

# Intensive English Programs: Linguistic Achievement

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# Intensive English Programs: Linguistic Achievement

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This study investigates the linguistic achievement of Japanese university students who participated in Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in the United States. The data, collected using pre-departure and post-program questionnaires, includes reactions from participants between 2002 and 2006. The paper reviews the combined achievements of five IEPs as well as differences by year of participation. Although there was a variety of learning experiences, the students perceived listening to be the skill that improved the most, followed by over-all communicative ability and speaking. An active chaperone who encouraged the students to participate in a wide variety of unofficial events was found to be a key component to a successful learning experience for participants, particularly when the students stay in dormitories rather than homestays. After examining students' responses according to the variable of English major, the paper concludes that non-English majors can benefit from participation as much as, if not more than, English majors.

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Japanese tertiary students desire English proficiency; English not only allows them to participate in various academic pursuits but also increases their possibilities for job attainment after graduation. Short-term Intensive English Programs (IEPs) are one option that students may consider in their goal to become proficient in English. Many Japanese students cannot participate in one-year programs; therefore, this may explain why Japan continues to be the leading country of origin of IEP students in the United States (IIE Network, 2005a). Between 2001 and 2004, however, the number of students participating in IEPs in the United States decreased from 78,521 to 44,565 (IIE Network, 2005a); likewise, there was a similar decline (34.4 percent) in the number of Japanese participants (IIE Network, 2005a). Decreases in international student enrollment, both for IEPs and

for long-term programs, have been attributed to several factors, including the development of more and better programs in the students' home countries, thereby eliminating the need to travel to the United States (IIE Network, 2005b).

In spite of the potential appeal of IEPs, there have been few studies investigating the self-perceived linguistic achievements that result from participation and in particular the achievements of Japanese students. Tanaka and Ellis (2003) used TOEFL scores to measure Japanese students' proficiency gains after a 15-week IEP. Menking (2004) demonstrated the instructors' perceptions that Japanese students had linguistic gains after participating in a three-week IEP, but the pilot study was limited by the small number of participants (seven). After only three weeks, significant linguistic gains may be difficult to concretely measure using standardized tests (e.g., TOEFL, TOEIC). Students themselves, however, may perceive improvement in their language abilities after participating in an IEP.

Self-perceived linguistic gains can be an instrumental part of the second language (L2) learning process. First, although motivation is multi-faceted and cannot be defined with a few simple elements, L2 instructors agree that motivation to learn an L2 must be maintained over a long period of time. Every L2 instructor can provide ample examples to support Dornyei's assertion (2000) that motivation is dynamic, not static, and is subject to internal and external influences. Second, self-perceived improvement is one important factor in the motivation to continue L2 studies and therefore directly influences advancement in linguistic achievement (Dornyei & Csizer, 1998). A component of Dornyei's framework (2003, pp. 23-24) of motivational teaching practice in the L2 classroom is encouraging positive retrospective self-evaluation and includes increasing learning satisfaction. Even if others do not believe the student has improved, if s/he perceives improvement and feels satisfied with the progress, motivation will follow. Third, a study of Japanese university students found strong student agreement that an important element in improving English language learning is improvement in student attitudes toward learning (Rausch, 2000). In addition to increasing motivation, self-perceived achievement could positively affect student attitudes toward L2 learning.

## Method

### *Aims*

This study was designed to determine what, if any, linguistic success students perceived after attending a three-week IEP. If there was perceived linguistic growth, this information can be used when future IEPs are offered. If there was not, however, future participation should be reevaluated.

### *Background of Programs*

Shimane University in Japan has maintained relationships with three universities in the United States, thereby allowing students the option of participating in IEPs either during spring break (i.e., March) or during summer vacation (i.e., August). While the spring IEP is always at the same university, the summer IEP alternates between two American universities. Because of such factors as a lack of student interest, the expense of participation, the timing of the IEP during the student year, and the fear of SARS, there were only enough students to participate once a year between 2002 and 2006, the years when the data was collected. In 2002, the students attended the summer IEP, but for the remaining years, participation occurred in the spring.

