

Interview Testing: A Basis For Preparing Non-English Majors For Study Abroad

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This study attempts to evaluate, by means of an open-ended questionnaire given to students on their return from study abroad tours to Taiwan and Canada, the usefulness of the English conversation courses offered at our university in preparing students for such programs. It was hoped that the success achieved in language retention and communication (through spiral learning and contact with multiple teachers) as previously observed in a simulated environment (Nutt, 2017) could be transferred to a real scenario. Approximately three quarters of the attendees responded positively, citing usefulness in basic everyday conversations and self-introductions. Increasing the amount of class time devoted to listening, speaking, and pronunciation were suggested as possible improvements. Students' attitudes towards English had also improved overall with many students wanting to study harder and some further adding they now understood the importance of English and how it changed their worldview.

本論は、台湾およびカナダへの海外留学から戻った学生たちに自由回答のアンケート調査を行うことにより、こうしたプログラムへの準備として私たちの大学が学生に提供している英会話コースの有用性を評価する試みである。模擬的状況にてすでに観察されたような(スパイラル学習と多様な教師との接触による)言語記憶力とコミュニケーション力における成果(Nutt, 2017)は、実際の状況においてもみられると期待された。およそ4分の3の参加者が、基礎的な日常会話や自己紹介における有用性を引き合いに出して肯定的に回答した。聞くこと、話すこと、および発音に割く授業時間を増やしたことがよかった点として挙げられた。生徒たちの英語に対する態度が全体的に改善し、多くの生徒がより熱心に学習したがるようになった上に、さらには英語の重要性と、それが彼らの世界観をどのように変えるかも理解するようになった。

The objective of this study is to evaluate, adapt and improve the English program offered to our students in light of open-ended questionnaires given to students who had returned from study abroad programs. This paper is intended as a follow-up to my previous paper "Interview testing:..." published in in the March 2017 issue of *TLT* (Nutt, 2017). Briefly, that paper attempted to address the problems our non-English major students had with English on their study abroad programs, that is, a difficulty in language retention and anxiety when communicating with people outside of their culture. This was tackled by conducting bi-semesterly interview tests with rotating guest teachers throughout the conversation classes. The first test consisted of ten questions, one initial and one follow-up, on

five personal topics: name, hometown, occupation, free time, and family. The second test was devised by taking ten semi-random questions from a pool of 20—the previous questions plus two further questions on each topic developing the themes. In the two subsequent tests, ten additional questions each were asked from an expanding pool, firstly by adding ten more follow-up questions and then two further topics related to past and future. Broadly speaking, the student body expressed their support for this approach in questionnaires given on the completion of the course. One of the objectives of this follow-up study is to further analyze the approach from the perspective of students who actually attended study abroad programs.

Study Groups

Two separate groups took part in study abroad programs in February and March 2017. The first group of 19 first- to third-year management students attended a one-week management study tour of Taiwan. There, they attended seven hours of lectures on business and economics in English with excursions to factories and nearby places of interest. They integrated with Taiwanese students during lunch breaks, communicating chiefly through English, and also had the opportunity to use English on the excursions and when shopping in downtown Taipei. The second group of seven students visited Canada for a month on an English immersion program, staying with host families, and with 18 hours of classroom instruction per week and excursions held on a weekly basis. This group was made up of students from the management, sports health, and nutrition departments.

Our students have three compulsory semesters of English conversation classes in the first two semesters in the first year and either the first or second semester of the second year that are taught by native English teachers, in conjunction with three semesters of general English taught by the Japanese faculty. Additionally, three supplementary English conversation classes specifically for the study abroad program are offered, for which attendance is required. These classes cover: cultural aspects

of greetings and self-introductions, shopping and count/non-count nouns, and the immigration process at the airport. The self-introduction lesson was an extension of what students had been taught in the interview part of the compulsory English conversation course adapting one-sentence answers (about their family, hometown, school life, hobbies, past and future) to make short five-sentence speeches. Various other elective business English, TOEIC, and English writing courses are also offered in the second and third years, but as these were not attended by the whole student body, they have been left out of the study.

Twenty-three of the 26 students who took part in the study abroad programs took the compulsory courses designed by myself, although I only personally taught six of those students. The other three students had a similar interview-based component to their course. The previously mentioned 23 students attended the supplementary classes taught by myself, the other three by another teacher.

The students who attended the study abroad programs were asked to complete a questionnaire after the program was completed, to assess the English program offered at our university (reproduced in Table 1 in a simplified format). Because of the limited number of students, the questionnaire was open-ended as opposed to the Likert-type in the previous study in order to gather the maximum amount of information. Questions were purposefully vague, affording the students a free voice rather than guiding them. The students were told that their input would be invaluable in helping develop the English conversation program. They were offered a 500 yen book voucher for fully completing the questionnaire. While I acknowledge that this could achieve a positive bias, I thought it was unavoidable. I have observed on previous occasions that despite allowing ample time to complete the comment section of questionnaires, respondents tend to leave them blank or write "nothing in particular" (特になし) even when they are encouraged to comment negatively or otherwise. In this instance, the Canada group who had traveled independently, were greeted at the airport upon their return to Japan and were understandably tired and in a hurry to return home, so the incentive was seen as a way to get their attention. The students on the trip to Taiwan completed their questionnaires in the hotel before returning to Japan, administered by the accompanying professors.

