

# Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



## “English only” in a three-week study-abroad program

Izumi Kanzaka  
Soka University

### Reference data:

Kanzaka, I. (2009). “English only” in a three-week study-abroad program. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.). *JALT2008 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper will discuss a rationale for promoting English only (EO) in the short-term study-abroad context. An EO policy was experimented with during an intensive English program in the Philippines where the author escorted 21 Japanese university students for three weeks. Based on the results of this experiment, guiding principles for pursuing EO in the short-term study-abroad context will be proposed.

本稿では、3週間のフィリピン大学英語研修において研修参加者同士のコミュニケーションをすべて英語で行った事例を報告する。そして、引率者の観察と研修生からのフィードバックなどをもとに、短期留学プログラムにおいてEnglish Onlyを実践する上で指標とするべき根本方針を提案する。

**M**any students view study abroad as the optimal way to learn a foreign language because it gives them an environment for being immersed in the target language, and they believe that language learning can be achieved most effectively in such an environment. Even many teachers and parents assume that study abroad is more effective than learning in a classroom (Freed, 1995). This assumption is one of the reasons that study abroad is very popular among Japanese students.

Many Japanese universities arrange their own package tours of short-term study abroad programs, and Soka University Japan is no exception. Package tours offered by the university have been popular for many practical reasons such as low cost and relative ease of the application procedure, and also because of the sense of security arising from the fact that university staff accompany the students during these tours.

A current concern regarding short-term study abroad programs is that the participants from the same home institution are often placed in the same class in the hosting institution, separated from other international students as well as from the local students. In some of the short-term study abroad programs Soka University

offers, the participants stay in the same accommodation and even go on weekend trips accompanied by a local tour guide who is fluent in Japanese. This means that, outside English classes, they might not have to use English at all, and this is what disappoints students who are enthusiastic about their language development. In order to improve the situation, an EO policy was attempted during a three-week study-abroad program in the Philippines where I served as the escorting teacher for 21 students.

In this paper, I will report on how we conducted the EO policy and how the participants responded to it. Then, guiding principles for pursuing EO in such short-term study-abroad programs will be proposed.

### **Brief description: The program and participants**

A group of 21 Japanese university students from the same home institution attended an intensive English program at the University of the Philippines (UP) for three weeks in February, 2008. However, our program practically started three months beforehand through pre-departure sessions. Furthermore, the students participated in post-tour activities for a week immediately after returning to Japan. In total, this was a 4-month program.

### ***Pre-departure sessions***

As preparation for the program, we held 10 pre-departure sessions over a 3-month period before leaving for the Philippines, including guidance sessions held by the travel agency together with the International Affairs Office of the university, and pre-departure study sessions held by

students together with me as the escorting teacher. An EO policy was suggested after the second pre-departure session. After a brief explanation of benefits to be expected from EO, everyone agreed to try it whenever possible, when with fellow program participants.

Inevitably, the guidance sessions by the travel agency were held in Japanese, but all the study sessions organized by the students, even planning and announcements of the study sessions through emails, were done in English. In the study sessions, history, politics, education, economy, literature, food and culture, and other topics related to the Philippines were covered, and individual students volunteered to give presentations on self-selected topics.

### ***The 3-week visit to the Philippines***

The actual visit to the Philippines consisted of two components: an intensive English program designed by UP and additional activities such as excursions arranged by Soka University.

In the English program at UP, students received 60 hours of English language instruction from Filipino professors of English. Students were divided into two groups, and there were no other students in the program. Ideally, they should have joined local students, or EFL students from other countries or at least Japanese students from other institutions, but this was the only option for us due to logistical constraints.

The UP English program is a pre-fixed package designed by professors of UP for EFL students visiting UP as a group for a short period. Therefore, there was little room

for negotiation prior to the program regarding the content of English classes, which mainly aimed to help students with oral communication skills through interviews and presentations, with only a couple of opportunities to observe actual university-level lectures at UP. Class tasks were designed based on specific skills that would be needed to complete tasks later in the program. Earlier tasks included creating interview questions and taking notes as preparation for the later tasks of interviewing local students and giving presentations on the interview results, scheduled for the last few days of the program. In addition, students were assigned to visit a local high school, where they shared Japanese culture with the local students. In summary, class tasks were designed to address three main goals: Students would successfully conduct an interview, deliver their presentation, and give a talk at the high school.

There were also some extra-curricular activities that were arranged by the sending institution: official visits to local colleges which have academic exchange agreements with Soka University; a voluntary visit to a free school near the garbage dump in Payatas; lectures at the Asia Development Bank; visits to local charity organizations; and excursions to historically important places. Through these additional activities, in spite of many constraints, we tried to provide students with as many opportunities as possible to meet with local people and see a number of different aspects of the Philippines.

