

Developing and assessing a language immersion camp

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This paper discusses an annual EFL immersion education camp. The paper begins by giving a theoretical framework for English immersion language camps. A thorough description of the camp and its goals are then presented. Next, the camp is evaluated both quantitatively and qualitatively as to whether it is meeting its goals and to identify possible areas for improvement. Finally, implications for further camps are discussed. While most indications point to the camp as being a success, ways to further improve upon the camp are suggested.

この論文は例年のEFL没入教育キャンプについて論じている。論文は、英語没入言語キャンプ用の理論的な枠組みを与えることにより始まる。そして目的に沿って行われたキャンプの詳細を説明していく。次に、キャンプがその目標を達成しているかどうかに関して定量的、質的、また改良用の可能なエリアを識別することを評価していく。最後に、さらなるキャンプへの含意について検討していく。ほとんどの指標でキャンプは成功であると指しているが、さらに改善する方法が示唆されている。

One of the most innovative approaches to second language (L2) acquisition in recent years is the concept of language immersion. Although the concept itself is not new, emerging literature from studies of bilingual education, heritage language education, and language revitalization suggest that language immersion programs can be a useful model for second language acquisition.

The purpose of this paper is to present a descriptive analysis of an annual immersion camp for Japanese university students. The results of an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data will be discussed leading to suggested answers to the following two key questions:

1. What key concepts of second language acquisition should be included in the program design of a week-long English language immersion camp?
2. What affect does this week-long English language immersion camp have upon L2 acquisition?

A theoretical framework for English immersion language camps

The theoretical framework used for this language immersion camp came from an examination of some key concepts from immersion education, bilingual education, and language revitalization.

According to Cummins (2000) the term “immersion education” came from Canada during the 1960s to describe programs in which the French language is used as a medium of instruction for elementary school students whose home language was English. A typical immersion program has eight core features of which the second language is the cornerstone of the curriculum (Swain & Johnson, 1997).

Immersion programs and immersion classes are based on the idea that L2 acquisition should be learned the ‘natural way’, that is, in the same way a child learns its mother tongue (Genesee, 1991, 1994). This means that instead of concentrating on aspects about the target language, the target language itself should be used to convey information that is relevant and interesting for the learner.

Another type of immersion program is found in the innovative approaches to language revitalization. Language revitalization refers to “the development of programs that

result in re-establishing a language which has ceased being the language of communication in the speech community” (Hinton & Hale, 2001, p.5).

A major emphasis of revitalizing endangered languages is the concept of ‘living the language’. These programs encourage mainly adult learners to use the target language beyond the classroom into daily life (Hinton & Hale, 2001). The target language is therefore used in a variety of authentic, communicative situations.

Another concept readily applicable to the context of English immersion camps in Japan is the idea of ‘language domains’ (Fishman, 1972, 1991). A language domain is a designated time and/or location reserved for a specific language. For example, parents who desire to raise bilingual children may speak a certain language to their children from Saturday to Monday and choose a different language of communication from Tuesday to Friday. An example of a location language domain would be at one of the Maori language immersion schools for children in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Keegan, 1996).

There are two significant differences between the previous models of L2 learning and L2 learning in the Japanese EFL context. The first difference is attributed to learner motivation. In language revitalization many of the learners are strongly motivated to learn their own ancestral language as they want to regain their traditional cultural values and practices. This is very different for EFL learners who may have different motives to learn English as a foreign language.

The second difference is found in both the learners themselves and the wider cultural differences. Most of

the studies in relation to bilingual education, language revitalization and maintenance, and immersion education center on young learners, particularly children, whereas this immersion camp is focused on Japanese university students. Just with the age factor alone there are definite physical, mental, emotional, and social differences between these two sets of learners. Finally, there are cultural differences as no two cultures are ever the same. These cultural differences will also act as a variable upon L2 acquisition.

Despite these learning and teaching variables, the fundamental principles of L2 acquisition are still relevant for the design of a week-long English immersion camp. This paper will now turn to the descriptive analysis of the immersion camp.

