

The Impact of a Short-Term Study Abroad Experience on Attitudes toward Learning English

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Abstract

Taking part in a short-term study abroad program can be a very beneficial experience for students in helping them learn English and enhance their cultural sensitivity. This study investigated changes in the way that a group of students viewed their English communication skills after a two-week period studying English and experiencing different cultures in an English-speaking country. The participants in the research comprised 68 university students majoring in various medical sciences such as nursing, and medical laboratory and radiological technology. Analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data, the study found that studying English and being exposed to other cultures even for a short period of time had a major influence on students' self-perceived competence in English communication. The results indicate that studying abroad, even for a short term, may have a positive effect on students' attitudes toward learning and communicating in English. The study also suggests that it is important for students planning to work in healthcare environments to be given the opportunity to learn English and experience different cultures while studying abroad.

1. Introduction

Recently, there has been a significant growth in the percentage of high school students wanting to become registered nurses after graduating from university (Education Information Center, 2014). Some studies point out that this tendency is caused by the difficulty of finding work as a result of Japan's prolonged economic depression (Hayashi, 2014). Furthermore, since Japan has faced a chronic shortfall in human resources, especially in the field of nursing, there has been an increase in the number of universities setting up departments in medical fields such as nursing, and medical laboratory and radiology technology (Education Information Center, 2014; The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2007). Realizing the importance of developing human resources in this field, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is encouraging universities to focus on courses that develop practitioners with medical expertise. Moreover, the government provides active support for

setting up graduate schools and institutions where students can develop their knowledge and skills at a more advanced level. It is indispensable for medical science students to acquire English skills since they need to read medical references in English to increase their expertise in treating illnesses; they require the ability to present the findings of their research in English at international conferences; and they need to communicate in English with patients from other countries (Takagi, 2008).

Another reason for medical science students to develop their English skills is the increasing number of people coming to Japan from other countries. According to a report of the Ministry of Justice (2016), the number of foreign residents in Japan has been increasing gradually (Figure 1). This has led to an increased need for medical staff to be able to communicate in English with non-Japanese patients. Corresponding to these changes, a number of certified qualifications in medical English proficiency have emerged, including the Examination of Proficiency in English for Medical Purposes (EPEMP), the Social Workers' Essential English Test (SWEET), and Certification for Bilingual Medical Staff (CBMS). These qualifications support the idea that there is a growing demand for the development of English skills among health professionals in Japan.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate how studying English and experiencing other cultures on a short study-abroad program would affect students' attitude toward their communication skills in English, especially focusing on those in various medical sciences.

