

Enhanced English Speaking Skills: A Short-Term Study Abroad

Scott Menking

Abstract

This paper focuses on the linguistic achievements gained during a three-week Intensive English Program (IEP) by seven Japanese university students. Even though the length of the study program was only three weeks, there were recognizable improvements in the students' English speaking skills. The students were observed and evaluated in seven areas throughout the three-week program. This contrasts with previous studies that have evaluated student achievement with proficiency tests. Noticeable improvement was specifically made in the areas of *amount of speech*, *fluid speech*, *asked questions and/or made comments to others*, and *clear communication*.

Introduction

According to the *Report on International Educational Exchange* (Hey-Kyung 2002) more Japanese students attend Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in the United States than students from any other country. In 2001, for example, 21 percent of the IEP students were from Japan; these students studied English, on average, for 11.3 weeks (Hey-Kyung 2002). In a study of the beliefs of 1,296 Japanese tertiary students, Sakui and Gaies (1999, p. 483) found strong student disagreement to the statement, 'In order to speak and understand English very well, English education at school is enough.' In addition, Matsuura, Chiba, and Hilderbrandt's study (2001) of 301 Japanese university students found that the students believed that speaking and listening were more important than reading, writing, and grammar. These may be two of the many reasons for the popularity of IEPs in English-speaking countries such as the United States, Australia, England, and New Zealand. Furthermore, almost 60 percent of the students in

Matsuura, Chiba, and Hilderbrandt's study (2001, p. 76) agreed or strongly agreed that 'Learning about cultural differences is important for communication.' Involvement in IEPs, therefore, may be perceived as a means of gaining knowledge of cultural differences and thereby lowering or removing the 'foreignness' of the target language (English).

In spite of the apparent benefits of participating in an IEP, little research has been done on its affect on Japanese students' English proficiency. Tanaka and Ellis (2003) studied 166 Japanese students majoring in English who went on a 15-week program and concluded that proficiency improved slightly. To measure this gain, Tanaka and Ellis (2003) only relied on scores from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) obtained three months prior to the program and one and one-half weeks before the end of the IEP. Similarly, Bodycott and Crew (2000) used pre-departure and post-program proficiency tests and concluded that students from Hong Kong had gained confidence during a six-week immersion program although the proficiency test scores showed little improvement. Students in the Drake study (1997) took the Georgia State Test of English Proficiency at the beginning and at the end of the six-week IEP. He concluded that there is 'no test available that is sensitive enough to measure six weeks of language learning' (Drake 1997, Final Evaluations para. 4). He found that while 'some of the students moved up one level during their stay, some stayed the same, and a few failed to maintain their original level' (Drake 1997, Final Evaluations para. 4). On the other hand, Beamer and Sasaki's discussion (2003) of 64 students, primarily from Japan and Korea, in a 10-week IEP focused on students' sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the program. Improvement in English ability was not addressed. It is obvious, therefore, that more research is necessary to determine whether the time, energy, and financial resources expended by Japanese students attending IEPs results in increased linguistic skills. This evaluation is needed so that continued participation can be accurately evaluated.

This study, therefore, differs from the previously discussed research in two significant ways. Evaluating students at two points, at the beginning and at the

end of an IEP, provides only snapshot measurements. As students can be tired or feel stressed, giving a false measurement of their true skill levels, conducting evaluations over several days provides a more accurate measure of students' true abilities. In addition, Heaton (1988) noted that an interview situation is not always a natural situation and that it can increase tension for students, thus increasing the likelihood of inaccurate evaluations. Studies have shown 'the negative correlation of anxiety with ... proficiency test performance [and] performance in speaking and writing tasks' (Oxford 1999, p. 61). Consequently, evaluating students in natural settings where they are unaware that they are being evaluated decreases the potential for performance anxiety. It is significant, therefore, that the students in this study were evaluated in circumstances where they could perform unhindered. In addition, evaluating students in natural settings allows the evaluator to observe real-world situations as opposed to the unnatural environments associated with interviews. Because the author accompanied the students throughout the IEP and spent a great deal of time with the students outside of class, there was an opportunity to evaluate the students in natural settings throughout the three-week program. This eliminated the need for relying on pre- and post-program test scores. Because only seven students participated in the IEP, detailed data for each student could be gathered throughout the three-week program. If 64 or 166 students had participated, as in the previously discussed studies, this personal attention would have been difficult to achieve.

