

Benefits of Short-Term Study Abroad Experiences: What Impact Do They Have on Japanese EFL Learners' Oral Communicative Competence?

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This paper reports on some of the findings of the first of a series of descriptive studies that investigates the impact of short-term study abroad experiences on Japanese university EFL learners' oral communicative competence. The participants were twenty-four second-year Business students, who joined three- to four-month ESL programmes at two US universities. Their oral performance was assessed before and after the programme, using one-to-one, face-to-face interviews conducted by native speaker examiners. The examiners were also asked to rate the affective impact that learner performance had on them. This was to explore the sociolinguistic aspect, which was not adequately covered by the original assessment scales. The results indicate statistically significant improvement in fluency and coherence and in vocabulary, but not in grammar or pronunciation. The affective impact rating also shows a significant improvement. Three case studies were conducted in order to explore the possible reasons for the great individual differences observed.

本論文では、短期留学が日本人大学生英語学習者のオーラル・コミュニケーション能力に及ぼす影響について調査した研究の成果のいくつかを報告する。24名の経営学部2年生が、アメリカの2つの大学での3か月と4か月の短期語学留学プログラムに参加した。プログラムの前後に、ネイティブ・スピーカー試験官により1対1の対面式インタビューが行われ、オーラル・コミュニケーション能力が測定された。この際、語用論的な適切度を調査するため、学生のパフォーマンスが試験官に与えた情動的影響についても、データが収集された。分析の結果、流暢さと一貫性、語彙、情動的影響の項目で統計的に有意な向上がみられた。文法と発音では、そのような変化は見られなかった。すべての項目で大きな個人差がみられたため、3人の学生のケース・スタディが行われ、個人差の理由についての考察がなされた。

DESPITE THE long history of EFL education in Japan, oral communication has been considered one of Japanese EFL learners' weakest areas of competency. In 2003, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology (MEXT) produced "An Action Plan to Cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" and emphasised the need for developing "communication skills" of Japanese EFL learners. Five years later they launched the "Global 30" Project to encourage the internationalisation of universities by "dramatically boosting the number of international students educated in Japan as well as Japanese students studying abroad." (Japanese Universities for Motivated People (JUMP), n.d.; see also MEXT, 2009). An increasing number of Japanese universities offer short-term ESL study abroad (SA) programmes as an affordable and accessible means to promote the learning of English and international experiences.



However, the number of Japanese students studying abroad has been decreasing steadily for the last few years (Fukushima, 2010; Tanikawa, 2011). Economic recession and the insularity, introversion, and risk-aversion among young Japanese have been suggested as major reasons for this trend (Fukushima; Tanikawa). While these may partly explain the decline of the number of Japanese students studying abroad, the author hypothesises that students, as well as their parents who support them, may also not be convinced of the benefits of SA experiences. Universities typically rely on anecdotes or general impressionistic remarks in advertising their SA programmes, rather than presenting empirical data, which may be more convincing.

There exists a large body of research outside Japan which has investigated the effect of SA on language learners (see DeKeyser, 2007, for a review of studies). Many studies have focused on speaking, “probably reflect[ing] the fact that improvement in this area is usually seen as the main goal of study abroad.” (DeKeyser, 2007, p. 208) However, very few studies have examined Japanese EFL learners’ speech data before and after SA. These existing studies are extremely small scale and have serious methodological problems. For example, Churchill (2009) examined only one learner and collected speech samples a long time before and after studying abroad. Wood (2007), although collecting learner data over a period of six months during their SA stay, used a non-interactive task in eliciting the data and investigated only four learners. Wood also focused solely on the development of fluency and was thus limited in scope. Small-scale case studies with specific foci permit thorough investigations; however, larger samples and a broader scope are needed to yield findings which are more generalisable and complete.

Canale (1983) defines communication as “the exchange and negotiation of information between at least two individuals through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols ... and

production and comprehension processes,” where information includes “conceptual, sociocultural, affective and other content” (p. 4). It is “a form of social interaction ... [and] takes place in discourse and sociocultural contexts which provide constraints on appropriate language use and also clues as to correct interpretations of utterances” (p. 3). Thus, using a face-to-face interactive task is crucial in the investigation of communicative competence. Canale conceptualises communicative competence as referring to “both knowledge and skill in using this knowledge when interacting in actual communication” (p. 5). This makes sense because what is visible and therefore what counts in real-life communication is what someone does (as opposed to what someone could potentially do), which some researchers termed “performance” (e.g., Chomsky, 1965; Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980). This is also in line with the popularity of performance assessment in language testing (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Shohamy, 1995), which makes claims about what language learners can do based on their performance. This study adopts Canale’s view of communication and communicative competence. The word performance is used to mean what speakers do in communicative settings, including language assessment interviews.

