

A Study of English Training Program in America from the Learner's Point of View

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Abstract

This study investigates psychological aspects of university students who took English training program overseas. The comparison between a pre-test and a post-test in CELT showed this intensive English training had born fruits. The data of a questionnaire showed some interesting features: students chose Conversation as the most interesting subject; they worried whether or not they could make themselves understood when they spoke; they were embarrassed because of a lack of vocabulary in daily life, and so on. Secondly, a comparison of the data in the questionnaires between high-scorers and low-scorers was done. It suggested that more high-scorers chose writing as the most interesting and significant subject than low-scorers and that more low-scorers felt that their listening ability improved most in this English training program. Thirdly, a comparison of the data was run between the high-achiever group and the low-achiever group. The findings in this comparison were contradictory. A further study with a larger population is needed before any conclusion can be made.

I. Introduction

The number of college and university students who want to take part in English training programs overseas has been increasing. Mukogawa Women's University sends 2nd year students to Spokane, Washington and gives them English training there. They learn Intermediate Conversation, Intermediate Writing, and Comprehensive Reading in the morning, and in the afternoon, American Studies and Physical Education.

Participants live in a dormitory for three and a half months with American students, each of whom is in charge of these Japanese students as a resident assistant. Students have an hour long tutorial by these resident assistants every evening except on Saturday and Sunday. They are expected to acquire living English used in daily life. They make an East Coast Trip as well as some other short trips in Washington State.

The communicative competence has so far been measured by the Comprehensive English Language Test for Learners of English(CELT). It shows that this English training has been successful as a whole.

However, we have never analyzed students' feelings and opinions on this program. How do they evaluate this program? Which class did they think was most useful to improve their English ability? What were they worried about before attending this program? When we are aware of these answers, we will be in a better position to decide on priorities in our teaching to prepare students

better to attend this program, and American teachers also will be able to incorporate more effective language teaching activities relevant to the learner's real needs. This study was made with these above mentioned points in mind.

II. Method

1. Subjects

The subjects were 164 2nd year university students who participated in the English training overseas program at Mukogawa Women's University, Japan. The students were all women.

2. Procedure

(1) A test of CELT was given to the 2nd year university students as a pre-test before going to the USA. B test was given to the participants of the Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute (MFWI) program at the end of the program as a post-test.

* The points of each section: listening, structure, and vocabulary are adjusted so that a full mark comes to 100 points and the total for three sections is 300 points.

(2) A questionnaire was distributed to the participants three weeks after they came back to Japan. They were asked to fill it in with their name on a reply sheet.

(3) An additional questionnaire was given to 40 students chosen at random for a further survey on lack of vocabulary.

(4) These results were statistically analyzed. 'No replies' were eliminated when the data were analyzed. Chi-Square test and t-test were used, and a p-value of $p < 0.05$ as the level of significance was adopted.

III. Results

1. The Difference of Competence found in CELT

The differences of results in the pre-test and the post-test were compared. The average of the post-test is higher than that of the pre-test in each field: listening, structure, and vocabulary. This difference was statistically shown at the 1% significance level. Moreover, the data shows that the student's vocabulary score increased outstandingly, compared to listening and structure scores.

Table-1

	Pre-test		Post-test		Difference		Results of t-test	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Listening	55.18	12.32	59.87	10.00	4.83	10.46	5.91	**
Structure	65.04	11.40	67.85	9.89	2.83	9.48	3.82	**
Vocabulary	39.24	9.07	49.85	8.56	10.44	8.45	15.82	**
Total	159.35	25.70	177.56	20.87	18.16	18.23	12.76	**

** $P < 0.01$ (N=164)

2. Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire was given for the purpose of obtaining a general view of the participants' feelings and opinions on this program. The results were treated as a whole at first. The findings showed significant differences among the alternatives on each question.

(1) Classes and Language-use Activities outside the Classroom

More than half of the students think Conversation was the best class to develop their English

ability. They think that developing English ability means acquiring speaking competence. They were given more opportunities to speak English in Conversation class than other classes. Therefore, they seem to regard it as the most useful subject.

As to the subject which is the most interesting and substantial, one third of the students chose American Studies, and another one third chose, Conversation. The former is a subject which deals with American culture, literature and history, and the latter provides many opportunities to speak English. So it can be concluded that these two subjects give students a sense of fulfilment and pleasure.