This study also differs from previously conducted research in the format of the program. First, at only three weeks, this IEP is shorter than any of the studies previously discussed. Furthermore, in contrast to Tanaka and Ellis' study (2003) of English majors and Bodycott and Crew's study (2000) of English as a second language (ESL) students, only one of the seven participants in the IEP at Central Washington University was an English major. Finally, unlike the IEPs studied by Tanaka and Ellis (2003), Beamer and Sasaki (2003), and Drake (1997), classroom instruction did not include reading or writing components.

Program Background

Shimane University has had an exchange with Central Washington University (CWU) in the United States since 1982. Shimane University students travel to CWU every two years. Unfortunately, because of a lack of student interest in 2000, the Intensive English Program at CWU was cancelled. Shimane University was not, however, alone in its reluctant cancellation of English study-abroad programs in recent years. The Institute of International Education's *Opendoors : Report on International Educational Exchange* (Hey-Kyung 2002) reported an 8 percent decrease from the previous year in enrollment in IEPs in the United States for the year 2001. The report attributed this decline to the terrorist attacks in the United States that same year. For students from Japan, however, the prolonged weakened economy may be a contributing factor in the reduced numbers of students.

The students in this study participated in a three-week summer program at Central Washington University located in Ellensburg, a small college town high in the mountains in the interior of the state of Washington. Except for the two-day, one-night homestay, the students stayed on campus and ate in the CWU cafeteria. This gave them opportunities to meet native English-speaking participants from other conferences and seminars (e.g., teacher training, student workshops on creating a yearbook, etc.). Every weekday morning, the IEP students had three hours of classroom instruction that focused on communication and included, among other things, small talk etiquette and conversing about feelings toward others. The students also studied how to discuss cultural norms. In addition, they learned about the diversity of cultures that have settled in the Yakima River Valley where Ellensburg is located. Blanche (2002) reviewed the criteria for a quality short-term English study abroad; this program met his guidelines for language instruction and out-of-class activities.

In Sakui and Gaies' study (1999, p. 482) of tertiary students' beliefs, the statement with the strongest agreement was 'English conversation class should be enjoyable.' A combination of enjoyable classroom instruction as well as fun

activities lends itself to language acquisition for Japanese students. The IEP at CWU had this environment for learning English. In the afternoon after formal morning language classes, there were various activities that further encouraged the students to develop their English skills. The students were actively involved with conversation partners who were native English-speaking university students. With these conversation partners, the students participated in activities such as playing soccer, going bowling wearing costumes created with purchases from a second-hand store, and having a pizza party. The Shimane University students also experienced other activities such as horseback riding, river rafting, attending a Seattle Mariners baseball game, and visiting the Chimpanzee Language Research Facility. Furthermore, the accompanying instructor created many additional opportunities to be with native English-speaking Ellensburg residents and students. These social situations provided students with not only unique opportunities but also prompted meaningful linguistic use. This is significant since Beamer and Sasaki (2003, p. 84) found that ‘the students consistently complained that they [did] not have enough opportunities to use English communicatively once they [were] outside of their classes’ and that students felt isolated. These complaints were avoided during the study at CWU by providing a variety of optional activities for the students.

Participants

In August 2002, seven students from Shimane University participated in the Intensive English Program at Central Washington University. Blanche (2002) noted that this is within the ideal number of students for quality overseas programs. Of the seven students, only one was an English major. Two were law majors, two were chemistry majors, one was an economics major, and one was a mathematics major. At the time of the program, the English major was a third-year student. Two other students were third-year students, three were second-year students, and one was a first-year student. The fact that only one participant was an English major indicates that other members of the student body were interested in becoming proficient in English.

Instrument and Scoring

The students did not take an English proficiency test such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) before the Intensive English Program started. Instead, another instrument that is used to measure students' speaking abilities during the regular school year at Shimane University was used. Through repeated use, the scoring criteria for this instrument has been improved and is considered reliable for classroom assessments and for evaluating progress over a term. *Amount of speech* is scored on a 10-point scale with 1 being the lowest and 10 the highest. The following are all scored on a 5-point scale with 1 being the lowest and 5 the highest: *fluid speech, asked questions and/or made comments to others, clear communication (comprehensible output), tried to speak, appropriate use of vocabulary, and answering questions.*

The instrument was used by the Shimane University (SU) evaluator to measure the speaking skills of the students prior to the start of the program and at the end of the program. The students were given the scoring criteria before the first interview and observations so they were aware of the evaluation criteria. The first, base-line scores were a composite of an interview, students' performance during the preparation classes in Japan, and informal situations on campus at Shimane University. At CWU, the SU evaluator observed the students outside of the classroom in planned activities (e.g., horseback riding and river rafting) as well as during free time when the SU evaluator provided additional, optional activities (e.g., meeting a group of college students, going to the movies, shopping, star gazing, etc.). The SU evaluator also observed the students while living together with them in the dormitory. As previously discussed, observing and scoring students in natural English-speaking environments is preferable to only evaluating them with one interview because of students' self-imposed restrictions and stress that may inhibit them from demonstrating their abilities. To measure changes in speaking skills, the same instrument was again used to provide a composite score of the students' interactions in English throughout the program.

