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**JAPANESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' CHANGES THROUGH A STUDY
ABROAD PROGRAM**

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Abstract

Study abroad programs have been said, even when they are short-period ones, to be highly effective in improving students' language skills and communicative proficiency. In recent years, various training programs have been offered at many universities in Japan, and our college offers a Summer English Program (SIEP), the two-week-on-campus course at our affiliate school, University of Pittsburg at Bradford in the United States. Until today, in our college, little research has been conducted on students' changes after coming back to Japan. Our purpose of this study is to investigate how the students' confidence as their L2 selves and their motivation to learn and use English are strengthened after SIEP. One of the authors (Tomoto) traveled as a tutor of the SIEP in 2018 and observed that there was a big impact of the program on participating students between before and after the program. Although the English levels of the participants were diverse, it was interesting that almost all the students gained more confidence by taking this course and that they became more self-content about their English abilities. In this study, we conducted a questionnaire and interviews to find out what kind of changes have occurred in the students' motivation for learning English and for their communicative proficiency. We also analyzed the growth of students' English abilities in both reading and listening skills by the results of the VELC test. We investigated the transition of scores not only by conducting a t-test but also by arguing the background of the students to know why they had a high or low growth rate of the test scores. As a result, we were approaching ways to improve the program for the next fiscal year.

Keywords: Self-confidence, study abroad program, L2 self, language influence, motivation

Introduction

Government policy encourages students in Japan to study English, and English proficiency is becoming one of the most critical factors for socioeconomic success. However, Japan is not a multilingual country. Therefore, it is difficult for Japanese students to imagine themselves using English in the future. As a result, some of our students simply do not recognize the need to master English. Additionally, after taking the essential English program at junior high and high school for six years, some students have a strong aversion to English and then ask questions about taking another mandatory English class after entering university.

Under these circumstances, the authors, as English university educators, have been trying to find ways to motivate students. One of our school's attempts is the Summer Intensive English Program (SIEP) at our affiliate school, the University of Pittsburgh at Bradford in the United States. The program is an accredited two-week-on campus

course at UPB following 15 weekly preparatory English classes at our school in the spring semester.

One of the authors of this study was in charge of the program this year. She had 15 preparatory classes in Japan and also took the group of 14 students to UPB. The participants were selected according to their GPA (over two points) and screened through an interview test. She spent time with the students daily throughout the entirety of the program, and it became evident that all the students became more outgoing, cheerful, and gregarious after having taken the course. While the students' language abilities varied, the same tendencies were observed with all students.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the students' confidence as their L2 selves and motivation to learn and use English are strengthened. We also explore the reasons for the transitions in the VELC test score by analyzing the students individually or in groups that showed similar features.

Previous Studies and the Research Question

Tanaka (2007) mentioned that study abroad tends to strengthen Japanese students' confidence and motivation to learn and use English. He also showed some examples and stated that Japanese students' experience of communicating with native speakers in natural settings outside the classroom often triggers positive changes in their confidence and motivation even if the communication is on a simple level and not necessarily successful.

Yashima (2002) indicated that favorable contact and interaction experiences presumably reduce anxiety and enhance interest in the world, which, in turn, influence attitudes and motivation. She also claimed that motivation affected self-confidence in L2 communication, which led to a willingness to communicate in an L2 and suggested that to encourage students to be more willing to converse in English, EFL lessons should be designed to boost students' interest in different cultures and international affairs and activities, as well as to reduce anxiety and build confidence in communication.

Nitta and Asano (2010) pointed out that students' motives to learn English and their expectations at the pre-actional stage before starting the course depend upon their perception of enjoyment, understanding, and involvement with their classes and appear to have a considerable impact on their willingness.

Tomoto (2015) researched how bilingual Japanese speakers adjusted their style of speech and how they demonstrated their emotions depending on the language they use. She collected data from 241 bilingual speakers using questionnaires, and also conducted in-depth interviews with 16 students who were randomly selected.

The author who accompanied the group of students discovered that the SIEP seemed to have a tangible impact on their motivation. Notably, she observed that a shy student who had been quiet and withdrawn during the SIEP's preparatory classes or regular classes became highly gregarious and outgoing once he arrived in the U.S.A and communicated in English. The L2 images of some participants, including this student, were very different from their L1 images.

Our research questions in this study are as follows; how the students changed after being exposed to English only environment and how their English test scores were improved.