Table 1. *Simplified form of the questionnaire given to the students*

1. Do you feel English conversation (I,II,III) helped prepare you for your study abroad? How? 「英会話I,II,III」が留学に役立ちましたか? また、どのように? そうでない場合はなぜだと思います か?
2. What improvements would you like made to the course? 「英会話」のクラスを留学のためにどのように改善したらいいと思いますか?
3. Do you feel the supplementary English classes helped prepare you for your study abroad? How? 留学のための英会話の授業が役立ちましたか? また、どのように? そうでない場合はなぜだと思います か?
4. What improvements would you like made to the course? 留学のための英会話の授業をどのように改善したらいいと思いますか?
5. Has your feeling towards English changed since you studied abroad? If so, how? 英語に対する考え方が留学したことで変わりましたか?

Questionnaire Results

Each student's response was translated and evaluated as positive, negative, or neutral. Any common themes raised by the students were also noted.

Table 2. *Type of response to the questions in the questionnaire*

		Percentage of respondents			
		positive	negative	neutral	no answer
English conversation (I,II,III)	Taiwan	73.7%	10.5%	10.5%	5.3%
	Canada	85.7%	0%	14.3%	0%
	mean	76.9%	7.7%	11.5%	3.8%
Supplementary English	Taiwan	68.4%	10.5%	10.5%	10.5%
	Canada	85.7%	14.3%	0%	0%
	mean	73.1%	11.5%	7.7%	7.7%
Feeling towards English	Taiwan	73.7%	0%	26.3%	0%
	Canada	85.7%	0%	14.3%	0%
	mean	76.9%	0%	23.1%	0%

Overall, the majority of the students felt that the conversation program (76.9%) and the supplementary classes (73.1%) had helped them prepare for their study abroad tour, describing the courses as either *useful* (役に立ちました) or *very useful*. The remain-

ing students were split equally between what could be perceived as negative or neutral comments (the second including those who provided both positive and negative comments). Perhaps understandably, the students on the English immersion program in Canada were more supportive of the English courses offered, having had an interest in English beforehand, with over 85% responding positively in both instances. Pleasingly, no students on either program had a perceived negative attitude towards English after their study abroad tours, with more than three quarters of them responding positively.

Usefulness of Compulsory Conversation Classes

Over half (ten) of the students on the Taiwanese study tour (hereafter, TST) specifically mentioned that they had been able to use what they had learned in their core conversation classes in *everyday conversations* (日常会話) with Taiwanese students. Interestingly, five students felt that this was an area in which they felt they needed more study. Two of the Canadian study tour (CST) students also mentioned the usefulness in *everyday conversations*, two mentioned *self-introductions* (自己紹介), two mentioned that they could have *simple* or *basic* (単純/基本的) conversations, and one added that she could speak *smoothly* (スムーズに).

Improvements in Compulsory Conversation Classes

Three TST students said they wanted to learn more *practical* (実践的) English, three to increase listening activities, and three, pair practice, respectively. Two students in each group said they wanted to increase speaking and pronunciation practice. Three students wanted more opportunities to speak English in class; one added they understood *that speaking is more important than reading* (読むより会話をする方が力になると感じた), and another that if his *listening ability was better, he would be able to enjoy speaking more* (聞く能力を上げれば面白くなると思う).

Usefulness of Supplementary Classes

Overall, the TST students' comments were supportive of the class. Shopping, the airport experience, and self-introductions were mentioned positively by five, two, and four students respectively. One student mentioned that he *could use the self-introduction and dialogues that he had just learned* (とっきの自己紹介や対話使えた). Another added that *self-introductions were used a lot, so were useful* (自己紹介などは多くやったので役に立った). Yet another said that it was *useful to use what I had learned when communicating* (コミュニケ

ーションを取るときに使えたので役に立ちました). Three CST students said that it was useful to study English before going abroad. One person mentioned that she could talk about herself and her hometown. The airport and shopping were mentioned by two people each, one adding that she *could use English without thinking* (迷うことなく使えた).

Improvements in Supplementary Classes

Notably, four TST students wanted to increase the amount of listening practice in class; three more mentioned *easy to understand English* (わかりやすい英語); and two mentioned the actual number of classes taught. One student felt that he had spoken *grammatically correct English, but couldn't be understood, so maybe pronunciation was the problem* (ちゃんと文法通りに話したはずなのに通じていない時がありました。発音の問題だったかもしれません). Another notable point was that one student felt that it would be worthwhile to learn some language of the country they were visiting. No common themes among the CST students were noted, although one student (from the CST) said that he wanted to *keep the classes as they are* (今のままでいい), but the students were encouraged to be critical of the program.