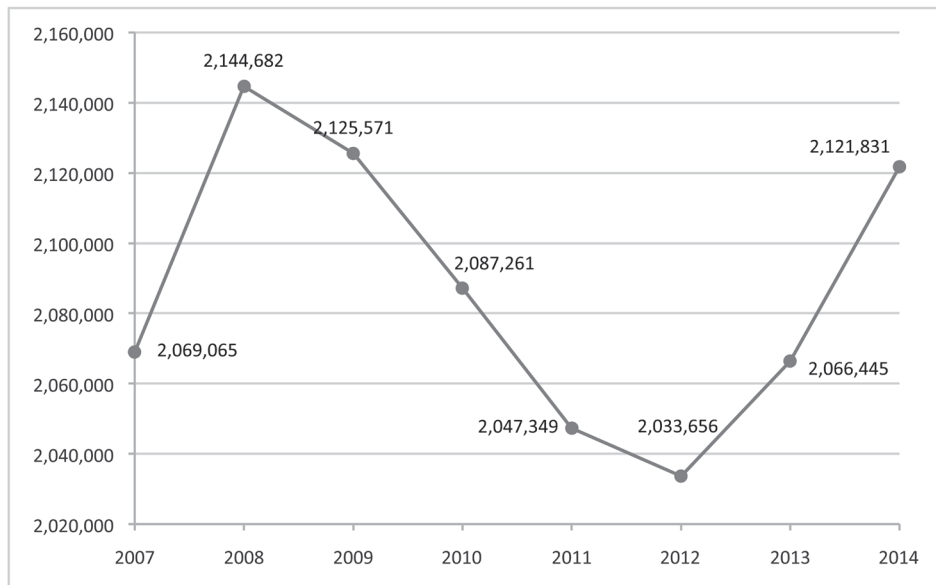


Figure 1. Changes in the numbers of foreign residents in Japan

2. Literature Review

Willingness to communicate (WTC) was originally studied by McCroskey and Richmond (1987), which evolved from the earlier work (Burgoon, 1976) on unwillingness to communicate. The WTC scale was designed as a direct measure of the respondent's predisposition toward approaching or avoiding the initiation of communication in their first language. In 1992, McCroskey investigated the reliability and validity of this scale by researching data obtained in the US and other countries. MacIntyre and Charos (1996) applied the hypothetical structure (MacIntyre, 1996) of the WTC model in an L2 situation, taking account of the previous study's WTC model (McCroskey & Richmond, 1987) and the Socio-Educational Model (Gardner, 1985). Since their research found that the effects of personality were indirect, being channeled through perceived L2 competence and L2 communication anxiety, they insisted that reducing students' anxiety and giving them confidence to communicate in L2 enhance their willingness to communicate in L2. In 1998, a heuristic model which showed the range of potential influences on L2 WTC was proposed by MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998). They suggested that a suitable goal in L2 learning is to increase WTC so that language instruction might achieve its social and political goal of bringing cultures into contact and nations together. With the advent of this model, research into the relationship between L2 WTC and other affective factors such as L2 anxiety, L2 communication competence, and L2 confidence has been conducted.

In Japan, Yashima has conducted several studies (1998, 1999, 2002) on Japanese students' self-perceived communication competence in English based on the findings and models discussed above. Matsuoka (2004, 2005) has studied Japanese nursing students' self-perceived communication competence in English. Her 2004 study examined the way in which motivational factors, WTC in English, and English proficiency are inter-related. As these studies show, there are complex interrelated factors involved in learning a second language.

As for affective factors in study abroad program, some studies have pointed out that studying English abroad have positive effects on enhancing participants' motivation for English Study and cultural awareness, even for a short-term (Kitao, 1993; Kobayashi, 1999; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). Kobayashi (1999) also found out that there were significantly positive differences in participants' attitudes toward foreign people and study abroad after participating in the program. Given that students' affective factors are related to their English proficiency (Sabet, 2007), it would be worth researching them from the practical viewpoints of English education.

3. Methods

The students were participants in a short study-abroad program that took place in Hawaii in

March 2011 and 2013. The group consisted of 68 medical science students (including nursing students and students training to be laboratory or radiological technicians). The average age of the participants was 20.3 years. The purpose of the program was to enhance the cultural awareness of medical science students who might later work with non-Japanese patients in hospitals, as well to motivate them to develop their English communication skills. During the program, they undertook 30 hours of classroom-based, basic-level English, which included learning medical terms, as well as two laboratory-based sessions with local students studying to be nurses or medical technicians in Hawaii. On the last day of the program, the group gave a 20-minute presentation in English in front of the other students and teachers. Other activities included visiting a children's hospital, taking part in local festivals, and spending time with local students on campus. Through these activities, the students had a chance to be exposed to other cultures and local people as well as to learn English in a classroom environment.

4. Procedures and Measures

The participants were asked to complete a questionnaire about perceived communication competence (PCC) (MacIntyre & Charos, 1996) in English before and after participating in the program. It assesses the average percentage of time (ranging from 0% to 100%) for which respondents feel competent to speak English. The 12 items on the scale represent the intersection of three types of receivers (strangers, acquaintances, and friends) with four communication contexts (public speaking, talking in meetings, talking in small groups, and talking in dyads). The respondents were asked to indicate the percentage of time they would choose to communicate with each type of receiver and in each communication context when completely free to do so, using a figure between zero and a hundred. To ensure that each item was translated correctly into Japanese and could be clearly understood, Yashima's study (2002) was used as a basis because she used the same scales in her research. A nonparametric test (Wilcoxon signed-rank test) was employed for statistical analysis.

In order to examine their attitudes and changes qualitatively, the participants were also asked to respond to an open-ended questionnaire reflecting their experiences abroad after they returned. IBM SPSS Text Analytics for Surveys were conducted to analyze their reflections.

5. Results and Discussion

The results show that students, to a significant extent, "perceived [a higher] communication competence in English" regardless of the type of receiver or communication context after taking part in the two-week study-abroad program (Table 1). This finding indicates that studying English and experiencing other cultures through living abroad would be of great advantage to students in

terms of evaluating their own English communication ability, even for such a short period as two weeks.