Methodology

The participants of SIEP in 2018 are group of 14 students to UPB. The participants were selected according to their GPA (over two points) and screened through an

interview test. So all of them are supposed to be motivational at the beginning of the SIEP.

Tomoto was in charge of the preparatory classed of 15 hours in the first semester, and led the students to UPB in the August 2018. We conducted Velc test before and after SIEP. After SIEP, the students are required to submit reports on the program. To explore their inner thoughts about the motivational changes, we conducted the questionnaire and interviews for them.

The Questionnaire Procedure

We collected the participants' opinions and impressions of the SIEP by conducting a questionnaire and open-ended and semi-structured interview. First, we gathered feedback from seven students who answered our survey regarding the SIEP.

The questions asked in the questionnaires in advance were as follows:

- Q1 Do you think it was worthwhile to attend the SIEP?
- Q2 Would you recommend attending the SIEP to your friends?
- Q3 What was positive about the classes at UPB?
- Q4 What was negative about the classes at UPB?
- Q5 What was good about the activities (excursion, sports) at UPB?
- Q6 What was beneficial about the preparation classes in Japan?
- Q7 What should be changed in the preparation classes in Japan next year?
- Q8 Did the SIEP produce any differences in you after participating in the program?

Questionnaire Results

Generally, the questionnaires showed the students' satisfaction and eagerness to learn more. In Q1 and Q2, almost all the students gave overwhelmingly positive answers (Table 1 and 2).

Table 1

| | |
|--|---|
| Q1. Do you think it was worthwhile to attend the SIEP? | |
| Strongly agree | 7 |
| Agree | 0 |
| Neutral | 0 |
| Disagree | 0 |
| Strongly disagree | 0 |

Table 2

| | |
|---|---|
| Q2. Would you recommend the SIEP to your friends? | |
| Strongly agree | 6 |
| Agree | 1 |
| Neutral | 0 |
| Disagree | 0 |
| Strongly disagree | 0 |

Q3 revealed that they were satisfied with their opportunities to communicate with the local people, using English, and learning American culture (Table 3).

Table 3

| | |
|---|---|
| Q3. What was positive about the classes at UPB? | |
| Communicating with natives | 7 |
| Speaking out in classes | 5 |
| Not using textbooks | 2 |
| Learning useful expressions | 3 |
| Learning American culture | 5 |

Q8 showed that the students' motivation to further study English and their future hopes had increased (Table 4).

Table4

| | |
|--|---|
| Q8 Did the SIEP produce any differences in you after participating in the program? | |
| Test score rose | 2 |
| Listening skill increased | 4 |
| Motivation to study English increased | 7 |
| Confidence increased | 3 |
| Hopes for the future appeared or changed | 2 |
| Motivation to study other subjects increased | 1 |
| Changed feelings toward friends who have not experienced international study | 1 |

The Interview

Next, we probed deeper by listening to students face-to-face in a warm and relaxing atmosphere. We randomly selected four participants (two females and two males) from the 14 participants in the SIEP and interviewed them for about 90 minutes. The rest of the questions (Q4–Q7) were asked directly in the follow-up interview detailed below. The students' feedback is categorized into four elements:

1. Positive feedback

To communicate in English with native speakers was a lot of fun and worthwhile. Especially, becoming friendly with local college staff and a bus driver was worth it to them.

They could play basketball with local students and became friends using SNS such as Instagram and Facebook. Some of them remain in close contact with local students even now.

The Japanese participants got friendlier with each other than they were in Japan. The two-week-stay made them intimates.

(2) Negative feedback

They wanted to study more difficult English grammar.

They thought that their English pronunciation should have been corrected.

The teacher at UPB selected the history of Ferdinando Magellan as a discussion theme, which was a common topic in the USA, but the Japanese students did not know him well. The students realized that historical and cultural references in the US were different from those in Japan, and they felt the culture gap.

(3) Changes in students produced by the SIEP

Two students decided to apply for a long-term study abroad program. Another two students want to apply for another short-term study program next year.

(4) Future hopes

Two students hope to work abroad in the future.

One student wants to marry an American in the future.

VELC Test

Procedure. There are ten ($n=10$) participants in this study including three first-year students, two second-year students, and five third-year students. They spoke Japanese as their first language and lacked any experience in international education. Their ability to speak English as a second language was classified by the VELC test (Visualizing English Language Competency Test. *Kinseido*). The VELC test is a simple and reliable English proficiency test developed by Japanese experts for testing the English education of Japanese college students.

