

LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES OF JAPANESE STUDENTS IN AUCKLAND

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Introduction

There are many approaches to acquiring a foreign language. It is often said that the most effective way to learn a language is to live in the country that uses the target language. There is no doubt that in-country study (study abroad) experience is a notable factor in accelerating the development of foreign language proficiency (Carroll, 1967). Many people currently come to New Zealand to study English as a second language (ESL). A number of English language schools have been established, mainly by private enterprise, in the past decade. There were a total of 52 private language schools authorised by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) as of September 1995 (NZQA, 1995). On national average, Japanese students accounted for 32.6% of all students in private language schools in 1995 (Chikyuu no arukikata, 1995).

Some studies have investigated the outcomes and problems of in-country study experience (e.g. Martin, 1980; Freed, 1990, 1993; Burns, 1991; Teichler and Stube, 1991; Hashimoto, 1993; Marriott, 1993, 1995; Marriott and Enomoto, 1995; Spence-Brown, 1993; Atsuzawa-Windley and Noguchi, 1995; Mullins et al., 1995; Yoshida, 1996). However, participants in these studies were mainly secondary or university students. There have been few studies focusing on in-country experiences of students going to language schools.

The objective of this paper is to examine the relatively unidentified issue of the language learning experiences of Japanese students overseas, enrolled in ESL courses in language schools. This paper is mainly concerned with presenting how Japanese students achieve improvements in ESL by identifying the most useful and less useful English learning experiences in New Zealand as reported by Japanese students.

Language learning and in-country experience

The language learning experiences and the feelings toward these experiences have a great influence on individual language acquisition. Good learning experiences strengthen motivation and accelerate the development of proficiency, while bad experiences often lead to negative emotional responses to language studying, or the target language and culture. Oxford (1989) reported features of the "best" and the "worst" language learning experiences identified by 275 participants who were language teachers or course

administrators and had experience in studying foreign languages. Some examples of the best experiences were: being in the country where the target language was spoken or in some other immersion or semi-immersion situation; having a purpose for learning; using meaningful and natural vocabulary; learning experientially through relevant communication; and, practising real-life interaction. On the other hand, the following were reported as examples of the worst experiences: lack of discipline or structure in the setting; lack of match between teaching methods and the needs of the individual student; lack of interaction and no question-asking opportunities; no consideration of students' desires or requirements; and, no practical or natural use of the target language.

Marriott (1995) considered the most and the least useful language learning experiences of 10 Australian secondary students in Japan on a 12 month exchange programme. The three most useful experiences nominated by the participants were as follows: host family interaction, peer interaction at school, and television viewing. Host family and peer interaction in particular provided participants with good opportunities for using and practising the target language in natural situations. The following were nominated as the three least useful experiences: regular courses at school, interacting in English, and independent study. All participants had to attend regular classes such as Ancient Japanese, World History, or Home Economics with Japanese classmates. Because these classes were conducted in Japanese, these were too difficult for the Australian students to understand. As a result, they mentioned that they gave up concentrating on these classes, and instead they often wrote letters, read English novels, or studied Kanji (Chinese characters).

Generally, students who seek to use the target language the most, both in and out of the classroom, will ultimately make the most progress (Rubin, 1975; Seliger, 1977; Stern, 1983). Therefore, living and studying in the native speaking environment is an ideal situation in order to acquire a language because it provides more linguistic input and obliges use of the target language out of the classroom. Indeed, Martin (1980) and Hashimoto (1993) reported that informal, out-of-class contact (specifically in a homestay environment) led to increased proficiency in the target language. Also, Freed (1990) focused on the effects of out-of-class contact on the achievement and proficiency of American students who had studied in the native speaking environment. Freed's study considered the differences in the achievement and proficiency, between students at various levels (beginning, intermediate, and advanced), and between different types of out-of-class contacts, that is, between interactive out-of-class contact (e.g. time spent with friends and host family) and non-interactive out-of-class contact (e.g. reading, watching television, listening to the radio, going to the movies). Freed found that interactive out-of-class contact helped grammatical achievement for lower-level students, but that it did not make a difference for higher-level students. In contrast, non-interactive out-of-class contact did not help lower-level students, but it did help higher-level students.

Research design

The participants were 15 Japanese students (J1 - J15), comprising five males and 10 females, who had taken ESL courses for more than three months at a tertiary institution (School A) in Auckland in 1995 and 1996. The average age of participants was 21.4. All participants except J8 had completed the high school qualification in Japan. This meant that they had studied English for at least six years in junior and senior high schools in Japan because English is generally a compulsory subject from junior high school level. Other than official English education, five participants had had experience in studying English in private institutions, such as a language school in Japan or overseas before they came to New Zealand. 10 participants had not lived overseas for a long term (more than one month) before. The details of the participants' backgrounds are presented in the Appendix.

