were exposed to family-style dinners and found that families eat smaller portions and generally have a healthier diet than their pre-departure stereotypes.

Students also learned about American families. Student E learned about “*American family’s life for example, praying before eating and taking care of children.*” In addition, two students stayed with a family that had adopted two children from South Korea. One of these students (C) wrote, “*In America, people adopt a child usually. And American people have good smell soap.*” Adoption is not as common in Japan as in the United States. In discussing this comment with the student, it became clear that this was her intended meaning rather than implying that most American families adopt children. Staying with a family with adopted children allowed her to expand her perceptions of families in the United States.

Upon their return to the dormitories, the students exchanged stories about their homestay experiences, thereby compounding their learning. For example, all of the students learned about adoption from the two students who stayed with the family with two adopted Korean children. The female students also learned about weddings and were envious of the two male students who both had the unique opportunity to attend weddings. One of them (G) wrote, “*I learned American marriage and normal American life style.*” These experiences are unattainable through classroom study and invaluable to IEP participants.

After the homestay, the author asked the students if they had any problems during their homestays. It would not be uncommon

to have some problems, but none of the students mentioned any. Two Japanese working at the American university queried the students independently, yet again the students did not complain or discuss any problems about the homestays. This may be unique because of the families’ enthusiasm, because the homestay was short, and because the families were accustomed to hosting Japanese students. Further investigation is necessary.

### **Most difficult part of the IEP**

Like the homestay comments, students did not express negative feelings either verbally during the IEP or in writing on the post-IEP questionnaire. Furthermore, after the students returned to Japan, the international student office at the Japanese university asked the students for complaints about the program. The only complaint, made by three students, was that there was too much food and that some of the food was too sweet.

On the post-IEP questionnaire, students did, however, express one area of frustration when answering the question, “What was the most difficult thing or part of this trip?” Although one student (B) noted, “*It was difficult to get used to meal,*” the other six students’ comments centered on their inability to clearly express themselves in English. Student F, for instance, wrote, “*When I wanted to get across the detail, I couldn’t get across in English.*” Similarly, student G found, “*I spoke right grammar though American peoples sometime don’t catch my emotion.*”

### **Discussion**

Japanese student participation in IEPs in the United States has decreased dramatically (33.4%) in the past two years (Institute of International Education, 2003). One can conclude that educators and prospective students are meticulously evaluating

future participation. Consequently, an understanding of the types of learning that result from IEP attendance allows for more accurate assessments. Based on the students' answers to the post-IEP questionnaire, it is obvious that the students found the IEP to be both linguistically and personally rewarding. Further investigation is, however, necessary to determine whether these findings are unique to this group of learners or to this particular IEP.

While examining Japanese tertiary students' beliefs, Sakui and Gaies (1999, p. 482) found that students strongly agree that "English conversation class should be enjoyable." Several times during informal gatherings of the group since the IEP, the students have discussed how much they learned and how much they enjoyed their IEP experiences. The fact that all seven of the students reported that they would recommend the IEP to other students also indicates that they enjoyed the program. Since the IEP, in fact, at least four of the participants have recommended this three-week program to other students. As the questionnaire did not explore how important enjoyment is to the overall positive results of participating in an IEP, this is another area for future investigation.

## Conclusion

Although there is a tendency to focus only on the possible linguistic achievements when considering participation in an Intensive English Program, the broadening of the students' views and their increased awareness of the target language culture are also significant learning experiences that should not be ignored. Because these students were able to speak directly with Americans and observe people in everyday settings including American homes, they were able to draw their

own conclusions. They discovered that the United States and Americans are different from their pre-program impressions, thereby decreasing their stereotypes. These students were exposed to different perspectives and began, perhaps for the first time, to consider for themselves who they are and what direction they want to take in the future. The experience and knowledge that these students acquired during the Intensive English Program is a unique component in their education.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professor Ichikawa at Shimane University for his assistance with the Japanese abstract.

## References

- Beamer, M., & Sasaki, T. (2003). A case study of student expectations in an IEP. *JALT 2002 Proceedings: Waves of the Future*, 82-85.
- Bittel, B. (1989). *Make your own tomorrow*. Adelaide: Hyde Park Press.
- Bodycott, P., & Crew, V. (2000). Living the language: The value of short-term overseas English language immersion programs. *The Language Teacher*, 24(9), 27-33.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-47.
- Drake, D. (1997). Integrating study abroad students into the university community. *The Language Teacher* [Online], 21(11).
- Institute of International Education. (2003). *Open doors 2003: International students in the U.S.* [Online]. Available: <<http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=35954>>.

- Sakui, K., & Gaies, S. (1999). Investigating Japanese learner's beliefs about language learning. *System*, 27, 473-492.
- Tanaka, K., & Ellis, R. (2003). Study abroad, language proficiency, and learner beliefs about language learning. *JALT Journal*, 25(1), 63-85.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2002). *An introduction to sociolinguistics* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Yule, G. (1996). *The study of language* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Cambridge: CUP.

## Appendix

In total, there were 41 questions on the pre-departure and post-IEP questionnaires. The items that were analyzed for this paper are presented below.

### **Study Abroad Pre-Departure Questionnaire (3 weeks)**

1. What year of school are you in? (1) (2) (3) (4)
2. What is your major area of study?
10. What do you plan to gain from this trip?
11. Please write, briefly, your impressions of the United States.

### **Post-IEP Questionnaire (3 weeks)**

6. Write, briefly, how your impressions of the United States have changed.
7. Did you gain anything from this trip? **Yes** **No**  
If yes: What did you gain from this trip?  
If no: Why not?
9. Briefly write what you accomplished.
10. What was the most difficult thing or part of this trip?
11. What part of this trip will be the most helpful in the future?  
Why?
19. Would you recommend a study abroad trip to other students?  
If no: Why not? **Yes** **No**
20. What did you learn from your homestay experience?