According to Canale (1983), communicative competence comprises four competency areas: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. Grammatical competence refers to “mastery of the language code” (p. 7) including the rules of morphology, vocabulary, syntax, phonology, and orthography. Sociolinguistic competence is concerned with the appropriate use of language both in verbal and non-verbal forms, “depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purposes of the interaction, and norms or conventions of interaction” (p. 7). Discourse competence is related to “mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres,” through “*cohesion* in form and *coherence* in meaning” (p. 9, italics in original).

Strategic competence is concerned with the ability to use “communication strategies” either “to compensate for break-downs in communication” or “to enhance the effectiveness of communication” (pp. 10-11).

What is needed is a study of a reasonable sample size, which assesses changes in learner performance in an interactive task before and after SA, covering the four areas of communicative competence. This is the first attempt in a series of such studies. The following research question is the focus of this paper:

What impact do short-term language SA experiences have on the oral communicative competence of Japanese university EFL learners?

Method

Participants

The participants were twenty-four second-year Business students, 11 male and 13 female, between the ages of 19 and 21. Their pre-departure TOEFL ITP scores ranged from 427 to 503, with the mean of 458.3 (sd: 21.42). All but five students had travelled to foreign countries before joining the SA programme, although most of their experiences were limited to short sightseeing trips. Three students had two-week to one-month homestay experiences in English speaking countries, but their TOEFL ITP scores were at the same level as that of the other students.

SA Programme

Students joined three-month to four-month ESL courses at two US universities in 2010 as an optional programme of the Faculty of Business Administration. Each student lived in an on-campus dormitory with a roommate. The roommates were mostly other Asian non-native speaker (NNS) students at University A and US NSs at University B. The number of students going to each

university varies from year to year, but 21 out of 24 students chose the shorter course in this particular year. The overview of the ESL courses are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of the ESL Courses

University	University A (n=21)	University B (n=3)		
Length (period)	3 months (mid-September - early December)	4 months (mid-August - mid-December)		
	Approximately 18+ hours/week (Monday to Thursday)	Approximately 18 to 20 hours/week (Monday to Friday)		
Classes & class hours	Listening / Speaking	4 hrs/wk	Listening/Speaking	6+ hrs/wk
	Writing	6 hrs/wk	Reading/Writing	6+ hrs/wk
	Reading / Vocabulary	4 hrs/wk	Integrated Skills (content-based) or Topic (conversation)	4 hrs/wk
	Electives	4 hrs/wk		
	Bay Area Experience	4 hrs/mth	Electives (optional)	4 hrs/wk

Prior to departure, all students were required to take a one-semester preparation course taught by a NS teacher, which focused on basic academic skills (e.g., group discussions and oral presentations) and inter-cultural themes (e.g., culture shock, different communication styles). During their stay in the US, the students were asked to submit online monthly reports about their study and life in general; however, only a few sent the reports every month.

Pretest and Posttest

One-to-one, face-to-face interviews were conducted before and after the SA by two NSs with qualifications and substantial experience with Cambridge ESOL examinations. Each student was interviewed once by each examiner, either in late July before departure or in mid- to late December after their return. Amongst validated oral performance test formats, the IELTS Speaking test (Cambridge ESOL, 2007) was selected as the basis for designing the task, as it is in line with the view of communication and the theory of communicative competence adopted in this study. Each interview lasted approximately 12 to 14 minutes and had three parts: introduction and interview, individual long turn, and two-way discussion (see Table 2).

Table 2. Interview Structure (adapted from Cambridge ESOL, 2007, p. 11)

Part	Nature of interaction	Length
Introduction & interview	The learner answers general & simple questions about him/herself	4-5 minutes
Individual long turn	The learner is given a verbal prompt on a card and is asked to talk on a particular topic. The learner has 1 minute to prepare before speaking for 1-2 minutes.	3-4 minutes (including 1 minute preparation time)
Two-way discussion	The interviewer and the learner engage in a discussion of more abstract issues and concepts linked to the topic in Part 2.	4-5 minutes

The interviewers assessed each learner's performance using the IELTS Speaking band descriptors (public version). The descriptors had nine bands and consisted of the four criteria of Fluency & Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range

& Accuracy, and Pronunciation. The learners were awarded a whole or half band score for each criterion. It should be noted that the setting and content of the interviews were somewhat different from that of the official IELTS test. Therefore, the same degrees of reliability and validity as the original IELTS test are not claimed in this study.