The investigation was based on questionnaires and follow-up interviews. First, in a questionnaire written in Japanese, each participant was asked to explain the details of the three (or more) most useful and not useful language learning experiences or situations in New Zealand, after having written some personal information such as previous English study experience or the length of stay in New Zealand. The participants completed the questionnaire by themselves, taking approximately one hour. Afterwards, each participant was interviewed in Japanese by the researcher for about 30 minutes, to confirm their responses to the questionnaire and provide extra feedback. The interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Each type of experience or situation was counted only once when a participant repeated in the later interview what had been already nominated in the questionnaire.

Results and discussion

The following table presents the perceived useful language learning experiences ranked according to frequency.

| Types of situations | No. of occurrences (%) | |
|--|-------------------------------|---------------|
| Host family interaction | 19 | 27.1% |
| host family (9) | | |
| host mother (3) | | |
| host children (3) | | |
| homestay mates (2) | | |
| host mother's friends (1) | | |
| neighbours (1) | | |
| TV/video/movie viewing and radio listening | 13 | 18.6% |
| Peer interaction at school | 7 | 10.0% |
| Using English-English dictionary | 4 | 5.7% |
| Interacting with Japanese | 3 | 4.3% |
| Writing diary in English | 3 | 4.3% |
| Participation in parties | 2 | 2.9% |
| Organising car sale/purchase/repair | 2 | 2.9% |
| Writing letters in English | 2 | 2.9% |
| Shopping experience | 2 | 2.9% |
| Peer interaction in dormitory | 2 | 2.9% |
| Interacting with New Zealanders | 2 | 2.9% |
| Language exchange | 1 | 1.4% |
| Reading newspaper/magazine | 1 | 1.4% |
| Participation in church/community centre | 1 | 1.4% |
| Reading public signs | 1 | 1.4% |
| Interacting with school teachers | 1 | 1.4% |
| Participation in sports clubs | 1 | 1.4% |
| Going to night clubs | 1 | 1.4% |
| Private English lessons after school | 1 | 1.4% |
| Using Japanese-English dictionary | 1 | 1.4% |
| Total | 70 | 100.0% |

Table 1: Frequencies and rankings of useful language learning experiences

The three most useful learning experiences nominated by Japanese students were: host family interaction, television/video/movie viewing or radio listening, and peer interaction at school. Most of useful experiences were categorised as out-of-class contact. There were very few students who recognised in-class contact such as interacting with teachers as useful experience.

Many students mentioned that homestay experience was the most beneficial because it provided them with opportunities for practising English in a natural environment. Some typical comments regarding homestay experience were as follows:

After coming back from school, I try to talk to my host family, especially host mother. In the conversation, I try using new words or expressions that I studied at school at that day. Using new expressions in real conversation is very profitable for improving my lexical knowledge and speaking skill. Besides, it is helpful for me that my host mother often corrects my wrong expressions (J4).

Conversation with my host mother was the best learning experience. I talked to her about a variety of things, for example, my life in Japan, future plans, interests, or daily events at school. I made an effort to be unafraid of mistakes and continue the conversation. She taught me a lot of expressions and useful words. Through the experience, I became unafraid of minor mistakes when I speak English, and I got confidence in speaking English (J12).

One general problem for overseas students, not only Japanese, going to language schools is a limited social network, especially with local people. All of the people in language schools, except the teachers, are non-native English speakers (NNESs). Therefore, although they live in New Zealand, the students do not have many opportunities for associating with local New Zealanders or other native English speakers (NESs). In fact, the majority of participants in this research (9 out of 15) answered that they did not have any native English speaking friends except in their host families. As a result, compared with host family interaction (27.1%), interaction with other New Zealanders achieved a very small percentage (2.9%) as the best learning experience. Considering these facts, for Japanese students, host family interaction was the main and almost only opportunity for contacting NESs in out-of-class situations.

Other than daily conversation, some students reported that working in the kitchen with their host mothers and playing with the host children were also good speaking practice opportunities. Above all, the latter seemed to be good learning experience. One student remarked that:

pronunciation of child English was more difficult to understand. But, because children tended to repeat the same words or phrases again and again, I realised one day I remembered such words or phrases unconsciously through playing with children (J3).

Another student pointed out that because "talking to children was more relaxed and less strained than talking to the host mother or father" (J10), the student could communicate with children more fluently in English.