The homestay also gives students useful opportunities to use English and talk with Americans, too. When there is a need to communicate with people, their motivation is raised, which leads to satisfaction in learning.

Table-3

The subject which was the most interesting and substantial	(N=159)
Reading	9.4%
Writing	16.4%
* Conversation	32.7%
* American Studies	37.7%
Physical Education	1.9%
Nothing in particular	1.9%

$X^2=113.5 \quad P < 0.01$

(2) Language Anxiety and Real Embarrassment

On the whole, the anxiety level in speaking is higher than that in listening comprehension. This may be because they did not feel ashamed even if they could not understand but they always felt ashamed when they were at a loss to speak. More than one third of the students doubted if they could acquire their English in class.

As to the item, 'What embarrassed you most in class?', more than half of the students felt that they lacked vocabulary.

This shows that they suffered from lack of vocabulary all the time.

The results of an additional questionnaire show that about 78% of them felt that they lacked in vocabulary when they spoke, and that they think they didn't know words used in daily life.

Table-2

The subject which students thought was the best to improve English	(N=159)
Reading	11.9%
Writing	19.5%
* Conversation	54.7%
American Studies	11.9%
Physical Education	0.0%
Nothing in particular	1.9%

$X^2=190.47 \quad P < 0.01$

Table-4

The activity which was the best to improve English outside of class	(N=153)
Tutorials	7.2%
East Coast Trip	7.2%
Seattle Trip	1.3%
Ensemble	2.0%
* Homestay	56.9%
Halloween Party	0.0%
* Talking with American students	21.6%
Others	2.0%
Nothing in Particular	2.0%

$X^2=372.35 \quad P < 0.01$

Table-5

What students felt most anxious about in class	(N=154)
Whether or not I can understand English	27.9%
* Whether or not I can make myself understood	37.7%
Whether or not I can get credit	1.9%
* Whether or not I can really acquire English	31.8%
Others	0.6%

$X^2=93.53 \quad P < 0.01$

Table-6

What embarrassed students most in class (N=149)	
Could not understand when listening	8.1%
Could not speak	12.8%
* Lack of vocabulary	58.4%
Lack of English grammar	3.4%
Lack of knowledge of Japan	15.4%
Lack of knowledge of America	0.0%
Others	2.0%

$$X^2=256.59 \quad P < 0.01$$

Table-7

When students felt a lack of vocabulary (N=40)	
In listening	7.5%
* In speaking	77.7%
In reading	10.0%
In writing	2.5%
Can't say when	2.5%

$$X^2=83.5 \quad P < 0.01$$

(3) Effort Level; Skill Which Improved Most; Overall Evaluation of the Program

67% of the participants think that they made efforts to acquire English competence. This finding shows that intensive training is very effective to motivate learners. Many students replied that listening skills improved the most, in contrast, no students said that they had increased their vocabulary, though the CELT results show vocabulary did increase.

As a whole, this intensive training program was successful because about 90% of the students said that this program was 'very significant' or 'significant.'

Table-8

Why students felt a lack of vocabulary (N=39)	
* Didn't know words used in daily life	53.9%
Found many unknown words in papers	2.6%
Didn't understand their slang	0.0%
Forgot many words learned before	30.8%
Didn't know the usage of words	7.7%
Others	5.1%

$$X^2=53.15 \quad P < 0.01$$

Table-9

Effort level (N=161)	
Studied very hard	13.7%
* Studied hard	53.4%
Don't know	13.7%
Didn't study so hard	17.4%
Didn't study at all	1.9%

$$X^2=123.8 \quad P < 0.01$$

Table-10

Skill which improved most (N=150)	
* Listening	64.0%
Speaking	12.0%
Reading	1.3%
Writing	11.3%
Vocabulary	0.0%
English in general	4.7%
Don't think English improved	6.7%

$$X^2=307.46 \quad P < 0.01$$

Table-11

Overall evaluation of the program (N=161)	
* Very significant	35.4%
* Significant	54.0%
Don't know	9.9%
Not so significant	0.6%
Not significant at all	0.0%

$$X^2=150.79 \quad P < 0.01$$

3. Comparison between Hi-scorers and Low-scorers on the CELT

Those who obtained more than 200 points were chosen as a sample of high-scorers and those who obtained less than 160 points, were chosen as a sample of low-scorers. The results of each item on a questionnaire were compared and statistically significant differences were obtained on the three items.