### *Post-tour sessions*

For the purpose of collecting feedback and keeping records, the tour participants had post-tour sessions during the week

right after returning to Japan. In the feedback meeting, students first filled in a questionnaire and then shared their thoughts in reflective discussions and interviews. As an official record of the tour, they made a photo album and wrote reports to the university. Some stayed for follow-up interviews. In addition, seven volunteers wrote formal reflective essays in English.

### *The participants and their reasons for attending the program*

#### *Students' profiles*

The breakdown of the 21 students was: 13 females and eight males; 10 sophomores and 11 freshmen. They formed groups of two to four to share rooms in their accommodation on UP campus.

The participants were from various departments: law, education, business, economics, engineering, sociology, and English literature. All of the nine economics majors were from the International Program, which is an English-medium economics program where EO even outside class is strongly promoted. As I had taught them in an advanced EAP course in the International Program, I was already familiar with their English proficiency levels, in both writing and speaking. The other participants' English levels were initially judged by three means: their institutional TOEFL scores, the EFL courses they had taken, and the quality of their English on an open-ended survey form which they submitted right after they got accepted to the tour. All the participants had scored at least 480 points on the institutional TOEFL, and the English levels shown on the survey form did not

show any significant difference in vocabulary and syntax proficiency between those who were in the International Program and those who were not. This initial evaluation became one strong reason for deciding on EO for this group.

With regard to their experience abroad, 12 participants had had the experience of visiting a foreign country at least once for two to four weeks. One of them had lived in the United States for two years and attended elementary school there. Nine had never been out of Japan. (To refer to individual participants in this paper, pseudonyms will be used.)

### *Reasons for participation mentioned in the application forms*

The participants' reasons for attending the UP tour varied but could be divided into four categories: (1) interest in visiting the Philippines itself or developing countries in general; (2) interest in language development; (3) exposure to different cultures and life styles in general, not necessarily the Philippines, to broaden world views; and (4) personal growth and independence. Some participants mentioned multiple reasons.

Particular attention was paid to reasons related to the use of English. Three students said that they regretted not having used English much in their previous short-term study abroad experience, so they would try this time. Another three who had never been abroad showed their desire to be in a place where they would have to use English all the time. Another three said that, in spite of their long EFL learning experience, they never had a chance to use English outside class. Others did not mention English as a reason.

To sum up, there were clearly two groups of students: one that wanted to be in the Philippines, where the language happened to be English, which they were fluent in already; and the other that wanted to develop their English proficiency and the place happened to be the Philippines, which they would develop interest in because of this opportunity to be there for 3 weeks. With the specific reasons which they mentioned in mind, I took up my research role of observing the students' behaviors, paying particular attention to their use of English in interaction with local people, with other tour participants, and with me.

### **Expected benefits of EO and basic guidelines**

Benefits obtained from EO in the short-term study-abroad context can be summarized as follows. EO among fellow program participants would help them increase the speed of accessing their knowledge, and as a result, develop fluency. It would also give opportunities for rehearsal of using English in a friendly and supportive environment, which would help them reduce anxiety. It would also give opportunities for rehearsal of surviving an English-only environment in the real world. Students were paying money for the opportunities to use English, so why not make the most of this paid experience by using English all the time?

EO is a valid method to facilitate the use of language use strategies. In the EFL classes I teach, I always see in the beginning of a semester some students who have a tendency to try to speak in English only when the content of the conversation is relatively simple but switch to Japanese when things become complicated or when they talk about something serious. That could mean that they can only have

a deep dialogue with someone who can speak Japanese but when they talk with non-Japanese speakers they can only exchange greetings and small talk. Being able to sustain a conversation even when lacking exact words, by using strategies such as simplified expressions or synonyms, is an important skill for making friendships with people using another language.

Moreover, study abroad is more than just language development. In order to gain more from the experience, students need to develop the ability to discover things, and this involves unaided use of the L2. If they always depend on the use of L1, when could they be able to stand and walk on their own feet? In a way, EO is preparation for real-life experience and a big step in learner development towards autonomy; by trying EO, students can develop the ability to feel the world and gain first-hand experience without mediation by other people in the form of translation. Autonomy is a legitimate goal for education, and autonomy in language learning involves autonomy in language use (Little, 2000; Nix, 2007). By developing their ability to manage in a completely English setting, learners can move towards independence.

With these expected benefits in mind, we successfully carried out all the pre-departure study sessions entirely in English. Then, the group departed for the Philippines. Even from the night before departure, while they stayed at a hotel near the airport, until coming back to the same airport after the tour, students were encouraged to try EO as much as possible.