Another important feature of homestay experience was that the host family often functioned as a medium of network expansion for Japanese students. Some students mentioned that

they could get acquainted with local New Zealanders through their host families. For example, the following activities were reported: the host mother's friend often dropped by; the host family introduced the student to neighbours; and, the host mother sometimes took the student to a party. As mentioned above, lack of opportunity for associating with New Zealanders was one of the serious problems of Japanese students. Homestay experience seemed to play a role in partly solving such a problem.

Television viewing was also nominated as a good learning experience. A number of students commented that viewing television programs, such as news and dramas, was effective in improving their listening ability. The students could get accustomed to the natural speed of English, which is much faster than "classroom English", through viewing television programs. Moreover, quite a few students mentioned that they usually watched television with their host families. At that time, television programs did not only function as listening material, but also provided common topics to develop a conversation. In fact, many students tried to ask their host families questions about unfamiliar words, expressions, and topics while they were watching television. Other than these general features, one student made an attempt to improve listening skills with a more specific approach as follows:

Everyday I watch "Shortland Street"¹ with a pen and a piece of paper. While watching the program, I write down all the words which I could comprehend. I don't care about the correct spelling at that time. After the program, I look up the meaning and spelling of these words in my dictionary. When I can't find the correct spelling, I ask my host family (J10).

As for peer interaction at school, most peers were overseas students from mainly Asian countries. Generally, because they are NNEs, their English tends to be slower and simpler than native speaker English. Therefore, it is not difficult for Japanese students to understand their peers' English and communicate with them in English. Many students pointed out that that was the merit of talking to NNEs at school. Besides, a peer sometimes played a role as not only a conversation partner but also a private tutor. Some Japanese students said that they often asked their school mates, who were more advanced learners of English, about vocabulary or grammar. For instance, one student commented as follows:

I was taught a lot of things about English, especially grammar, by my Asian friends because they could speak English much better than me. Their pronunciation was not difficult to understand, and they didn't mind if I used incorrect English. So I could speak to them in English positively, without strain. I think I could learn many words and expressions through conversation with them (J10).

¹ Popular soap opera produced in New Zealand. "Shortland Street" and the national news at six o'clock were quite popular television programs among Japanese students.

Other than language learning, the benefit of associating with foreign peers was to develop personal friendships and cultural enrichment. Some students remarked that they got strong moral support from their foreign peers, and they gained in socio-cultural knowledge of other Asian countries through associating with these peers.

The three least useful experiences were as follows: peer interaction at school, regular courses at school, and interacting with Japanese. However, compared with useful experiences, nominating less useful experiences seemed to be quite difficult. Many students answered such as:

There were not useless experiences at all. All experiences in New Zealand have been useful for English learning.

Therefore, the total number of less useful experiences mentioned by students was much smaller than useful experiences. The experiences are ranked below in Table 2.

| Types of situations | No. of occurrences (%) | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|--------|
| Peer interaction at school | 6 | 24.0% |
| Regular courses at school | 6 | 24.0% |
| afternoon courses (4) | | |
| general courses (1) | | |
| placement test (1) | | |
| Interacting with Japanese | 4 | 16.0% |
| Unsatisfactory dormitory environment | 2 | 8.0% |
| Using grammar books | 2 | 8.0% |
| Unsatisfactory homestay environment | 2 | 8.0% |
| TV viewing | 1 | 4.0% |
| Using English-English dictionary | 1 | 4.0% |
| Independent study | 1 | 4.0% |
| Total | 25 | 100.0% |

Table 2: Frequencies and rankings of less useful language learning experiences

An interesting finding was that peer interaction at school was nominated as the least useful experience although it was also placed third in the most useful experience category. Some students claimed that conversation with peers, that is NNEs, is less useful for English learning because NNEs often use incorrect English with each other and nobody corrects such incorrect English. A typical comment critical of peer interaction was:

Speaking to non-native speakers is useless for English learning. In situations where both speaker and listener are non-native, if I use more or less incorrect English in my speech, the listener probably can't pay attention to and can't correct that. So

I'm afraid that we always use improper grammar and pronunciation, and as a result, we somehow can communicate with each other with such improper English (J13).

These students believed that the best and only way of developing speaking skills was to talk to NESs. They expected that they could be acquainted with New Zealanders easily soon after they came to New Zealand. However, in reality, mainly because of the language barrier and hesitation, it is difficult for Japanese students to make native English speaking friends. Some students mentioned that they really would like to make friends with New Zealanders other than their host families, but they are not confident of communicating with them in English. As many local New Zealanders study in the Travel and Tourism course in School A, Japanese students have quite a few opportunities for socialising with New Zealanders at school, for example during lunch time in the canteen. Nevertheless, no Japanese students utilised such good opportunities. On the contrary, some Japanese students seemed to avoid the opportunities. Even though they hoped to make friends with New Zealanders, they hesitated and avoided speaking to New Zealand students at school. One student remarked, "I want to do that, but I can't do that. I can't understand their English" (J6).