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One third of the high-scorers felt that Writing was substantial and interesting; on the other hand, low-scorers do not think that Writing was substantial nor did they show as much interest in it. High-scorers were confident in English, so they talked with American students more often than low-scorers did. High-scorers thought that talking with American students was very useful to develop their English ability. The number of low-scorers who think that they improved listening ability is larger than that of high-scorers. Some high-scorers said that their English had not improved during the program.

Table-12

The subject which was the most interesting and substantial

	Hi-Scorers (N=29)	Low-Scorers (N=27)	X ²
Reading	10.3%	3.7%	n.s.
* Writing	34.5%	7.4%	P<0.05
Conversation	20.7%	44.4%	n.s.
American Studies	31.0%	40.7%	n.s.
Physical Education	0.0%	3.7%	n.s.
Nothing in particular	3.4%	0.0%	n.s.

Table-13

The activity which was the best to improve English outside of class

	Hi-Scorers (N=28)	Low-Scorers (N=29)	X ²
Tutorial	7.1%	6.9%	n.s.
* East coast trip	0.0%	17.2%	P<0.1 *
Seattle trip	0.0%	3.4%	n.s.
Ensemble	0.0%	3.4%	n.s.
Homestay	39.3%	62.1%	n.s.
Halloween party	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.
* Talking with American students	46.4%	6.9%	P<0.01
Others	3.6%	0.0%	n.s.
Nothing in particular	3.6%	0.0%	n.s.

* Yates's correction

Table-14

Skill which improved most

	Hi-Scorers (N=26)	Low-Scorers (N=27)	X ²
* Listening	46.2%	74.1%	P<0.05
Speaking	7.7%	14.8%	n.s.
Reading	3.8%	0.0%	n.s.
Writing	19.2%	11.1%	n.s.
Vocabulary	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.
English in general	7.7%	0.0%	n.s.
Don't think English ability improved	15.4%	0.0%	n.s.

4. Comparison between the High-achiever Group and the Low-achiever Group

Some students made remarkable progress on the CELT results, and others did not. A comparison was run to find out the difference between the high-achiever group and the low-achiever group. The former consists of students who obtained more than 30 points in the post-test than they had in the pre-test. The latter is those students who obtained the same points in the post-test as they had in the pre-test, or obtained fewer points than before.

Table-15

	Hi-achiever Grp. (N=27)	Low-achiever Grp. (N=28)	X ²
Tutorial	11.1%	0.0%	n.s.
East coast trip	7.4%	14.3%	n.s.
Seattle trip	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.
Ensemble	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.
Homestay	66.7%	46.4%	n.s.
Halloween party	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.
* Talking with American students	14.8%	39.2%	P<0.05
Others	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.
Nothing in particular	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.

Table-16

	Hi-achiever Grp. (N=30)	Low-achiever Grp. (N=27)	X ²
* Reading	0.0%	18.5%	P<0.05
Writing	10.0%	7.4%	n.s.
Conversation	50.0%	25.9%	n.s.
American Studies	33.3%	48.1%	n.s.
Physical Education	6.7%	0.0%	n.s.
Nothing in particular	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.

Table-17

Effort level	Hi-achiever Grp. (N=27)	Low-achiever Grp. (N=28)	X ²
Studied very hard	22.6%	11.1%	n.s.
Studied hard	58.1%	55.6%	n.s.
Don't know	16.1%	7.4%	n.s.
* Didn't study so hard	3.2%	25.9%	P<0.05 *
Didn't study at all	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.

Yeats's correction

More students in the Low-achiever group chose 'Talking with American students' as the activity which was the best to improve English. About 19% of the students in the Low-achiever Group chose Reading as the most interesting and substantial subject. On the other hand, no one in the High-achiever Group chose it. What do these two findings mean? The Low-achiever Group includes those students who did not get higher marks than before because they had already got high marks in the pre-test. The High-achiever Group also includes those students who got higher marks in the

post-test because their marks had been low in the pre-test. So, it requires a larger population to make seemingly contradictory results clear.

More students in the Low-achiever Group than the High-achiever Group said 'Didn't study so hard'. Also, 65% of the High-achiever Group said that this program was very significant.