The interviewers were also asked to rate the negative affective impact learner performance had on them, such as irritation or discomfort felt while interacting with the learners. A 5-point scale developed by the author (Sato, 2008) was used, which ranged from "1: very serious" to "5: none". This subjective rating provided data on the sociolinguistic appropriacy of learner performance, which was not adequately covered by the IELTS descriptors but considered to be important. It has been reported that sociolinguistic inappropriacy often has negative affective effects on the interlocutor, which in turn could lead to serious social and interpersonal consequences (e.g., Gumperz, 1982, 1995, 1996; Thomas, 1983; Wolfson, 1983).

Results

In the following analyses, the groups who joined the shorter and longer courses are treated as one group since no obvious difference in the results was found between them. This seems to be partly because of the extremely small number of students who enrolled on the longer course and partly because of the great individual differences (see below).

Group Analyses

The pretest and the posttest rating scores were compared using a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. The results show that, as a group, the learners' oral performance was rated significantly higher ($p < .005$) on the IELTS Speaking band descriptors (public version) after SA. The group mean of the average of the four

analytical scores improved from 4.29 (sd: 0.574) in the pretest to 4.69 (sd: 0.501) in the posttest, with the mean difference of 0.40 (sd: 0.521). However, great differences were observed amongst the individuals as the high standard deviation indicates. In fact, the average scores of seven learners were lower in the posttest than in the pretest (see Figure 1).

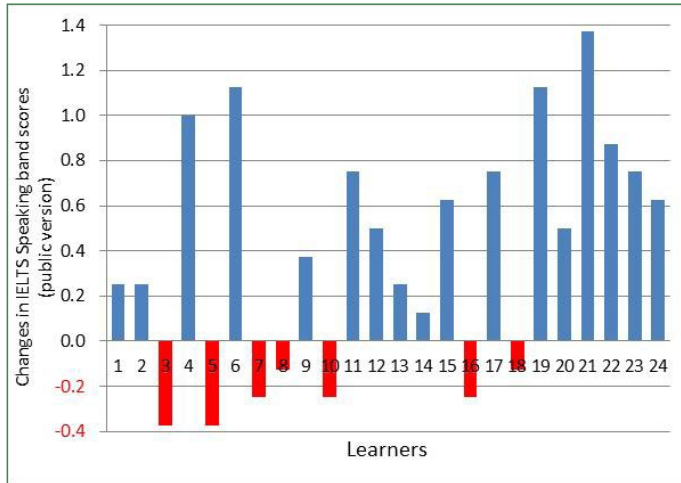
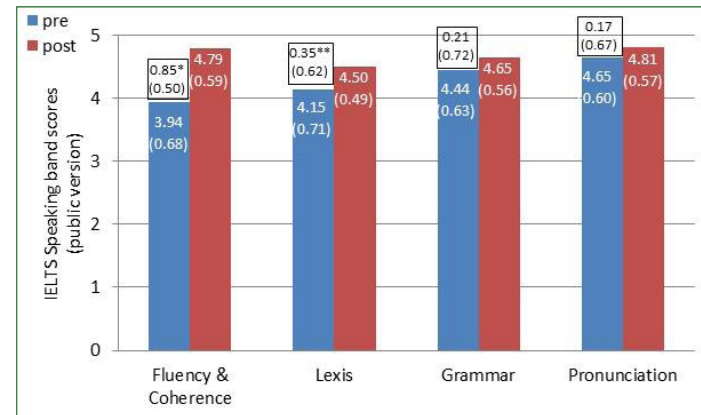


Figure 1. Pretest/Posttest Changes (Individual): Average of 4 Analytical Scores (N=24)

The areas in which the mean scores of the learner group significantly improved in the posttest were Fluency & Coherence and Lexical Resource. No significant change was observed in Grammatical Range & Accuracy and Pronunciation (see Figure 2). Smaller individual differences were found in the posttest in all the four areas. It should be noted, however, that a wide range of individual differences was observed in the pretest/posttest

score changes. Except for Fluency & Coherence, the standard deviations were much greater than the means (see figures in the round brackets in the square boxes in Figure 2).