English language camp description

Background

This annual, one-week immersion camp was first held in September 2002 at Eta-jima, Hiroshima. The second camp was held at the same venue in September 2003. In 2004 the camp was held in Kagoshima, Kyushu and the 2005 camp was held in Aso in Kyushu.

The camp maintains a teacher to student ratio of approximately 1:5. The camps have ranged in size from about 35-50 students. The students are all enrolled at a four-year university. The teachers are all ESL professionals with teaching experience. In addition to the teachers, one senior member of the economics faculty attended as the camp manager along with three economics faculty members who attended this camp as managers and active participants.

Camp aims, concept, and philosophy

The aims of the English immersion camp are to improve:

1. students' TOEIC scores;
2. motivation to study English
3. confidence in using English;
4. oral communication;
5. intercultural awareness

The concept of the English immersion camp is to provide participants with a safe learning environment where the target language is the only medium of communication. Since participants are placed together in a 'camp' environment they must interact in a variety of contexts. All participants must 'live the target language' meaning English is to be used in all places at all times.

The philosophy of the camp is to encourage co-operative learning and to breakdown traditional communication barriers often cited in Japan based EFL literature (such as the "foreign language phobia" in De Rolf JD 1995 and Yamaguchi 2002). These barriers, whether inherent or perceived, may include: personal barriers (being shy, afraid to make mistakes, fear of embarrassment); social and cultural barriers (fear of speaking to 'foreigners', fear of speaking to members of the opposite sex, fear of speaking to someone more senior) and institutional barriers (language contexts, limited exposure to different teaching pedagogies and methodologies, limited target language exposure and usage).

Camp schedule and description of events

The camp is made up of a number of key events during the week. Some of these events are held only one time during the week while other activities are ongoing and are held regularly. Of course, some activities will vary according to the venue of that year's camp, but an example of a typical camp schedule, displayed in Table 1 below, can be divided into the following categories: planned language activities, unplanned language activities, and language tests.

Planned language activities

Planned language activities are events that have specific language goals in mind. The goals of these activities are varied. The first three activities, workshops, presentations, and group skits encourage active production of the target language (listening and speaking) while quiz night and movie night focus on listening skills.

Table 1. Camp schedule

Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday
9:00 Meeting 12:00 Lunch 15:00 Arrive at camp site Afternoon- camp rules and orientation Dinner Pre-camp Evaluation- TOEIC test Group introductions-greetings	7:00 morning ceremony Morning Workshop 1 Lunch Afternoon Workshop 2 BBQ Party Night Presentations- two groups	Breakfast Sports Morning Workshop 3 Lunch Afternoon Workshop 4 Dinner Bon Fire Party Night Presentations- two groups	Breakfast Morning Workshop 5 Lunch Adventure Walk Dinner Bon Fire Party Night Presentations- two groups Movie night
Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Breakfast Sports Morning Workshop 6 Lunch Afternoon Workshop 7 Dinner Night Presentations- two groups Quiz Night	Breakfast Sports Morning Workshop 8 Lunch Afternoon Workshop 9 Dinner Night Presentations- two groups Dance Party	Breakfast Morning workshop 10 Lunch Post-camp Evaluation- TOEIC test Dinner Skits Farewell Party	Breakfast Camp Clean-up Farewell/Closing Ceremony 11:30 Depart for home 16:00 Arrive home

Workshops

Workshops are specific language classes that last for an hour and a half. There are two workshops every day (a total of ten for the week), one in the morning and another in the afternoon. Every workshop is led by one of the camp teachers. Students are placed in groups and systematically rotate from teacher to teacher. By the end of the camp students have had one workshop from each teacher. Students are thereby exposed to different styles of teaching and different learning material. Each workshop teacher has a prepared topic. A representative sample of workshop topics is displayed in Table 2 below.

Presentations

The second type of planned language activity is presentations. Each member, both students and teachers, must deliver an oral presentation to the camp. The central

aim of the presentation is to practice public speaking. The length of each presentation varies according to the confidence and ability level of the speaker. The teachers act as ‘role models’ and deliver presentations ranging from ten to twenty minutes. As a general rule, speakers are not allowed to read notes. However they are allowed to write down their main points on a white/black board. The topic of the presentation is open.