The programs at the two American universities are similar. The IEPs last three weeks. Students attend English classes that emphasize oral communication and are taught in the morning by American university instructors; in the afternoon there are often planned group activities or opportunities to interact with conversation partners. Both the morning and afternoon components are important for L2 interaction because these elements of the programs increase the number of contact hours students have in the L2. Classroom instruction (*learning*) as well as experience and interaction in the language (*acquisition*) are key elements in becoming proficient in an L2 (Yule, 1998). On the weekends during the IEP there are often excursions, such as going to famous places that are nearby or attending sporting events. The spring and summer IEPs vary in one important aspect. During the summer, students stay in university dormitories except for a weekend homestay. As a result, during the evenings and free time, there is no structure that encourages students to use their L2. In contrast, spring participants have a homestay for

the entire IEP so their evenings and free time are usually spent with native speakers.

### *Participants*

Data was gathered over a five-year period. Fifty-five Japanese students participated in the IEPs between 2002 and 2006. Seven students attended the 2002 summer program, and 13 students went on the IEP in the spring of 2003. In the spring of 2004, eight students took part in the IEP; 14 students participated in the 2005 spring program. In the spring of 2006, there were 13 participants. Students were recruited with posters and through announcements made in English classes; participation was open to students majoring in English as well as students from other departments. This broad search was performed in an attempt to enroll any student who was interested and to have enough students to hold the IEP. Twenty-seven students (49.09 percent) were English majors while the remaining 28 (50.91 percent) were students studying pre-law (9 students), science (9 students), Japanese literature (3 students), math (2 students), education (2 students), communications (1 student), engineering (1 student), and economics (1 student). There was also variety in the age of the students, with 16 freshman (29.09 percent), 30 sophomores (54.55 percent), 8 juniors (14.54 percent), and 1 senior (1.82 percent).

Five participants were removed from the study because they did not complete both the pre- and post-questionnaire, resulting in a return rate of 90.91 percent. Of the students remaining in the study, 26 (52.00 percent) were English majors and 24 (48.00 percent) were students from other departments. Sixteen (32.00 percent) were freshman, 26 (52.00 percent) were sophomores, 7 (14.00 percent) were juniors, and 1 (2.00 percent) was a senior.

### *Instruments*

To reduce the potential influence of students' desire to have positive outcomes after investing time and money to participate in the IEP, the students were asked to rate their skills at two points: in Japan at the beginning of the pre-departure orientation and soon after returning from the United States. Students evaluated their L2 skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening) as well as their overall

communicative ability on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *poor* to *excellent* (i.e., 1. Poor 2. Fair 3. Good 4. Very good 5. Excellent). Informal discussions with Japanese university students suggested that some students believe the ability to communicate in English and the ability to speak English are not the same. Students have noted, for example, that speaking entails uttering grammatically correct sentences and a concern for pronunciation while overall ability to communicate includes using gestures and other non-verbal communication. University students may not, however, be conscious of other differences between communicative ability and L2 speaking ability. For example, communication strategies, such as direct appeal for help, allow students to sustain communication by compensating for and overcoming imperfect knowledge and other limiting factors (Brown, 1994, p. 228) and are an important part of communicative competence that students tend to underutilize. In addition, communicative competence necessitates an interlocutor and is associated with four competencies: grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic (Brown, 1994). Since communicative ability and speaking ability are different in the L2 literature and from the perspective of some students, both abilities were included on the questionnaire.

In consideration of inflated assessments of skill improvement, first, the results were compared to other comments on the questionnaires; no conflicts were found. Second, the results were reinforced by formal and informal discussions with the participants before and after the IEPs. Third, the observations made by the American program instructors and the Shimane University chaperones further emphasized the validity of the students' judgments.

