

The Effect of Short-term Stays in English Speaking Countries on Attitudes Toward Learning and Using English

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Introduction

Having taught English at the high school, junior college, and university levels in Japan for twenty-five years I have noticed that many students who join my classes are better at conversational English than in the past. This positive change can be attributed to a variety of factors, but the one that stands out to me is the increasing number of students who have spent an extended amount of time in English speaking countries or who have been in non-English speaking countries but have attended English-medium international schools. Improvement in conversational English ability in relation to extended exposure to English in situations such as these is not surprising.

Besides the increase in the number of young Japanese of all levels, elementary through high school, who have spent an extended amount of time abroad in English speaking countries, there has been an even greater number who have been to English speaking countries for short-term stays. Most likely these short visits were vacation trips, but some students have gone abroad to participate in sporting events, do volunteer work, attend conferences, along with other reasons. Various studies have examined the effect of long-term stays abroad on students primarily from Western countries (e.g., Aveni, 2005; Carlson, Burn, Unseem, and Yachimowicz, 1990; Nash, 1976). On the other hand, little if any research has been

accomplished on the effect of short-term stays of Japanese students in countries where English is the first language or the language of instruction in school (Kumagi, 1977).

Aim of the Study

In these brief research notes, I would like to report on an ongoing study I am conducting on the effect of short-term stays abroad on Japanese learners of English. The purpose of the study is to determine if there is any effect on Japanese university students' attitudes towards speaking and listening to English in their formal English classes and their general attitudes towards studying English after they return to Japan from their short stay abroad. My hypothesis is that even a short-term visit has a positive effect on students' attitude towards learning and using English. In this study, a short-term visit is defined as a month or less, and it had to be when the student was in high school or later. The purpose of the visit could have been for any reason except to study English, and the stay needed to be in a country that used English as a first language.

Method

Participants. The participants in this study were 155 Japanese university students enrolled in three coeducational elective conversational English classes in Japan. Students were told that participation was voluntary. All of the teachers were native English speakers.

Data collection. An original anonymous questionnaire written in Japanese was used to collect data for this study. First, the questionnaire asked for the students' age, gender, and year in school. Next it asked if they had spent time out of Japan when they were a high

school or college student. If the response was yes, students were asked what country they had gone to, how long they stayed there, and what they did there. Space was allowed for students who had been outside of Japan more than one time. Finally, 36 statements were presented to gather information on the students' attitudes towards attending formal conversational English classes and expressing themselves in English. Responses were measured on a five-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Data analysis. The number of students reporting that they had been outside of Japan was 87. Sixty-eight reported that they had never left Japan. Questionnaires with information missing and those indicating that the student had been outside of Japan but did not fit the parameters of the study were eliminated. From the remaining questionnaires, random samples of 42 from the been-abroad group and 46 from the not-been-abroad group were analyzed. After tallying the students' responses, an average for each response was calculated, and the averages of the two groups were compared.

Results

These research notes present only the preliminary results of this pilot study. I will present a broad picture of what was found so far, saving a detailed description for a later paper after having a chance to analyze the questionnaire in detail, revise it, check it again, and administer a finalized version to a larger number of students.

Desire to attend English class. Nine percent of the students in the been-abroad group reported that they strongly agreed with the statement about desiring to attend English class which was nearly identical to the 8 percent reported by the not-been-abroad group.

Desire to study more English. Nine percent of the students in

the been-abroad group reported that they strongly agreed with the statement about desiring to take more English language classes in the future, which was nearly identical to the 10 percent reported by the not-been-abroad group.

Perception of spoken English ability. When asked if they felt that other students spoke English better than they did, 30 percent of the Been Abroad Group strongly agreed, in contrast to 16 percent of the not-been-abroad group.

Speaking English in class. When asked if they had problems speaking English in class, 10 percent of the been-abroad group strongly agreed in contrast to 3 percent of the not-been-abroad group. Other questions about classroom performance followed a similar pattern.

For other parts of the questionnaire, the results were similar.

Preliminary Conclusion

As explained above, I have purposely not gone into detail in reporting these preliminary results. The overall results, however, do suggest that there is little if any difference between the two groups in their attitude toward formal English learning in general. However, in regard to their attitude towards their ability to speak English, the group that had spent a short time abroad in English speaking countries responded more negatively about their perceived abilities than those who had never left Japan. These preliminary findings run contrary to the original hypothesis that a short-term stay abroad has a positive effect on students' attitudes towards learning and using English. The next step in this research is to determine whether these findings hold up to further analysis, and if so, what may be the possible reasons for these results.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Melvin R. Andrade for his helpful advice.

Selected References

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