Movie/Film

A film without Japanese subtitles is shown during the camp. The aim of this event is to focus on listening skills.

Quiz

The quiz is a chance to practice listening and also speaking. It also tests general knowledge of Japan and the rest of the world.

Table 2. Workshop topics

Content Workshops	English Language Learning and Practice	TOEIC Test Strategies and Practice
Focussed discussions of various topics such as smoking, cellular phones, death penalty, same sex marriage, and eliminating English from university entrance exams.	Expressing and supporting opinions. Solving problems and tasks through information sharing. Selected topics for discussion.	TOEIC preparation and test strategies concentrating on Part 5 and 6 of reading comprehension.
Politics, Economics and Culture of South East Asian Countries - An Examination of Japan's Neighbouring Countries.	“iTHINK” textbook conversation, language functions, and how to tell a bad joke.	TOEIC test preparation and test strategies. Overall test summary and advice.
Musicology/ethnology – the connection between language, culture and music.		TOEIC test preparation and test strategies concentrating on Part 1 and 2 of listening comprehension. Also, additional listening material.

Group skit

The final night of the immersion camp is celebrated by having an entertaining last night. Participants must perform a group skit in front of the camp. This event focuses on language production and cooperative learning.

*Unplanned language activities**Camp fire*

Presentations are given by selected speakers while participants are huddled around the camp fire. The camp fire provides an opportunity for participants to relax and make new friends. Participants are encouraged to give an impromptu performance.

BBQ

Dinner is usually eaten in the cafeteria, but on one of the nights a barbeque is held. Participants must use the target language to prepare the food, light the fire, cook, and clean for themselves in groups.

Dance party/Disco

The disco is a social event to help relieve any stress. Camp participants organize the music and operate the bar.

Sports

All participants of the camp are placed into teams. For example, during the 2003 camp, a game of soccer was organized. As with every activity, participants must

communicate in English.

Adventure walk

All camp participants are taken on an “adventure walk”. It is a useful time to visit some of the local scenic spots.

Farewell party

Every camp ends with a farewell party. The party is in two parts. The first part is a group skit. Each group must give some kind of group play or performance. After all the groups have finished, a disco party is held.

Other sports and recreational activities

There are many other sports and recreational activities such as swimming, Frisbee golf, basketball, tennis, ping-pong and volleyball. Camp participants can use the camp facilities in their free time. However, they must communicate in English.

Quantitative evaluation

Two TOEIC tests were conducted during the camp. The purposes of the TOEIC tests are to:

1. measure the affect of the week long immersion camp upon students' English ability.
2. allow students to practice TOEIC test taking strategies.

The first TOEIC test is held immediately before the immersion camp while the second test is administered immediately after the immersion camp. The TOEIC tests

were randomly selected and standard TOEIC testing conditions were applied.

Results

Table 3 displays the results from the pre-camp and post-camp TOEIC tests from 2002.

Table3. 2002 TOEIC results

n=35	Pre-camp Mean	Post-camp Mean	Significance	# of students who improved
Listening	281	337	p<.05	35
Reading	260	325	p<.05	35
Total	541	662	p<.05	35

As can be seen, all 35 of the learners at the 2002 camp who took both the pre-camp and post-camp improved their listening, reading, and overall scores. In addition, using SPSS 11.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc., 2001), a paired samples t-test was conducted and revealed that their improvements in listening scores ($t=7.04$, $df=34$, $p < .05$), reading scores ($t=10.65$, $df=34$, $p < .05$), and overall scores ($t=12.56$, $df=34$, $p < .05$) as a group were statistically significant.

Table 4 displays the results from the pre-camp and post-camp TOEIC tests from 2003.

Table 4. 2003 TOEIC results

n=39	Pre-camp Mean	Post-camp Mean	Significance	# of students who improved
Listening	294	304	*p>.05	26
Reading	311	292	p<.05	13
Total	605	596	*p>.05	17

The results from the 2003 TOEIC pre-camp and post-camp show mixed results. In the listening section, 26 learners showed improvement, in the reading part 13 showed improvement, and 17 students showed improvement overall.