Note: Pretest/Posttest changes are indicated in square boxes.
* $p < .001$, ** $p < .02$

Figure 2. Pretest/Posttest Comparison (Group Mean (sd)): Analytical Scores (N=24)

Spearman's correlation analyses were conducted between the pretest and posttest scores, and the pretest scores and pretest/posttest score changes to explore possible associations between these variables. The results showed significant correlations between the pretest and posttest scores in Fluency & Coherence ($r=0.642$, $p < .001$) and Lexical Resource ($r=0.523$, $p < .01$). Significant negative correlations were found between the pretest scores and the pretest/posttest changes in all the four areas (see Table 3).

Table 3. Spearman's Correlation between the Pretest scores and the Pretest/Posttest Score Changes

Criteria	Fluency & Coherence	Lexical Resource	Grammatical Accuracy & Range	Pronunciation
Spearman's rho	-0.595	-0.734	-0.663	-0.692
P-value	0.0022	0.0000	0.0004	0.0002

Significant improvement was also observed in the rating of the negative affective impact of the learner performances ($p < .001$). The mean score improved from 2.563 (sd: 0.838) in the pretest to 3.271 (sd: 0.909) in the posttest on the scale of "1: very serious" to "5: none", with the mean change of 0.708 (sd: 0.820). However, great individual differences were again observed as indicated by the high standard deviation. One learner got a lower score in the posttest, and eight learners' scores stayed the same.

Case Studies

In order to explore the possible reasons for the great cross-learner differences in the pretest/posttest changes mentioned above, case studies were conducted with the three learners whose average Speaking band scores changed most among the 24 participants. More specifically, Learner 3 and Learner 5, whose scores went down most, were compared with Learner 21, whose score improved the most (see Figure 1 above and Table 4 below). All three went to University A and had Asian NNS roommates.

Table 4. Profiles of Learner 3, Learner 5 and Learner 21

Learner	Sex	Host university	Roommate: Nationality & English level	Speaking band scores (average)		
				pretest	posttest	change
3	M	A	Indonesian (advanced)	4.750	4.375	-0.375
5	F	A	Chinese (advanced)	4.375	4.000	-0.375
21	F	A	Chinese (intermediate)	4.250	5.625	+1.375

When the analytical scores of each learner were examined, Learner 21 improved in all areas while Learner 3 and Learner 5 regressed in all but Fluency & Coherence (see Figure 3).

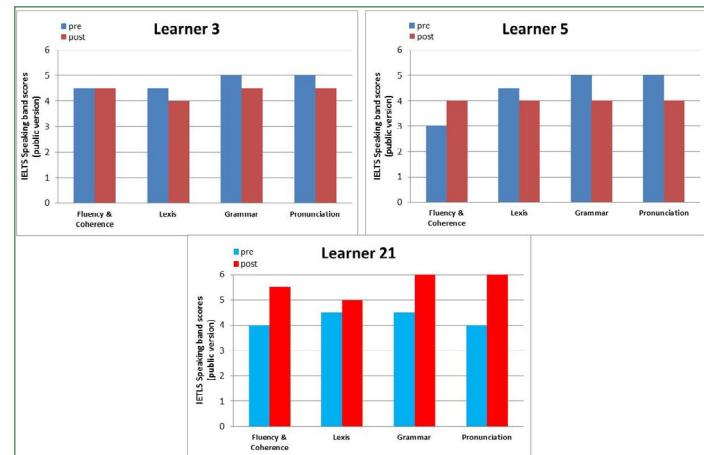


Figure 3. Pretest/Posttest Comparison (Individual): Analytical Scores (n=3)

The rating of the negative affective impact showed somewhat different results. Not only Learner 21 but also Learner 5 greatly improved after SA (see Figure 4). Only Learner 3 got a lower score in the posttest.

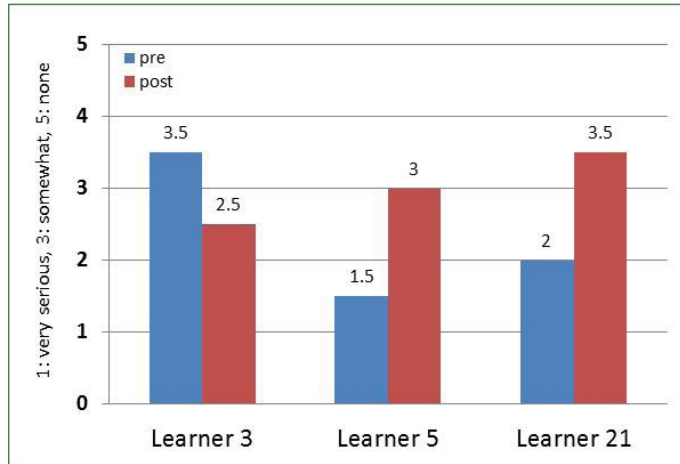


Figure 4. Pretest/Posttest Comparison (Individual): Negative Affective Impact Rating (n=3)

These learners' monthly reports showed some distinct characteristics. Learner 3 submitted the report only once at the beginning of October. It contained only brief general comments, and there was no mention of inter-cultural experiences or specific instances of English use outside the classroom. (Note: The following excerpts were originally written in Japanese and translated into English by the author.)