Attitudes Towards English

The vast majority of the students on the TST had changed their attitudes towards English for the better, with students commenting on their understanding of the importance of English or altered worldview (4 students), that communicating in English made them happy (3), roused their desire to improve (3), and that it highlighted the need to study harder (6). One of the benefits of such open-ended type questionnaires is that they may provide the researcher with unexpected information. Several of the students were surprised by the difference between their English ability and that of the Taiwanese students. One student was *impressed by the Taiwanese students' level and felt that he should speak better himself* (台湾の人がすごい話せていてすごいと思ったと同時に自分も少しは話せるようにならないといけないなと思った). Another *did not realize that people from other countries could speak English so well, so understood the importance of English when he got a job and felt that he should study English harder* (他国の人がこんなにも英語が話せるとは思わなかった。なので就職したときの英語の必要性を少し感じた。もう少し勉強しなくてはならないと思った). And finally, one student was *surprised by the difference in Japanese and Taiwanese English ability and now realizes since studying abroad, the importance of language and wants to be able to speak English at the everyday conversation level*

(日本と台湾の英語力の違いに驚いた。留学にきたことで自分の語学力のなさ、語学がいかに大切かということがわかった。日常会話レベルは話せるようになりたいです)。

Similarly, all of the CST students' attitudes had changed, with six people wanting to study more. One person now *wanted to be more involved with foreign countries* (自分自身も外国に関わりたいたと感じた), one wanted to *travel around the world*, adding that *the more English she knew, the more fun it would be* (もっと英語を勉強して、世界を旅したいと思ったし、さらに分かれば、面白くなると思った)。

Analysis of the Questionnaires, Developments, and Further Study

The vast majority of students responded positively to the courses offered. However, keeping the questionnaires open-ended to allow the students a voice has its drawbacks the researcher does not know what will be revealed. While no one specifically mentioned the core approach of the conversation classes (focusing on repetition and increasing contact with English-language speakers, to help prepare students for the study abroad program), no one criticized it either. Perhaps it would be unlikely for students to do so, unless they were guided towards such an answer. Therefore, I think we need to look a little deeper under the surface. The objectives of the course are for students to be able to hold simple conversations about themselves, and if we look at the questionnaire results, most of the students achieved this—specifically, saying that they could hold basic or simple everyday conversations using what they had learned. The key point being that they had retained what was taught. The self-introductions, an extension of what was taught in the core classes, were also described as being useful and used a lot. Such comments reinforced the value of the course. As an initial study, I think the vague open-ended approach to questionnaire design was useful in that it revealed unexpected results. However, when obtaining feedback from study abroad participants in future research projects, while keeping the questionnaires open-ended, where appropriate, I will categorize the questionnaire into course content, teaching method and examination method, so that students can be guided towards freely commenting on specific areas.

One of the recurring themes revealed that students felt that their listening and pronunciation skills needed improving. And while the textbook used as part of the course has adequate listening exercises, there is little time dedicated to pronunciation/intonation practice. This is something that should be addressed when selecting future course books. Students also mentioned that they wanted to increase the amount of class time dedicated to speaking and pair practice. Our course is designed

in such a way that this should account for half of the class time. Initial confirmation with the teaching faculty revealed this to be true, so perhaps the students have unrealistic expectations of how much time can be allocated to this, although the precise allocation of class time to different activities is something that offers itself for further study.

This study supports the findings of the previous study—that students were able to retain and re-produce what they had learned, justifying a continuation of this approach. However, owing to their limited lexicon, there were problems in communication that could not be overcome. The rote learning technique means that the range of questions that the students could answer was perhaps limited. I suspect that students may have struggled with any deviation from what they had learned. This is another area that warrants further study. Should it be found to be the case, time in the supplementary classes could be dedicated to equipping students with the tools to deal with such situations.

Study abroad trips can be life-changing experiences for our students, opening their eyes to a world outside of Japan. It is a sad fact that our students often do not appreciate the importance of foreign languages until they are removed from the Japanese “bubble.” For some of our students, that can be a waste, as the opportunities for further English study beyond the second year are limited at our university. Accordingly, I am incorporating some of the more inspirational questionnaire quotes into the orientation class for all first-year and second-year English conversation courses and for those going on future study abroad tours. Hopefully, this will motivate at least some students to further apply themselves. Finally, for those students visiting a country where English is not the official language, I shall arrange for a supplementary class where students can learn simple everyday greetings in the language.

Reference

Nutt, J. (2017) Interview testing: Focusing on repetition and increased contact with a variety of teachers to improve language retention and reduce anxiety. *The Language Teacher*, 41(2), 20–24.

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