Again, a paired samples t-test was conducted and revealed that their improvements in listening scores was not statistically significant ($t=1.60$, $df=38$, $p > .05$), for the reading section, the decline in score was statistically significant ($t=2.47$, $df=38$, $p < .05$), and for overall scores the decrease was not statistically significant ($t=.72$, $df=38$, $p>.05$).

Table 5 displays the results from the pre-camp and post-camp TOEIC tests from 2004.

Table 5. 2004 TOEIC results

n=43	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Significance	# of students who improved
Listening	293	308	p<.05	27
Reading	294	355	p<.05	40
Total	587	663	p<.05	41

Table 5 shows 27 students improved their listening scores, 40 students improved their reading scores, and 41 improved

their overall scores. A paired samples t-test revealed that their improvements in listening scores ($t=2.66$, $df=42$, $p < .05$), reading scores ($t=10.48$, $df=42$, $p < .05$), and overall scores ($t=8.53$, $df=34$, $p < .05$) were statistically significant.

Table 6 displays the results from the pre-camp and post-camp TOEIC tests from 2005.

Table 6. 2005 TOEIC results

n=47	Pretest Mean	Posttest Mean	Significance	# of students who improved
Listening	306	316	* $p>.05$	29
Reading	304	326	$p<.05$	33
Total	610	642	$p<.05$	22

The results from the 2005 scores were mixed. In the listening section, 29 learners showed improvement, 33 showed improvement in reading and 22 in overall score. A paired samples t-test revealed that their improvement in listening scores ($t=1.82$, $df=46$, $p > .05$) was not significant, while the improvement in reading ($t=3.51$, $df=46$, $p < .05$), and overall scores ($t=3.39$, $df=46$, $p < .05$) were statistically significant.

Qualitative evaluation

As part of the ongoing evaluation of the camp, questionnaires have been administered after each camp starting in 2003. The aim of these questionnaires is to further understand the learners' perceptions and preferences in regard to the camp.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of seven statements on a four-point Likert scale and five open-ended questions. The Likert scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The Likert scale questions and the corresponding response means are displayed in Table 7.

Table 7. Overall perceptions of the camp

Questions	2003 Mean n=21	2004 Mean n=46	2005 Mean n=47
I enjoyed the camp.	3.75	3.78	3.70
The workshops were interesting.	3.33	3.52	3.57
I spoke only English during the camp.	2.33	2.33	2.38
The number of workshops was appropriate.	2.58	2.40	3.23
Just speaking English during camp is easy.	2.17	1.96	1.79
I had enough free time.	2.19	2.74	3.21
I improved my English ability.	3.42	3.28	3.17

The results indicate the learners were highly satisfied with the camp. Learners not only enjoyed the activities, but also perceived an improved English ability. Learners also indicated that the camp was well structured in regard to the balance and content of workshops and free time. Finally, many students reported that speaking only English was difficult, and many indicated that they were not speaking only English at the camp.

In addition, five open-ended questions were asked. All students from each camp answered these in writing, and a random group of six students were also interviewed

individually. The data were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Strauss, 1987). The questions and the common responses that emerged from the data are reported below.

1. Why do you want to improve your English?

The most common response was to talk to foreigners and make friends. Other common responses included to be able to communicate when abroad and to improve their TOEIC scores.

2. Write down three things that you enjoyed doing at the camp.

Just about every activity included in each camp received some mention. Overall, the unplanned activities, such as the dance party, got more mentions than the other activities, but overall, all of the activities were well represented in the students' preferences. In addition to specific activities, learners mentioned that they especially enjoyed the free time in which they could talk with the teachers.

3. Write down three things that you did not enjoy.

The most common response was overwhelmingly 'nothing'. The only notable thing mentioned was in 2003 when many students claimed not enjoying the TOEIC test because they were too tired from prior activities.