The students in our college are required to take the VELC Test when they enter college and are divided into classes according to their scores. In December, they will take the VELC test to check how their competency varies.

The data discussed below were collected in the following manner. Students A, B and C are first-year students, and their scores before engaging with the SIEP program were derived from earlier scores in April 2018. Students D and E are second-year students, and F to J are third-year students. Their scores are from December 2017. All the scores after the SIEP were collected in December 2018. We do not account for students who did not take tests both before and after the SIEP.

Results. We collected the scores of ten students as outlined below (Table 5). As it shows, the mean scores increased from 422.1 to 437.6. We conducted a t -test, and it is appropriate to say the results approached the borderline of significance ($t=0.068$, $p<0.05$). To analyze the transition of the scores, the ten students were classified into the five groups below depending on how their scores changed. We aimed to investigate the students' changes also from the standpoint of their personal state or characteristic traits. This became practical because one of the authors was leading the group for the whole period and the number of the participating students was relatively small.

<Group1> Student G

<Group2> Student B

<Group3> Students F, H, I

<Group4> Students A, C, E, J

<Group5> Student D

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Table 5 (n=10)

| | BEFORE | | | AFTER (2018.12) | | |
|----------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------------|-----------|---------|
| STUDENT | TOTAL | LISTENING | READING | TOTAL | LISTENING | READING |
| A | 404 | 438 | 369 | 399 | 415 | 375 |
| B | 373 | 401 | 339 | 422 | 451 | 389 |
| C | 449 | 506 | 397 | 469 | 525 | 415 |
| D | 377 | 394 | 354 | 348 | 366 | 322 |
| E | 472 | 466 | 468 | 472 | 451 | 481 |
| F | 368 | 340 | 376 | 399 | 441 | 354 |
| G | 532 | 610 | 468 | 577 | 618 | 539 |
| H | 421 | 413 | 417 | 444 | 459 | 422 |
| I | 428 | 431 | 417 | 444 | 476 | 409 |
| J | 397 | 363 | 410 | 402 | 366 | 415 |
| MEAN | 422.1 | 436.2 | 401.5 | 437.6 | 456.8 | 412.1 |
| <i>t</i> | 0.068689 | 0.069948 | 0.152777 | | | |

($p < 0.05$)

<Group1>

Student G marked the highest score among all students in all three sections before the SIEP and also showed some increase respectively in his listening score (+8), reading score (+71), and the total score (+45). He is a third-year male student, and the author appointed him the leader of the SIEP group because of his excellent ability in English and leadership qualities. As a leader, he had more chances to associate with local people and consequently made many friends. The SIEP made him think about applying for the semester exchange program at the same UPB campus, and he studied English hard after returning to Japan to acquire the necessary TOEIC score. It obviously helped his VELC reading score increase by 71 points. Fortunately, he passed the exam for the exchange program and is now studying for the TOEFL test. The SIEP raised his self-esteem and motivated him to compete for the extended study abroad program.

<Group2>

Student B is a first-year male student, and he is the only student who improved significantly on all three sections; listening score (+50), reading score (+50), and the total score (+49). His total score was the second lowest among all the students before the SIEP, but it increased considerably. After talking with him and examining his post-SIEP report, we inferred that he was self-conscious about his oversized physique and lacked self-confidence in Japan, but in the US, he found that he was not too big and his self-esteem has dramatically increased. He became friendlier and outspoken, and also gained confidence through the experiences of fully understanding the classes given by the native English professor at UPB. He spoke in English during off-campus activities, such as playing basketball or visiting Niagara Falls with local students, and he has been highly motivated to keep learning English to better communicate with his new American friends even after returning to Japan.

<Group3>

Students F, H, and I are third-year female students, and their listening scores all increased substantially compared with their reading scores. Student F's listening score showed great growth from 340 to 441 (+101), although her reading score decreased from 376 to 354 (-22). Student H's listening score increased from 413 to 459 (+46), and her reading score also slightly increased from 417 to 422 (+5). Student I's listening score increased from 431 to 476 (+45), but her reading score decreased from 417 to 409 (-8).

The features that students F, H, and I shared that may explain their increased listening scores are that they seemed to enjoy communicating with American people. They engaged in; real dialogue with UPB professors, staff, local students, and clerks or servers at shops and restaurants. They were all eager to have conversations about their favorite American fashion, especially used clothes, dances, movies, and music.