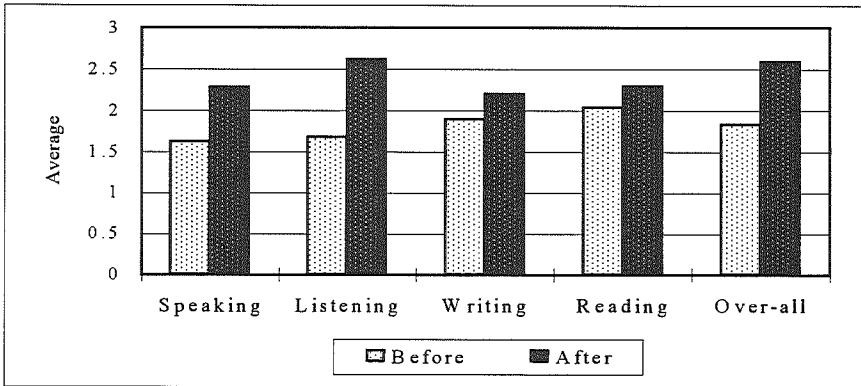
## Results and Discussion

### *Combined Achievement*

Students evaluated each L2 ability (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, listening) as well as their overall communicative ability on a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1. Poor 2. Fair 3. Good 4. Very good 5. Excellent). Means were calculated by assigning a value from one to five for each response. As a result, an average near one indicates students, as a whole, rated the skill as *poor* while an average near five indicates the students, as a group, asserted they had an *excellent* ability. As Figure

1 demonstrates, the students perceived all of their English abilities improved after participating in the IEPs. With an increase of 55.95 percent and a mean increase of .94 points, students felt their listening skill developed the most. The mode, 1, further confirmed this finding. Development of the listening ability is particularly important since Morley (1999) has noted it is used twice as much as speaking, four times as much as reading, and five times as much as writing.

Figure 1. Perceived abilities, all students



Note: (1) Poor (2) Fair (3) Good (4) Very good (5) Excellent

The second and third greatest perceived gains, with increases of 41.11 percent and 40.74 percent, respectively, were in over-all ability to communicate and the speaking ability. At the end of the IEPs, the mean for communicative ability was 2.59 while the speaking ability average was 2.28. As with listening, the modal responses were 1, although one student asserted that her communicative ability developed from *poor* to *very good*. Student comments reinforced the perceived increases and emphasized the Japanese students' discovery that they could speak and be understood by native-speaking interlocutors as well as understand the responses of the interlocutors. For example, a 2004 participant noted, "I could tell better in English to American people more than I thought." A 2005 participant expressed the joy of communicating in English. "Even if two language (Japanese & English) are different, I found that we could communicate each other....(star)

*How wonderful it is!!*” Similarly, many students echoed the thoughts of a 2005 participant who wrote, *“I could talk many American people in English actively.”* Believing in one’s ability to use an L2 to express meaning with native speakers reduces communicative apprehension (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002) and provides students with more confidence and motivation to try to communicate with increasing frequency.

On the pre-departure questionnaire, 13 students (26 percent) rated their over-all ability to communicate and their speaking ability differently. At the end of the IEPs, more students (22 students, 44 percent) rated the two abilities at different ability levels, and 16 students (32 percent) wrote about communication or communicative ability in comments for questionnaire items that did not directly ask about communication. For example, one 2006 participant wrote, *“I learned about importance to communicate. I learned about importance to use body language. Because Body language makes me easy to communicate.”* Similarly, a student who went on the IEP in 2003 asserted, *“If I can’t speak English well, I can communicate with people by using gesture or broken English,”* and a 2002 participant noted, *“I gained language is not the only means of communication. Communication is very important for people.”*

In contrast to improvement in oral abilities, students judged their development of writing and reading skills less dramatically, as depicted by the slight increases in the means of 0.30 (15.79 percent increase) and 0.26 (12.75 percent increase), respectively. Eighteen students (36.00 percent) perceived improvement in reading ability. This may be the result of being in an environment where English is the primary language and realizing that they could read such things as advertisements, signs, and labels, but further investigation is necessary. As with reading, 18 students (36.00 percent) believed their writing ability improved. In contrast, 35 students (70.00 percent) asserted that their writing, their reading, or both skills did not improve during the three weeks. This is not an unexpected finding as the IEPs focused on oral communication skills. Unlike the speaking, listening, and communicative abilities, however, some students assessed their post-IEP reading and writing abilities more poorly than before participation. While three students (6 percent) assessed both reading and writing more poorly, two (4 percent) perceived



their writing ability as lower at the end of the IEP, and three students (6 percent) had similar perceptions about reading. Further investigation into the reasons for these perceived declines is necessary.