4. Write down three things that you think could improve the camp.

Again, the most common response was 'nothing'. However, many students in 2003 thought the English only policy should be more strictly enforced. Other common complaints revolved around the venue, such as the food or the strict institutional rules of the venue.

5. How did this camp improve your English?

The most common response was an increase in confidence when using English. Students specifically mentioned things such as they were no longer fearful of speaking with foreigners, or they were no longer afraid to make mistakes.

Implications

Measuring success against camp objectives

Judging from the TOEIC scores, the questionnaire responses, and the interviews of the learners, the camp overall has been a great success. One of the major goals of the camp is to improve TOEIC scores. This goal has been met overall in three of the four camps.

The expectations of the learners and the organizers of the camp largely match in that it is hoped the camp will be a fun experience in which they can relax, make new friends, and improve their English. In the questionnaires and the interviews, students' responses indicate this did happen at the camp for the vast majority of students. As the researchers and many of the students noted, in the brief space of a week many students seemed to come out of their shell in regard to using English. Thus a major goal of increasing student confidence was achieved.

The interviews and questionnaires also indicate that the variety of teachers seem to make the camp an experience worth having for the learners. Many of the students mentioned that one of the best things was being able to talk and play games with teachers from various backgrounds during the activities and especially during free time. Judging from the students' responses, the selection of teachers at the camps has not only given the learners' exposure to other cultures, but also exposure to teachers who are willing to interact with the students not only during the planned activities, but during free time and unplanned activities as well. For the camp to ensure its success, teachers possessing these attributes will need to continue to be included.

The variety of activities also seemed to be appreciated by the students. The activities themselves provided stimuli and motivation for the learners to use English. This indicates that the balance and number of different activities is providing the learners with enough opportunities to use and improve their English skills, thereby achieving another major goal of the camp.

In brief, while the camp seems to be fulfilling its mission, there are some implications from the above data that show areas for possible improvement that could be applied to the camp.

English usage policy - positive reinforcement

The first major implication is the need to maintain a strict English only policy. This observation seems to be reflected in a comparison of the TOEIC scores from camp to camp. In the 2003 camp especially, students complained on the

questionnaire and in the interviews about the amount of Japanese being spoken. The TOEIC scores bear that observation out.

One suggestion to maintain the English only policy is to better prepare students beforehand so their expectations match that of the teachers. This was done in the later camps and seems to be a step in the right direction, judging by the TOEIC scores and student responses.

However, in line with the goals of the camp, it is hoped that the enforcement of the English-only rule can be something the students impose upon themselves with the learners taking greater responsibility for their language learning. One possible method that was trialed in the 2005 camp was to identify committed camp participants who would speak only English during the whole camp. They wore a special badge which read: "Lets speak English". It was hoped that the badge would be a badge of honor and encourage not only the wearer but everyone who came into communication with these participants to use English. The efficacy of the badges needs to be further investigated in future camps, but early indications are that it was successful.

TOEIC fatigue

A high number of students reported that they felt fatigue during the TOEIC test, especially during 2003. It is believed this was a major reason for disappointing scores that year. In later camps, the schedule was adjusted to allow students to rest and prepare for the test. Judging by the scores, this seems to have been effective and needs to be followed in future camps.

Student Preparation

Although the general view of the teachers was that student preparation was adequate it was felt that greater emphasis should be given to student preparation for presentations (speeches). After the 2003 camp it was revealed from the questionnaires and interviews that some students would like to delete the presentation activity from the camp. The implication here is that the learners could have this activity and its goal explained more thoroughly. The use of a step-by-step guide and giving preparation time during workshops was trialed in the 2005 camp, and complaints about the speech activity from students have drastically fallen. In fact, the speech activity received several mentions as a favorite activity, which is a positive change in learner perceptions and attitudes.

Conclusion

The language camps described in this paper have overall been successful in meeting the goals outlined earlier. Students are increasing their TOEIC scores, improving in their confidence and motivation to speak English, improving their overall communication skills, and growing in their intercultural awareness. Despite this success, improvements to the camp are continuing. The ongoing quantitative and qualitative analysis of the strengths and weaknesses must play a constant role in order to ensure the success of future camps.

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