Participating in regular language courses was also evaluated quite negatively. School A offers general English courses in the morning. In the afternoon, students can take optional courses such as media studies, conversation, or business English. Some students were critical of the afternoon courses. Other than general complaints, such as no interesting courses in the afternoon, there were a few negative comments relating especially to conversation classes. In particular, students were dissatisfied that some teachers always encouraged them in pair-work or role-play, in other words, made them speak to their classmates. These types of responses were related to negative evaluation of peer interaction. Some students mentioned as follows:

Low level of conversation between non-native speakers is not useful practice for actual communication (J4).

I understand conversation practice between students is necessary in the class. But if the students are the same proficiency level, they often use improper English each other, or can't recognise mistakes. The previous course I took was useless. In the class, there were not many explanations and instructions by teacher, and the teacher just encouraged us to do pair-work between students, based on handouts the teacher provided (J14).

Teachers always say "speak more, speak more" in the class. But they don't teach how to speak, specifically, in what situation we should use the vocabulary or expression (J15).

Japanese students seemed to expect that they should speak to higher proficiency peers (hopefully NESs) and that grammatical or phonetic mistakes in the conversation, even minor ones, should be corrected. They tended to prefer student-teacher interaction to student-student interaction such as pair-work, role play, or game activities. In addition, teachers were expected to explain grammar and instruction for activities more clearly, not only just conduct classroom activities.

Because it seems to reduce opportunities for using English, interacting with other Japanese was often nominated less useful experience. Most students pointed out that there were more Japanese at school than they had thought. Many students remarked that they tried not to form Japanese only groups and tried to make a non-Japanese environment. However, because of the large percentage of Japanese at school, it was difficult to keep away from Japanese completely. For example, one student said:

Against my will, I talk almost only to Japanese during tea-break or lunch time because of the many Japanese. ... There are a total of five Japanese in my class. So I end up using Japanese although I make every effort not to use it (J10).

Nevertheless, while some students were critical of associating with Japanese, there were a few positive responses about associating with Japanese friends. Those who evaluated interaction with Japanese peers positively had experience of cooperating with Japanese friends, for instance getting moral support or studying English together after school. These mixed evaluations on associating with Japanese can be interpreted as a reflection of the complex feelings of Japanese students. In other words, although they realise that they should live and study without Japanese, they do not have enough confidence in surviving with only English. As a result, they often rely on the Japanese language and Japanese friends.

Conclusion

This study has presented some features of in-country study experiences of Japanese students who have taken ESL courses. Overall, the students evaluated out-of-class contact (e.g. host family interaction, television viewing, peer interaction) as much more useful learning experiences than in-class contact (e.g. regular courses at school, interacting with teachers). Needless to say, compared with studying a foreign language in the learners' home countries, a significant benefit of studying the target language in the native speaking environment is to greatly increase the input and output of the target language in natural situations, especially out-of-class situations. Learners are always obliged to use the target language for actual communication with others. It can be said that that is a common feature of language acquisition through in-country experience. In particular, interacting with the host family was recognised as the most beneficial language learning experience. The homestay environment provided students with many opportunities for using the target language. In addition, the host family sometimes functions as a medium for expanding the

social network of Japanese students. As a result, a favourable impression of the homestay experience, rather than of the school or teacher, seemed to be an important factor in leading to overall positive evaluation of the in-country experience.

Another interesting finding was that there were two opposing responses to peer interaction at school, that is, interacting with NNEs. On the one hand, Japanese students evaluated peer interaction positively because NNEs' English is easy to understand and consequently communication with NNEs is easier and more relaxed than with NESs. On the other hand, some Japanese students seemed to believe that the best and only way to develop good oral communication skills is to talk to NESs. Therefore, they thought that talking to NNEs, either in or out of classroom, was less useful for language learning. These responses seemed to reflect the complex feelings and position of Japanese students. They have a great desire to associate with and talk to New Zealanders, but they have little chance for such interaction and it leads to dissatisfaction.

Regular courses at school as well as peer interaction were also nominated as less useful experiences. Some students were critical of teachers' attitudes toward students and their teaching approaches. Japanese students seemed to expect teachers to explain grammar in detail and make more opportunity for interaction between teacher and student rather than between students. In fact, some students were not keen on such classroom activities as role-play or pair work. These responses were related to the students' negative evaluation of interacting with NNEs as mentioned above, that it is useless for language learning.