### *Students' Impressions*

Students wrote about their gains and accomplishments on the post-IEP questionnaire. Some students wrote about increased cultural awareness, a better understanding of American people, or personal revelations (e.g., *"I think I realized the importance of a kind heart."*). Other students, however, wrote about their linguistic growth, providing additional evidence that the students felt they grew linguistically. For example, a 2006 participant asserted, *"I think my English ability improved."* Seven other students specifically mentioned pronunciation, and another seven discussed improvements in listening. Similarly, five students expounded on their improved speaking skills, and one participant mentioned her communicative ability. In addition, nine students, such as the 2003 participant who felt *"I could have confidence in my English skill,"* discussed increased confidence in using their English. Several students wrote comments similar to the 2003 participant who said, *"I gained the courage to do mistakes."*

Table 1. Percent increase in mean scores by year

	n	Speaking	Listening	Writing	Reading	Over-all	English Majors
2002	7	55.56	75.00	11.11	7.69	45.45	14.29%
2003	9	27.78	44.44	10.00	21.05	31.58	55.56%
2004	8	38.46	66.67	17.65	0.00	57.14	75.00%
2005	13	33.33	45.83	17.39	11.54	38.10	53.85%
2006	13	55.00	63.64	19.23	19.23	40.00	53.85%

Along with improved abilities and increased confidence, students noted changes in their attitudes and finished the IEP with heightened motivation. For example, while one 2004 participant felt, *"I came to like English more. I thought I must study English hard,"* another wrote, *"Before I went to America, I understood*

*English by translating English to Japanese but It is not good. I wanted to understand English as English. So, I tried change my brain from Japanese to English. Maybe It is success.*" A student who attended the 2002 IEP wrote, "I gain pleasure of talking." Along with two 2006 participants who noted, "I could think I try to study English more and more" and "I want to study English more and speak it smoothly," eight other students' comments demonstrate their increased motivation to study English. These comments suggest that because of the IEP experience students grew linguistically, and as a result, they returned to Shimane University more motivated to study English. For non-English majors, this motivation may be the impetus to take elective L2 courses that they would not have taken otherwise.

### *Programs Compared*

Although there were interesting differences in perceived achievement by year of participation, all students believed they grew linguistically because of their participation in the IEPs. As Table 1 demonstrates, participants in the 2002 IEP estimated improvement in the speaking and listening abilities more positively than students in the other IEPs; this result will be discussed in the following section. The group of students in 2004 assessed their gain in over-all communicative ability as greater than any other year. Students in 2003 perceived a larger gain in reading than those who attended in other years, and in 2006, students believed their writing improved more than participants in previous years. These differences demonstrate the personal nature of L2 learning while also emphasizing the variety of learning that can occur during IEPs.

The participants in 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 went to the same American university for the IEP, and consequently, their results are of particular interest. As Table 1 demonstrates, the 2004 group had a clear majority of English majors (75.00 percent); these students perceived the highest growth of the five years' participants in over-all communication and the second highest for listening and writing. Their lack of any perceived reading achievement cannot be easily explained, but because there are many factors in L2 acquisition, it is assumed that some combination of factors influenced the outcome.

The 2005 and 2006 groups are also noteworthy because although each had the

same number of participants and ratio of English majors to non-English majors, the results are markedly different. Further investigation is necessary with future IEP participants, but one possible explanation is the new curriculum at Shimane University. Of the 13 participants in 2005, three were required to meet the new graduation requirements, and as a result, they took three TOEIC-based courses during their freshman year. In contrast, all but one of the thirteen participants in 2006 had taken these courses. Because these courses develop students' listening and reading skills and there is also a large conversation component, it is hypothesized that the students were better prepared to utilize their time during the IEP, resulting in greater perceived language improvement.