Student F was originally an outgoing student in Japan, but she became even more sociable and talkative after arriving in the U.S. She enjoyed meeting new people and made many friends. She also achieved her dream of performing her favorite dance at Times Square while spending the last five days of the SIEP program in New York City. She was devoted to practicing both her dance and English conversation before, during, and after the SIEP, which could explain why she demonstrated the highest listening score rise among all the students.

Student H was a reticent student, and I could hardly hear her when she spoke in class in Japan. However, she talked more cheerfully during the SIEP program, primarily due to the influence of American culture and the friendly people, and the photos of her are full of big smiles. She wrote in her post-SIEP report that she changed into a superior version of herself through the SIEP. Although she had not been good at talking to people before, she needed to make herself understood in the US and realized the importance of communication. Both her self-confidence and motivation to study English increased remarkably.

Student I was also very introverted beforehand but showed a drastic change through the SIEP. She related in the interview and in her post-SIEP report that her experiences in the US brought her confidence, mental growth, and the motivation to keep learning English. She became outgoing and positive and liked herself that way. She cried when we left NY because she wanted to stay in the US and enjoy her L2 (second language) self.

<Group4>

The scores of students A, C, E, J did not show notable differences. However, they wrote in their post-SIEP reports that the SIEP was a once-in-a-lifetime experience and that they were satisfied with the program's contents. Their motivation to study English has not only strengthened but has also become more purposeful because of their desire to communicate with the American friends and professors they met through the SIEP. Students A and C are applying for the extended exchange program at UPB next year, and they have been studying hard for the TOEIC test after returning to Japan to reach the required score for the application.

Student E showed the most significant difference between his L1 and L2 selves. He sounded and acted like two different people when he spoke in Japanese and in English. His personality seemed to change depending on the language he used. He was quiet when he spoke Japanese, but he became lively and outgoing, and even his voice became louder when he spoke English. We were all surprised to see this change

and thought it was fascinating that he felt the connection between the language and its culture.

Student J is a third-year female student who wrote in her post-SIEP report that she learned from the friends she made in the SIEP program how to study actively and independently. She hopes to make the most of the SIEP experience to realize her future dreams and is highly motivated to continue studying English.

<Group5>

Student D decreased his listening (-28), reading (-32), and his total score (-29) due to poor health on the VELC test day. However, he enjoyed every moment of his SIEP experiences and showed outstanding communication skills and great maturity in organizing the group.

Discussion and Further Study

The questionnaires and interview results revealed that studying abroad for two weeks had a positive impact on L2 learners. Generally, all the students were genuinely interested in conversing with local people and making new American friends. Three female students who especially enjoyed communicating with the local people demonstrated significant growth in their test scores, particularly in the listening section (students F, H, I). They are highly motivated to keep up their English and stay in touch with their American friends via SNS and hope to visit them at UPB again on their graduation trip.

It should be emphasized that the SIEP also impacted the students' future dreams. Two students strongly desire to apply for the long-term exchange student program between YCC and UPB next year and have started preparing for the screening test (students A and C), and another student has already applied and passed the test and is going back to UPB on a semester exchange student program this year (student G).

Furthermore, there was a significant change in the score of the student who had the second lowest score in the VELC test but was motivated to attend the SIEP in advance (student B). This could be one of the critical elements for the next year regarding how we screen applicants for the program. Dornyei noted "Motivation is responsible for why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity and how they are going to pursue it" (Dornyei and Ushioda, 2011, p.4). This questions us which students we should select, the one with high English GPA or the one with high motivation. The important thing is how their experiences in UPB reflect their future plans or self-image. Ultimately, this was a limited investigation among 14 people with four interviewees while using ten VELC test comparisons throughout one year. We would like to measure it continuously from the next fiscal year onward.

Our college will continue this SIEP program next year, and we still search for improved program itineraries and contents to ensure that students form positive views when studying and using English. We should reconsider the criteria for selection and include not only students' GPA or present English proficiency but also their motivation, potential, or personality. This current study should be updated regularly to improve the SIEP program.

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Appendix

Consent to Participate in Research

JAPANESE COLLEGE STUDENTS' CHANGES THROUGH A STUDY

インタビュー調査への協力をお願い

この度は、私たちのインタビュー調査にご協力くださり、誠にありがとうございます。このインタビューは、2018年度、2019年度に共同研究（東本、白須）として横浜商科大学にて行われる「横浜商科大学夏季英語研修（SIEP）の教育効果」研究のために行われるものです。

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年 月 日

協力者（回答者）

お名前 _____

御所属 _____

ご連絡先 _____

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