- Study: *Sometimes I struggle with homework. But I don't feel English study is that hard, so I'm enjoying studying!*
- Life: *English is everywhere, so I can learn continuously. I eat a lot every day....*

Learner 21 also submitted the report only once at the end of September. Unlike Learner 3's report, however, it showed that she identified tasks in English study and set realistic and specific goals, and that she was making an effort to find out-of-class opportunities to use English in social settings.

- Study: *I can't tell if the level of the class is appropriate for me or not because we've just started, but homework is easy. However, I can't speak much in class, so I'd like to try and be more active and speak more in class. I'd like to remember the basics that I forgot.*
- Life: *I've been playing basketball and having parties with foreigners. I'd like to get closer to them.*

Learner 5 sent a very detailed report twice, at the beginning of October and November. They showed good analyses of problems encountered both in and out of the classroom, and her positive attitudes to overcome them. She was also aware of her own strengths and progress, which she used to motivate herself. Her November report also indicated she was observant of issues in inter-cultural communication.

(Beginning of October)

- Study: *The writing class is very hard to follow because grammar terms are all in English. I feel I have to learn grammar terms. I feel pressure because my Chinese classmates are very fluent in English. However, I've been managing to do my homework every day, so I'll try my best to keep up with the class.*
- Life: *I felt homesick a lot at the beginning, but these days I enjoy more and more because I can understand English and can talk to my roommate and foreign friends. ...*

(Beginning of November)

- Study: *I'm getting used to homework these days and feeling more comfortable about my study. In my last report I wrote the writ-*

ing class was very hard, but these days I can understand what the teacher says and can respond confidently in class. I think it's a great improvement not to find the writing class painful. There are international students from many different countries, and I've realised that their mother tongues are reflected in their accents. I'm very glad I can understand English better than before even when spoken with such different accents.

- *Life: In our suite we have Europeans and Chinese, and there have been some issues between them, and we, Japanese, are in a dilemma. ... Europeans say Chinese talk too loud, but I've seen Europeans having parties every weekend until late at night and Chinese having trouble sleeping. I think these stem from cultural differences and they both need to compromise...*

The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data of the three students together suggests that self-aware learners who set realistic and specific goals, and sought out-of-class opportunities to use English improved in the affective impact rating, though not necessarily in other scores.

Discussion and Provisional Conclusion

The group results suggest that the short-term ESL SA experiences investigated in the present study had a positive impact on the Japanese university English learners' oral communicative competence - at least in some areas. The areas which showed significant improvement were fluency and coherence, and vocabulary. Sociolinguistic appropriacy also seems to have improved as indicated by the significant improvement in the affective impact rating. Significant negative correlations were found between the pretest scores and the pretest/posttest score changes in all four areas assessed by the IELTS Speaking band descriptors. This indicates that students who got lower scores before studying abroad benefited more through the SA experi-

ences. This coincides with the smaller cross-learner differences observed in the posttest. This is also in line with the lack of significant improvement in grammar and pronunciation, in which the participants had attained comparatively high scores before studying abroad. One interpretation of these findings would be that the communicative pressure and social context in the target-language environment facilitated the development of competence in the areas particularly important in daily social interactions, and to an extent that was required to fulfil communicative needs in such a setting. The three case studies, including the qualitative examination of the learners' monthly reports, revealed some possible causes of cross-learner differences and the importance of considering the sociolinguistic aspect of oral communication. Self-aware learners who set realistic and specific goals, and sought out-of-class opportunities to use English seem to have improved sociolinguistically, though not necessarily linguistically.

There are some limitations in the design of this study, and further studies are needed to provide a more complete picture of the impact of SA experiences. For example, assessment tools which have separate scales for fluency and coherence, and can evaluate sociolinguistic competence more thoroughly may enhance the validity of the findings. The qualitative data examined are also relatively sparse, and more detailed case studies are needed. For example, interviews with students may shed more light on the possible cause of individual differences. Finally, it is unknown whether the gains in oral communicative competence found in this study will be retained or further developed over time. This is another area for further investigation.

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Bio Data

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