#### *Active Chaperone*

The average speaking and listening improvement was assessed by the 2002 group as higher than the other groups, and the perceived gain in over-all ability to communicate was second greatest. This is surprising since the students stayed in a dormitory rather than with families for most of the IEP. The students in the spring IEPs consistently reflected on the positive experiences and the learning that took place during their homestays. For example, one 2006 participant noted, "*I could enjoy the life of the U.S. with my host family. She always talks to me about many things. It was helpful to me to improve my speaking and listening skills.*"

Although the difference between the 2002 summer program and the 2003-2006 spring programs cannot be discounted as a possible factor, these findings can also be attributed to the active involvement of the native-speaking L2 instructor who accompanied the 2002 group to the United States. Not only did a Japanese instructor accompany the students the other years (2003-2006) but these chaperones were not associated with L2 studies. As the chaperone in 2002, the native-speaking instructor stayed with the IEP students on the same floor in the dormitory for the entire three weeks, excluding the two-day homestay. The first day of the IEP, outside of IEP-sponsored activities the students tended to return to the dormitory and interact with other Shimane University students in their rooms. After the first day, the chaperone encouraged the students to get out of their rooms and become involved beyond the classes and scheduled afternoon activities;

every day for the remainder of the IEP, the chaperone organized extra activities. For example, by taking part in international student activities designed for long-term students, the chaperone enabled the students to interact with groups affiliated with the university. In addition, the chaperone went with the students to a summer concert in the city park and encouraged the students to join him on a trip to a farmer's market in the center of town. Before leaving Japan, students searched on the Internet for apartments in the city where the university is located; this helped the students become familiar with the area. During the IEP, the native-speaking instructor (i.e., chaperone) then accompanied the students on walks past the apartments the students had found on the Internet as well as through the business areas of town and residential neighborhoods.

During these additional excursions the Japanese students spoke with each other in English. The students initiated a self-enforced game; at the end of every day, the students decided who among them had spoken the least amount of English. That student had to drink a soft drink that they all hated because they said it tasted like medicine. A student who participated in both 2002 and 2003 said that because the chaperone was a native speaker, they were always trying to use English and "*Doing things with the instructor all the time. That was really great!*" In addition, at the end of the 2002 IEP and in gatherings after the IEP, the students discussed their perceptions of the IEP. They consistently noted that they found great accomplishment in being able to communicate with regular people who were not affiliated with the university. This positive feedback reflects the value of the additional activities that helped the students to be actively involved in using English outside of official IEP-planned activities. In contrast, a 2006 participant noted, "*We (Shimane University students) couldn't speak English each other well. We should have spoken it!!*" An active chaperone, whether a native speaker or a non-native speaker, can be instrumental in encouraging the IEP students to use English among themselves.

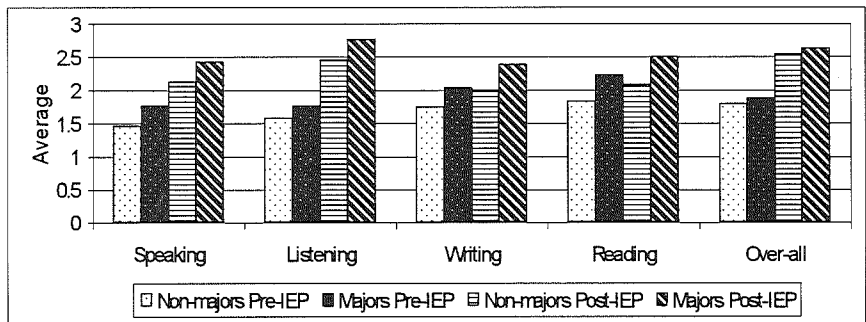
Beamer and Sasaki's study (2003) provides further evidence that additional opportunities to speak English in the community and an environment that encouraged students to use English among themselves strongly contributed to the students' perceived success. Their study found that the IEP students consistently

complained that they lacked communicative opportunities outside of the classroom. By leaving the students to themselves after program hours, there are many lost opportunities for linguistic and cultural growth; this time needs to be fully utilized because students only have a few weeks in the target culture. An active chaperone is particularly important when students are not in homestays. A native-speaking instructor may be better able to organize additional opportunities to use English because of an understanding of the types of events and activities readily available in the host country.