As for the qualitative research, the method of linguistics-based text mining was used in order to identify the issues which the results of the quantitative method missed. Regarding their reflections, by asking how they perceived their English ability after this program, the results show that they were more likely to have confidence in communicating in English, especially as regards their listening skill (Table 2: How do you perceive your English skills after this program?). Most of them also commented that they felt great when they understood what people said to them in English. Moreover, it was interesting that several participants even commented they should have studied English more in Japan so that they could communicate well in English with local people during their stay.

The other question concerns what else besides English ability changed during this program, and the results are as follows (Table 3: Are there any changes or influences you noticed after this program besides those concerning English skills? If yes, please explain.). Even though the question asked about changes or differences besides English ability due to participating in this program, the words in their responses were frequently related to communicating and learning in English. Actually, most of the students commented they had great experiences with local people, and through living abroad, they increased their desire to learn English, and one student even said that she wanted to study abroad to learn English and other cultures.

Based on these quantitative and qualitative findings from this research, it is evident that the participants were positively influenced by taking part in this program, which means studying English and being exposed to other cultures even for a short period of time has a major influence on students' attitude toward learning English and self-perceived communication competence in English communication.

Table 1: Perceived Communication Competence in English

	Perceived Communication Competence in English		
	Pre	Post	z
Stranger	82.96 (0-350)	139.83 (6-360)	-4.53**
Acquaintance	78.08 (0-330)	170.09 (20-360)	-5.07**
Friend	75.00 (13-185)	180.00 (95-250)	-4.64**
Group Discussion	86.82 (0-270)	130.52 (16-270)	-4.58**
Meeting	70.99 (0-300)	117.82 (15-270)	-4.94**
Interpersonal Conversation	90.96 (0-240)	134.18 (22-270)	-4.95**
Public Speaking	67.48 (0-300)	116.83 (15-270)	-4.81**
median (interquartile range)			**p<.005

Table 2:How do you perceive your English skills after this program?

	Noun in Japanese		Verb in Japanese	
1	English	英語 (31)	listen	聞き取る、聞く (29)
2	study abroad	留学 (15)	speak, talk	話す、言う (27)
3	conversation	会話 (13)	understand	わかる、分かる (12)
4	understanding	理解 (8)	use <English>	(英語を)使う (7)
5	word	単語 (6)	compare	比べる (6)

():frequency of words in student reflections

Table 3:Are there any changes or influences you noticed after this program besides those concerning English skills? If yes, please explain.

	Noun in Japanese		Verb in Japanese	
1	people	人、人々 (21)	speak, talk	話す、言う (29)
2	English	英語 (11)	be able	出来る、できる (14)
3	communication	コミュニケーション (12)	understand	わかる、分かる (7)
4	overseas	海外 (7)	learn	学ぶ (6)
5	study	勉強 (6)	feel 感じる, widen	広がる (4)

():frequency of words in student reflections

6. Conclusion

The student curriculum for medical science students in Japan is less likely to offer flexibility in comparison with other subjects, because many classes are mandatory and include apprenticeships relating to medical specializations. This could be one of the reasons why medical science students have less time for, or less interest in studying English. The findings of this study, however, show that participating in study-abroad programs would not only motivate these students to study English but would also increase their self-confidence in communicating in English, irrespective of the communication context or type of receiver. A limitation of this study is that it did not show any relationship between students' affective factors such as self-perceived communication competence in English and attitude toward learning English and English proficiency; however, since some research (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, Donovan, 2002; MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels, 1998; Yashima, 2002; Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, Shimizu, 2004) argues that having a positive attitude toward communicating in English is an essential factor in developing proficiency in English, the study of interrelationships between medical science students' affective factors toward learning English and their English proficiency is needed more for the future issues.

With more foreign people coming to Japan, the chance of nurses and medical technicians

dealing with them in hospitals is increasing. Accordingly, they need to be more aware of their patients' conditions, values, beliefs, and cultural backgrounds in order to provide their patients with appropriate care. Some authors have argued that study abroad programs bring a wealth of benefits to the participants, such as becoming more open-minded and independent, developing greater tolerance of ambiguity and difference, gaining knowledge of other cultures and lifestyles, and participating in the world community (Sabet, 2007). The experience of studying abroad gives students a chance to meet people from other cultures and with different values. This leads not only to improving competence in English but also enhances sensitivity toward and awareness of different cultures, values, and backgrounds.

Regardless of these advantages, few medical science departments in Japanese universities currently offer a study-abroad program which gives students such opportunities to study English and experience other cultures. In order to educate future health professionals with international points of view, it is desirable to consider giving medical science students study abroad experiences not only to improve English communication skills but also to nurture cultural awareness.

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