“As much as possible” should be defined here. According to Aveni (2005), during study abroad, achievement of

language acquisition requires the use of the target language but some learners may need to use L1 in the following situations: (a) information exchange is possible only in L1; (b) information exchange is urgent and can be done more successfully in L1; (c) social networking in L2 use will cause the learner to be ostracized or isolated because other speakers of the same L1 do not want to use L2; (d) to escape from the exhausting demands of L2 communication; (e) a learner feels unable to portray the self accurately. Guidelines for the use of L1 in our EO policy were all based on what Aveni suggests above. Also, one important thing was added and emphasized: When the students talk to the escorting teacher, for example, when making a complaint, being a less proficient speaker of English in the conversation would be an enormous disadvantage for them so, in such situations, the escorting teacher should allow L1 unconditionally.

### Actually experience with EO during the UP tour

The 21 students tried EO whenever it was possible for them, and some did not use Japanese even when they fell ill with heavy diarrhea and a high fever. One of them pursued perfect EO even when he was hospitalized for three days.

On the post-tour reflective questionnaire, all of the participants wrote positive feedback on the EO policy. They shared their reflections as follows: *Without EO policy, I wouldn't have spoken English in the dormitory at all (Tamiko). I could have the courage to speak English ... because other students were so patient and waited for me when I struggled (Aiko). It was a good policy for me because to speak Japanese is so easy and I would have tended to speak Japanese to other tour participants otherwise (Yayoi).*

Even those who could not always speak English responded positively: *I think it was a great idea although I couldn't achieve a totally EO experience* (Emiko).

The participants also reported that they developed language use strategies through the EO experience. This was particularly noticeable among some of those who were not from the International Program. For them, it was the first intensive EO experience with other Japanese speakers for such a long time: *I started to use plain English to keep the communication; and before communication, I should think quickly what words I will use* (Shinichiro). *I think it was so important to try making mistakes, analyzing them and learning from them* (Daisuke). *If I don't have much vocabulary, I can tell my feeling with the passion. Trying to communicate is the most important.* (Toshie). *It's an attitude. If I don't know the expression, should speak even with just words* (Emiko). Thus the idea of pursuing EO was perceived positively by all the participants.

However, students also faced challenges. One of them said that it took a while to make friends with other participants because of EO. EO also had further implications for relationship-building within the group. Their limited vocabulary or choice of wrong words made them sound rude, and it made other participants feel uncomfortable. Here is an excerpt from a student's post-tour essay:

... we got confused and gradually got really frustrated. Finally, unnecessary conflict happened .... However, I feel glad we had this conflict because ***it helped me notice that my English level is so low, and my English would probably work only in the classroom.*** I now really feel that I need

to brush up my English communication skills. ... Now my passion for learning English is burning, and my target is clearer. If we hadn't tried English-only, I would never be feeling this way, and would never know what real English world is (Yoichi).

Another challenge was that some participants wanted to maintain EO but were not able to because of the influence of other participants. Moreover, when they officially switched to Japanese in various situations, deciding exactly when to switch to Japanese and when to switch back to English was difficult. Inevitably, when we had several occasions to meet people from Japanese-speaking communities in Manila, the use of Japanese was assumed, but even after those meetings, when the students were supposed to switch back to English, a few kept speaking in Japanese. In such cases, I consulted with the group leaders, who then told me that they would prefer to remind each other of the EO policy in a subtle way by using English consciously in front of those who were still using Japanese rather than having the escorting teacher intervene. Thus they tried to make their EO experience as stress-free as possible.

Students' responses to the post-tour questionnaire revealed more affective factors regarding EO. Some students who wanted to maintain EO longer became frustrated because others had already given up using English even in simple conversation. They felt that they had to use Japanese when their roommates started to talk in Japanese because they believed they would sound selfish by insisting on EO. This affective issue seemed to be very complicated. Not only those who wanted to maintain EO, but also those who wanted to give up EO said that they were frustrated. There was one

student who was strongly determined to persist in EO no matter what, and most of the participants praised her efforts, but one student commented negatively about this when her negotiation for switching to Japanese was unsuccessful: *Of course we joined the tour to learn English, but for me, it was more than that. When I talked with someone who had a different purpose, it was hard* (Mieko). Ironically, she was the one who had initially said on her application form that she wanted to overcome her passive attitude towards speaking English through this tour. Obviously, “as much as possible” regarding EO did not mean the same to all, and some highly-motivated students shared their concerns about other participants’ motivation as they sensed a big gap in their attitudes, not their English proficiency.