*Majors Compared*

Because of the apparent influence of a majority of English majors in 2004 and the possible benefit of the newly revised L2 language courses in 2006, the data was also analyzed to compare differences between English majors and non-English majors. There are several important initial observations of the pre-departure and post-IEP student assessments (Figure 2). First, the English majors started the IEPs believing their skills were more developed than did the non-English majors. Second, after three weeks the English majors continued to perceive their abilities to be more advanced than the non-English majors, and in fact, the non-English majors' post-IEP perceptions of their writing and reading skills were lower than the English majors' pre-departure assessment. Third, both groups perceived improvement in all five areas. There is, therefore, evidence that not only English

Figure 2. Perceived abilities, by major

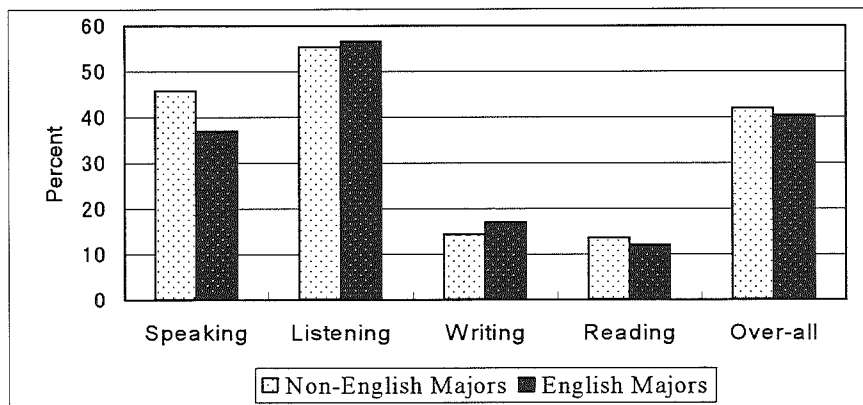


Note: (1) Poor (2) Fair (3) Good (4) Very good (5) Excellent

majors but also other students can benefit from participating in IEPs. This fact should be used when trying to recruit students for future IEPs.

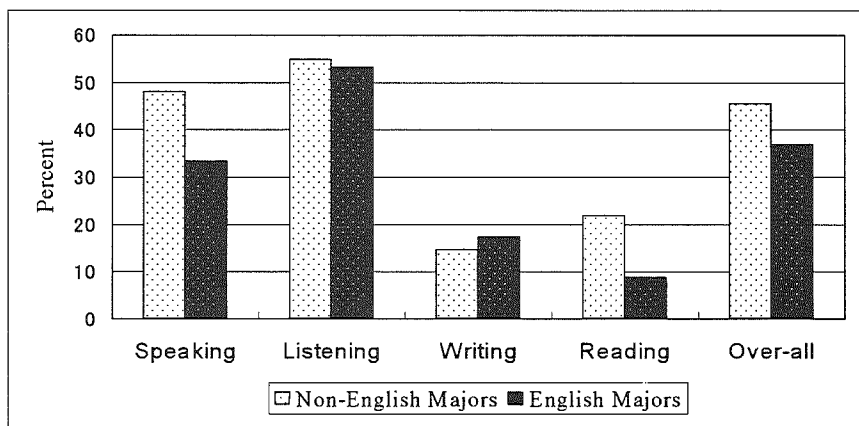
As Figure 3 demonstrates, the perceived gains of the two groups of majors were similar. For example, the perceived increase in communicative ability by the English majors (40.43 percent) and non-English majors (41.86 percent) varied by only 1.43 percent. As with communicative ability, the non-English majors actually perceived greater gains than the English majors for speaking and reading. The pre-IEP English majors' mean for speaking was 21.32 percent greater than the non-English majors. However, the difference between the two groups' means diminished to 14.03 percent after the IEPs since the English majors perceived their speaking skill improved by 36.96 percent while the non-English majors felt their ability increased by 45.71 percent. These differences in perceived improvement are noteworthy because they indicate that not only can non-English majors benefit from participating in IEPs but they may perceive greater gains in some areas than English majors. One possible explanation is that because English majors began with more developed skills, there was less room for improvement. A second possibility is that the English majors were more critical of their own skill evaluation than the non-majors. Because many other possibilities exist, additional research is necessary.