In addition to the evaluator from Shimane University, the instructor of the IEP at Central Washington University was asked to complete the instrument at the beginning and at the end of the program. Two evaluators were used to confirm trends in changes of language ability, thereby reducing the risk of bias in the data. Both evaluators agreed that there was improvement by all students during the IEP. There were, however, some differences between the two evaluators. One reason for the differences may be that the CWU evaluator based her ratings primarily on interviews and secondarily on observations in the classroom. On the other hand, the SU evaluator observed the students' use of English during afternoon and evening activities, as well as on the weekends. The difference in the evaluation environments, therefore, is believed to be a contributing factor in the scoring differences. Because both evaluators agreed that the students progressed, the SU evaluator's scores, which are more comprehensive, will be the focus of the paper. However, significant differences between the two evaluators will be discussed.

Results

Amount of Speech

To score 1 point in *amount of speech*, a student typically only had to make one or two word utterances whenever s/he spoke. To receive the full 10 points in this category, the student had to speak multiple times in conversations, contributing in a very active manner. To be fair, judgment was tempered by the personality of each student. If, for example, a student was generally quiet during conversations in Japanese, it would be unreasonable to expect him/her to become a dominant speaker during an English conversation. The quantity of speech was, consequently, judged accordingly.

Overall, the *amount of speech* score increased by 24 points for the group, an increase of 75 percent. On average, each student improved by 3.4 points by the SU evaluator and 2.6 points by the CWU evaluator. The difference in the scores of the two evaluators is the result of one student's evaluation. Although both evaluators agreed that student 'E' finished the IEP with a score of 9 or 10, the SU

evaluator's base-line evaluation was significantly lower than that of the CWU evaluator's. Consequently, this discrepancy occurred. If this student is removed from the comparison, both evaluators agreed that the remaining six students improved by an average of 2.7 points. Oxford (1999, p. 66) noted that one manifestation of language anxiety is 'low levels of verbal production.' Improvement in *amount of speech* indicates that the students' anxiety decreased and that they benefited from improved confidence in their speaking skills. Tanaka and Ellis (2003, p. 78) hypothesized that one reason for the small gains on the TOEFL scores of students who had completed an IEP was because the Japanese learners 'had little need to use English outside the classroom.' The increase in the amount of speaking by the students who attended the IEP at CWU indicates that unlike the students studied by Tanaka and Ellis, these students did use English outside of the classroom. It was observed that as the students were better able to make themselves understood with native speakers, they gained confidence. This confidence led to more speaking.

Fluid Speech

Students who scored 1 point in *fluid speech* made multiple breaks while speaking. To receive the full 5 points, a student had to use full sentences or strings of sentences with no unnatural breaks in the utterances. Grammar and pronunciation mistakes were not measured; instead, the ability to communicate ideas using one or more sentences was deemed important for this item. Discourse competence, the ability to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve unity, is one of the four skills associated with communicative competence (Yalden 1987, p. 20). Utterances displaying discourse competence, therefore, indicate students are constructing thoughts and utterances in a more holistic approach. On the other hand, when second language (L2) learners question or doubt themselves too much during an utterance, there are breaks or pauses that result from monitoring output before speaking. McVeigh (2001) reported that Japanese students are prone to over self-correction or monitoring that causes intermittent breaks in speech. Excessive self-correction leads to a breakdown in meaning transfer or halted communication. As a result, interlocutors have a

difficult time understanding the speaker because of multiple, long pauses. These pauses differ from pauses that are made for emphasis or in instances where the speaker is allowing the receiver time to process information.

As with *amount of speech*, there was a 75 percent (9 point) increase in the scores for *fluid speech*, a measure of the ability to make utterances without unnatural breaks or hesitation while formulating an utterance. In reviewing previous research of study-abroad programs where the participants were not necessarily Japanese students, Tanaka and Ellis (2003) found that gains in fluency are common. It is important to note, however, that in the case of the students in the IEP at CWU, these gains were recorded after only three weeks. Ellis (1994, p. 394) referred to the 'linguistic features that disturb the smooth flow of speech' as hesitation phenomena; the SU students' improvement indicates they had better control of hesitation phenomena after only three weeks in an IEP, thereby improving their communicative ability.