Table-18

Overall evaluation	Hi-achiever Grp.(N=27)	Low-achiever Grp.(N=28)	X ²
* Very significant	66.7%	25.0%	P<0.01
* Significant	23.3%	64.3%	P<0.01
Don't know	10.0%	10.7%	n.s.
Not so significant	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.
Not significant at all	0.0%	0.0%	n.s.

V. Discussion

In this study student's feelings and opinions on the three and a half month overseas English training program were obtained. Most students said that studying English in America was a good and happy experience. Indeed, the score on the CELT also shows their English abilities were enhanced. Although they were anxious, they were very rarely frightened.

According to a survey of all students, they preferred Conversation and American Studies. This may be because these are subjects in which their needs were fulfilled as Ausubel(1968)¹⁾ pointed out. That is to say, they could manipulate the target language, explore what they didn't know, get stimulated, and broaden their knowledge in classes.

Not only in classes but also outside of classes, the overseas training program provided good opportunities to use the target language, especially when they did a homestay. This corresponds to the experimental aspect of a fourfold curriculum framework which Stern made(1983).²⁾

Japanese students who are enrolled in this program are anxious about learning English abroad. The results suggest that they feel most nervous when they speak English. This point is illustrated in a paper written by MacIntyre and Gardner(1991).³⁾ In this study, beginning adult language students were told to write a brief essay on either an anxiety-provoking experience or a confidence-building one. The most anxiety-provoking experience reported in their essays was related to speaking.

What actually embarrassed students most, however, was the lack of vocabulary. This tells us that English vocabulary learned in Japan as a foreign language is very different from that used in an authentic situation. We have to reconsider what words learners require before attending this English training program. In addition to this, learners should acquire communication strategies, that is, the ability to communicate within restrictions.⁴⁾ Learners who have acquired communication strategies can ask a speaker to repeat, to speak slowly, or to rephrase in easy words, and then when they are faced with difficulty they can guess what a speaker wants to say. As a result the anxiety level decreases.

As a whole, most students studied hard during the training program despite their worries. As MacIntyre(1995)⁵⁾ states, anxiety seems to have little negative effect and may actually improve performance through increased effort. It seems to function as a facilitating anxiety. Therefore, most students feel a sense of fulfillment, saying that the program was significant.

The comparison between High-scorers and Low-scorers gives us a new direction to further

study. The finding that more than one third of High-scorers chose Writing as the most interesting and substantial subject is that the learning style of High-scorers may be different from that of Low-scorers or this may be because High-scorers want to express what they would like to say more precisely and in more detail. Another finding shows that while 74% of Low-scorers said that their listening ability had improved, only 46% of the High-scorers said this. This may be because the achievement goal of High-scorers is higher than that of Low-scorers. Also, High-scorers said that talking with American students was the best way to improve their English language abilities outside of class because they had a more positive attitude towards speaking to American students, compared to Low-scorers. This tells how important it is to enhance their English ability before sending them to an authentic situation.

The comparison between the High-achiever Group and the Low-achiever Group didn't provide us with distinguishable results. The only distinctive feature was that one-fourth of the Low-achiever Group didn't study hard.

V. Conclusion

Japanese students are taught to read and write, and they are sometimes given the opportunity to listen to and speak English, but what they are least taught is to speak. They do know a lot of English, but they can't speak. There appears a wall of silence. How can we break the wall? As Marc Helgesen(1992)⁶⁾ says, the key is to activate the English they already have. By activation, you put them in touch with what they already know, and help them develop the ability to use it. An English training program overseas is one way of doing this.

Psychological aspects play a very important role in developing communicative competence, especially in speaking. What students want to do is to speak English, but what they are worried about most is whether or not they can make themselves understood. What embarrassed them most is a lack of vocabulary used in daily life. These findings will be very helpful in improving the English training overseas program and in preparing the students before departure to enable them to benefit even more from the program overseas.

Acknowledgement

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Notes:

- 1) Brown(1992) p. 154.
- 2) Stern(1983) p. 262.
- 3) *Lang. Teach.*, 26, p. 6.
- 4) *TESOL*, Q 29, p. 56
- 5) *MLJ*, 79, p. 92.
- 6) Wadden(1992) pp. 37-38.

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