It was evident that English proficiency was not the only cause of participants’ giving up EO when some of those who had demonstrated higher level vocabulary, more grammar accuracy or higher scores on the institutional TOEFL had difficulty in maintaining their conversation in English. They struggled in simplifying their utterances or got stuck when they did not come up with the exact word they wanted to use. My observation was that this was also caused by their lack of skills for sustaining communication. There are many strategies that could be used to express a target meaning but they did not have the skills to do so. Students who tended to give up EO more often perceived this as simply their English proficiency problem, but those who were able to maintain EO perceived it as a motivational difference. One of them gave a constructive suggestion for future programs: *Before starting EO, we should get agreement from all the participants, maybe before they apply for the program* (Kazuo).

Further, totally unexpectedly, I learned in the reflective discussion meeting that some groups had their own EO rules, which I was not aware of during the tour. For example, on the first night, the two groups of male students got together and discussed how they should pursue EO, especially whether or not they would want to try EO even when they are inside their own rooms. They started off the meeting by getting to know each other. After a few hours of discussions in Japanese, they agreed to pursue EO 24 hours a day, everywhere. They said that they needed to use Japanese during this important decision-making process in order to get to know each other well enough so that they could survive their three weeks of EO together, even inside their accommodation. After building this sense of unity through dialogue in Japanese, they were able to maintain a 24-hour EO policy throughout the program. This can be seen as evidence of developing autonomy. Similarly, one group of female students made their own rule that using Japanese inside their room would be okay any time because they felt it was the only place where they could relax. They were trying to balance their mental state by reducing the EO hours. In both cases, the escorting teacher did not give any directions, but the students took the initiatives in decision-making and were in charge of and satisfied with the outcomes. These were interpreted as autonomous behaviours. Surely, “studying away from home entails accepting responsibility” (Chanock, 2004).

On the other hand, another group of four female students sharing one room reported at the post-tour feedback session that they were using Japanese in their room almost every night and that gradually they began to use Japanese when they

did not have to. None of them was completely happy about this, especially after they learned in the post-tour meeting that other rooms pursued EO more strictly and successfully. Unfortunately, I had no way to intervene as I was not aware of it at all: It was all taking place behind closed doors.

In interpreting all these results, a very important pattern emerged. Students who emphasized language development in their application forms tended to use Japanese more often, whereas students who did not mention English proficiency development were able to maintain EO. This can be interpreted to indicate that those whose primary concern was English wanted to join this tour because they had never had successful EO experience previously, but those who were already confident with their ability to survive EO did not mention language development. The former believed that an EO environment would raise their English proficiency and that failure was due to their ability, whereas the latter, those who were more ready for EO, attribute their readiness and success to motivation, efforts, and attitudes. From an escorting teacher's point of view, a difference in their language learning habits in the regular curriculum in the home institution could also be perceived.

Here is a summary of what was found in the experiment with EO in the study abroad tour to the Philippines. Firstly, EO was challenging not only for weaker students but also for stronger students because of lack of required skills, but it provided enhanced opportunities for "pushed out." Secondly, EO caused conflict among students, but they perceived it as positive learning experience and were able to deal with conflicts peacefully. Thirdly, groups that spontaneously generated their own EO rules demonstrated greater success in

EO and developed towards autonomy. Fourthly, as expected, EO needed to be suspended from time to time, but it was not only for the reasons justifying the use of L1 (Aveni 2005) as mentioned earlier in this paper, but also due to communication breakdown in relatively simple conversations inside their own rooms, and such communication breakdowns were perceived as a sign of declining motivation by some students who were more capable of EO. Lastly, after the inevitable suspensions of EO, deciding when to resume EO was perceived as extremely difficult.

### Guiding principles for pursuing EO in short-term study-abroad programs

To conclude this paper, based on the observations made during the UP tour and the students' feedback, I would like to propose guiding principles for pursuing EO in short-term abroad programs.

First, all the participants should understand the expected benefits of EO and agree on the EO policy *before* they sign up. Second, both weak and strong learners should acquire basic skills needed for EO, including skills in paraphrasing; repeating; simplifying words; and asking effective questions to maintain the conversation—ideally, these should be included in the pre-departure sessions. Third, it should be clear to all participants not only when to switch to L1 but also when to switch back to English, and who should get involved in the decision-making process, so that participants may develop a sense of responsibility. Finally, affective factors should be considered in the exercise of EO. Study abroad experience itself involves exhausting demands, and EO should not add excessive stress.

**Izumi Kanzaka** is a lecturer at the World Language Center, Soka University, Japan. She is currently teaching academic foundation courses in the International Program of the Economics Department at Soka University. Her research interests include learner autonomy, self-access, teacher education, and various aspects of psychology in foreign language education. <izumi@soka.ac.jp>

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