Asked Questions and/or Made Comments to Others

To receive 1 point for *asked questions and/or made comments to others*, a student had to infrequently make an effort to utter one-word responses. To receive the full 5 points, however, the student had to ask questions and/or make comments in group conversations even when s/he was not spoken to directly. A comment could be as simple as 'Really?' or 'I don't understand.' This item represents actions that are significant in contributing to conversations without being prompted, an important part of being involved in discussions. In using these skills, speakers can extend ideas and provide additional input. This can be associated with increased enjoyment in conversing with others.

With a total improvement of 9 points for the group, a 47 percent increase, the third most significant improvement during the IEP was in the category, *asked questions and/or made comments to others*. One student scored the maximum 5 points by both the SU evaluator and the CWU evaluator. Although the other students improved by 1 or 2 points according to the SU evaluator, the CWU evaluator concluded that four of the students did not improve. Both evaluators,

however, agreed that in aggregate the students' final score was 28 points. One explanation is that the students became more conscious of asking questions and using their English upon arrival in the United States, resulting in higher initial scores at CWU than in Japan.

Clear Communication

Clear communication allows the interlocutor to clearly understand another's utterances and the ideas contained in them. It is, for example, easier to understand an idea that is expressed in detail rather than one point at a time. A similar concept applies to reading, where one moves from reading word-by-word or sentence-by-sentence to reading paragraphs or pages for entire meaning. In the same way that doing so allows the reader to more clearly understand what is conveyed, a speaker who moves away from form-only utterances provides the interlocutor with clearer meaning. Second language learners often, however, give a great deal of attention to form, relegating meaning to second priority and ignoring appropriateness (Yalden 1987). As L2 learners improve their skills, they are better able to construct longer utterances because they do not have to consciously think about form as much. This measure, therefore, was an important gauge of whether students moved away from form-focused utterances during their time in the IEP in the United States.

Those students who received 1 point in *clear communication* were only able to make themselves roughly understood. On the other hand, to receive the full 5 points the student had to be able to express him/herself so there was no uncertainty as to the intended meaning. Overall, the group improved by 47 percent (8 points), with an average improvement of 1.14 points. Both evaluators agreed that student 'A' earned 5 points on the final evaluation, an improvement of 1 point. Improvements were generally the result of clearer utterances that better expressed ideas. This, in turn, was directly related to the students' improved *fluidity* and to the *amount of speech* the students produced. Learning an L2 is similar to any other skill, such as sports; it requires practice. The more one practices, the more improvement there generally is. Similarly, the more opportunities a student has to speak the L2, the better s/he is able to

communicate and to communicate clearly. This was obvious in the improvement found in *clear communication*.

Tried to Speak

This category, *tried to speak*, was designed to measure effort to speak English. A score of 1 point indicates that the student infrequently made an effort to speak, using, for example, one-word utterances. To receive the full 5 points, the student had to make an effort to join the conversation intermittently with at least one- or two-word utterances. Growth in this area reflects a learner's increased desire and/or ability to speak, possibly as a result of increased confidence. With total group improvement of 8 points, there was a 31 percent increase in scores. Two students improved by 2 points while four students improved by 1 point. Both of the evaluators agreed that one of the students had already achieved (and maintained) the maximum points at the beginning of the program. In addition, both evaluators gave the other students a 4 or 5 on their final evaluation. One student was the exception, receiving a 3 from the CWU evaluator.

Appropriate Use of Vocabulary

There was less improvement in the area of *appropriate use of vocabulary* than in many of the other categories. Although a student could score 1 point for the use of basic vocabulary that may or may not have been used in exactly the correct manner, to receive all 5 points the student had to correctly use vocabulary that was appropriate for the topic. Although both evaluators agreed that overall the students improved by 21 percent, each evaluator believed that three or four students showed no improvement over the three-week period. According to the SU evaluator, two students improved by 1 point, and one student improved by 2 points.

Before departure from Japan and throughout the program, the students were encouraged to make a list in a notebook of new words they had learned and to try to use these new words in conversations. The student who improved the most made a conscious effort to use new vocabulary repeatedly. His effort to use new vocabulary sometimes made for comical situations that everyone enjoyed

because he deliberately used the new vocabulary in situations where the word or phrase was strange. This student's method of using new vocabulary could have led to fossilization if he had not understood the appropriate usage. To avoid this problem, the SU evaluator checked the student's understanding of the new vocabulary and found that he did, in fact, understand the appropriate uses but that he was using his own learning style to remember new vocabulary and phrases. Although the other students tried this memory method at times, only student 'F' was consistently successful in trying to use new vocabulary. Dornyei (1998, p. 117) noted that motivation is 'one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second/foreign language (L2) learning,' and this student demonstrated this. By being motivated to learn and use new vocabulary, he improved more than the other students. This verifies that at times, therefore, students may have to create situations or topics where they can use the new vocabulary that they want to practice.