Figure 3. Percent increase in perceived abilities, by major



Because of the previously discussed differences in the results between the first year and the following years, the 2002 results were removed. Consequently, the impressions of the 25 English majors and 18 non-English majors who participated between 2003 and 2006 were examined. As Figure 4 demonstrates, when the results of one American IEP are examined, the differences in the perceived increases are even greater. The non-English majors perceived greater progress in their speaking, reading, and over-all communicative abilities while the English majors' increases were smaller for these three abilities. In addition, unlike the five-year data, gains in the listening skill were slightly greater for the non-English majors than the English majors. The writing results were, however, constant; this may be attributable to minimal writing requirements during the IEPs since the primary focus was oral communication, but further investigation is necessary with larger numbers of participants to verify these trends.

Figure 4. Percent increase in perceived abilities from 2003-2006, by major



### Conclusion

IEPs provide Japanese L2 students with environments where they can perceive linguistic gains in a relatively short amount of time. Listening skills were perceived to improve the most, followed by communicative ability and the speaking skill. Because L2 learning is affected by many personal factors, there was a

variety of learning and development. For example, some students began to rate their communicative ability and the speaking skill as unequal. Other students observed development in the reading skill. Because improvement was demonstrated with data from participants in five different IEPs at two American universities, there is strong evidence that participation in IEPs is worthwhile. The differences in the results also emphasize the responsibility and consequent benefits when the chaperone not only encourages the students to interact with each other in English but also provides the students with opportunities to interact with the university community and the larger society that surrounds the microcosm of universities.

Equally important, even though the English majors' pre-departure and post-IEP self-evaluated skills were ranked as better developed than those of the non-English majors, the percent increases in the means demonstrate the potential for non-English majors to have larger growth, specifically in speaking. Consequently, the study shows that not only English majors but also students from other departments, such as science, law, and Japanese literature, can benefit from participating in IEPs. These programs provide students with the opportunity to experience using English daily; this can be instrumental in helping Japanese students become international speakers of English. Since IEPs can be a crucial part of language development, the university should increase the promotion of IEPs as well as develop additional opportunities for students to study in target language cultures.

### Acknowledgement

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**Appendix**

Linguistic section of the pre-departure and post-IEP questionnaires

1. What year of school are you in? (1) (2) (3) (4)
2. What is your major area of study? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Rate your speaking ability.  
1. Poor      2. Fair      3. Good      4. Very good      5. Excellent
4. Rate your listening ability.  
1. Poor      2. Fair      3. Good      4. Very good      5. Excellent
5. Rate your writing ability.  
1. Poor      2. Fair      3. Good      4. Very good      5. Excellent
6. Rate your reading ability.  
1. Poor      2. Fair      3. Good      4. Very good      5. Excellent
7. Rate your over-all ability to communicate.  
1. Poor      2. Fair      3. Good      4. Very good      5. Excellent

Post-IEP questionnaire only

10. Did you gain anything from this trip?    Yes    No  
    If *yes*: What did you gain from this trip?  
    If *no*: Why not?
11. Did you accomplish what you wanted to on this study trip?    Yes    No
12. Briefly write what you accomplished.