However, when considering these points, we should remember that there are significant differences in language learning and teaching style between Japan and New Zealand. For example, Elson-White (1996) pointed out that Japanese students are used to teacher-directed class management. In this situation, students are expected to be passive, that is, be non-inquisitive and non-analytical, and be accepting of information supplied by the teacher. Besides, English education in Japan is traditionally based on the so-called grammar-translation method. Japanese students have been encouraged to memorise grammar and vocabulary and they have had few experiences of studying foreign languages for actual oral communication.

It seems to be difficult for some Japanese students to adapt instantly to the current, interactive teaching approach used in New Zealand. They tend to prefer teacher-directed class management in which all information is supplied by the teacher. They are not used to the autonomous learning style which New Zealand teachers usually expect. As a result, they are often upset and this has led to a negative evaluation of New Zealand language teachers giving rise to such comments as "no explanation about grammar and vocabulary", "unclear instructions for class activities", or "no information how to use the expressions". It has often occurred that, after having experience in ESL classes in New Zealand, some Asian students, not only Japanese, make remarks such as: "I came to study English, I didn't come to play games in class".

Because of the small number of participants, it will be difficult to generalise all the results and interpretations in this paper. However, considering the significant influence of the homestay environment on second language acquisition during in-country experience, language school administrators, rather than teachers, should keep in mind the quality of the host family to satisfy students. There is a potential risk that an unsatisfactory homestay environment will lead to an overall negative evaluation of the language school and the in-country experience itself.

Language teachers should consider differences in the socio-cultural backgrounds and learning and teaching styles between the students' home countries and New Zealand. Teachers should not expect that all overseas students can adjust to the learning and teaching style in New Zealand instantly. Therefore, encouraging the students to establish the autonomous learning style, that is learner training, occupies an important part in second language teaching. In addition, teachers need to realise that there is no best teaching method. The so-called communicative approach is not necessarily effective for "all" students and situations. In order to increase students' motivation and satisfaction, teachers should be more sensitive to these points and develop more flexibility in their teaching approach and classroom management. English language education is currently a large and profitable industry for New Zealand. Language schools and teachers ought to become aware of the students' actual needs for their learning experiences in New Zealand so that they can provide more appropriate and attractive ESL courses for the students.

Note

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Appendix: Background of the participants

| | Sex | Age | Prior in-country experience | Prior English study at private institutions | Level of English class | Length of stay in N.Z. | Residence in N.Z. |
|-----|-----|-----|-------------------------------|---|------------------------|------------------------|--|
| J1 | M | 24 | None | None | Intermediate | 10 mths | Dormitory 5 mths Flat (with Japanese) 4mths Homestay 1mth (1 family) |
| J2 | F | 27 | 7 mths China (travel) | None | Intermediate | 7 mths | Homestay 7mths (1 family) |
| J3 | F | 23 | 2 mths U.S. (English study) | 1 year Japan 2 mths U.S. | Intermediate | 3 mths | Dormitory 2 mths Homestay 1 mth (1family) |
| J4 | F | 25 | None | None | Intermediate | 3 mths | Homestay 3 mths (1 family) |
| J5 | M | 21 | None | None | Elementary | 3 mths | Dormitory 1.5 mths Homestay 1.5 mths |
| J6 | F | 21 | 1 mth Britain (English study) | 3 mths Japan 1 mth Britain | Advanced | 3 mths | Homestay 3mths (1 family) |
| J7 | F | 25 | None | None | Elementary | 4 mths | Homestay 4mths (1 family) |
| J8 | M | 16 | None | None | Elementary | 4 mths | Homestay 4mths (3 families) |
| J9 | M | 20 | 1 mth N.Z. (College) | 1 mth N.Z. | Elementary | 3 mths | Dormitory 3 mths |
| J10 | F | 20 | 1 mth U.S. (English study) | 1 mth U.S. | Elementary | 3 mths | Dormitory 2 mths Homestay 1 mth (1 family) |
| J11 | F | 19 | None | None | Elementary | 3 mths | Homestay 3 mths (2 families) |
| J12 | F | 20 | None | 3 years Japan | Elementary | 3 mths | Homestay 3 mths (1 family) |
| J13 | F | 19 | None | None | Intermediate | 3 mths | Homestay 2.5 mths (1 family) Dormitory 0.5 mth |
| J14 | F | 23 | None | None | Elementary | 4 mths | Homestay 4 mths (1 family) |
| J15 | M | 18 | None | None | Beginners | 3 mths | Homestay 3 mths (2 families) |