Answering Questions

This category was created to measure students' ability to fully answer questions as well as answer follow-up questions. This skill is important because students need the skills to appropriately respond to questions they do not understand or do not know how to answer rather than responding with no reaction. *Answering questions* is related to the listening skill because without listening abilities, questions cannot be answered.

To receive 1 point, a student had to make an effort to answer questions, but to receive all 5 points the student had to give a full answer to the question as well as answer follow-up questions. With an increase of 5 points (20 percent), students in the IEP improved the least in this category. One reason for this is that there was less room for improvement. One student started the IEP with 5 points from both evaluators, and the remaining six students had beginning scores of 3 or 4. Because of the fairly high scores at the beginning, both evaluators found that two students did not improve. One can also conclude that because the students generally had good ability at the beginning of the program they came to the program with developed listening skills.

Discussion and Implications

All of the Shimane University students who participated in the 2002 summer Intensive English Program improved their English skills. This is notable since the students had sizable improvements during a three-week program, whereas previous studies have researched longer IEPs. Both evaluators found improvements, most notably in the *amount of speech* and in *fluid speech*, although, on the whole, improvement was found in every area examined. Knowledge of English is important, but knowledge without use is meaningless for English communication. The more one understands of any subject, the more confidence one can gain in the application of that knowledge. It is encouraging, therefore, that three weeks of study in an English-speaking country enabled Japanese students to improve important communication skills. Furthermore, the study found that not only English majors but also other university students can benefit by participating in an IEP.

Drake (1997) noted that IEPs may not be successful if the participants are reclusive. Tanaka and Ellis (2003) made similar conclusions. Going to a different culture that uses a different language can only be an educational experience if the students have the attitude that there is something to be learned rather than viewing the trip as a foreign shopping spree. The positive results from this IEP reflect the personalities and motivation of each of the students and their desire to utilize their time during the IEP. There were no reclusive students during this IEP. Language partners and extra activities also significantly increased not only the students' speaking and listening skills but also their confidence in their skills to a level that enabled them to communicate effectively with native speakers.

Intensive English Programs give students opportunities and additional motivation to practice their English skills. High motivation to learn English directly increases the effort L2 learners put into achieving a better command of the target language and 'can make up for considerable deficiencies ... in one's language aptitude' (Dornyei 1998, p. 117). This motivation invigorates the students to apply themselves to the study and practice of speaking and listening

in English. With newfound confidence and visible improvement in their ability to communicate, these seven students came to enjoy speaking in English. IEPs, therefore, are environments where students can improve their English speaking skills. It is possible, however, that this group of students was unique in their desire to fully utilize their time during the IEP. Future research using observation techniques like those used to gather this study's data are necessary to confirm the value of IEPs on a larger scale.

Two students who participated in the summer 2002 IEP also participated in another IEP the following spring (2003). These two students joined the spring program because they realized the advantages of studying in an IEP. The experience and knowledge that all of these students gained is an integral part of their university education. In a world that is becoming more interrelated every day, it is becoming increasingly important to have a better understanding of other languages and cultures. While visiting other countries is beneficial, understanding the embedded cultural assumptions cannot be achieved without studying the language. IEPs in other countries have been and can continue to be an effective way for Japanese university students to improve both linguistic and cultural understanding.

Conclusion

It is evident that these students' English speaking skills improved. This is the result of intensive, increased exposure to an English-speaking society. Confidence in their English skills did not come only from classroom instruction. Outside of the classroom, students greatly benefited from time spent with conversation partners, from free time when the students interacted with the community, and from their homestays. With their conversation partners, for example, the students were able to test phrases as well as learn new ones. It is doubtful that similar results could have been achieved during a three-week intensive English course in Japan because after the students left the classroom, they would have spoken their native Japanese language, not English.

The accomplishments made by the 2002 summer IEP participants are a good example of what future students can accomplish if they put forth the effort. The results indicate that IEPs are worth the time, energy, and financial resources involved and that they are valuable not only for English majors but also for other university students in general. When students are committed to an Intensive English Program, great progress can be made in three weeks. The option of taking short-term IEPs in the United States and other countries, therefore, needs to continue if universities are going to provide students with a well-rounded education that includes linguistic and cultural enrichment.

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