

Comparison of ESL Achievement Scores Between Japanese College Students Enrolled in a Study Abroad Program and Students not Enrolled

Curtis KELLY*

This study examines the motivational effect of enrollment in a study abroad program on English achievement. Three months after signing up, the Michigan English Placement Test scores of Japanese college students about to go abroad were compared to those of a stratified random sample of students not enrolled. An independent one-tailed t-test with a 0.05 region of rejection was conducted on the means with the results being $p=.27$. Since the resulting probability was greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis failed to be rejected. It is concluded that the enrollees show no significantly greater level of achievement than the control group.

Keywords: English as Second Language (ESL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) motivation, achievement, study abroad, ryugaku, college, university, Japan

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine the motivational effect of enrollment in a study abroad program on achievement in English as compared to similar students not enrolled. Achievement is measured by test scores on the Form B Michigan English Placement Test. The scores of the thirty-two students enrolled in the program, the treatment group, are compared to those of a control group, a stratified random sample of students not enrolled of similar proficiency and taking the same classes.

Japanese colleges and universities have long been engaged in sending their students abroad to study in order to improve their English language abilities

*Professor of English

(McKeown, 2009), international understanding (Yashima, 2010), or personal construct (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004). What role do study abroad programs play in Japanese institutions of tertiary education, and how are they related to achievement? What do we know about study habits in the general Japanese EFL population, and what do we know about standardized English achievement tests? Each of these questions will be addressed in the literature review below.

1.1 Study Abroad Programs in Japan

Foreign study tours are common at institutions of higher learning, especially at schools offering international studies, such as colleges with language departments. Kwansai Gakuin, Doshisha, Kansai, Waseda, and Ritsumeikan Universities were pioneers in international student exchanges (Japan Association of Private Colleges and Universities, 1994), but recently, study abroad and exchange programs have spread to almost every tertiary institution in Japan that has an English program in Japan. These schools send students abroad to study in order to improve their English language abilities (McKeown, 2009; Taguchi, 2008), international understanding (Asaoka & Yano, 2009; Ellis & Tanaka, 2003; Yashima, 2010), or personal construct (Matsuda & Gobel, 2004; McKeown).

Almost every college with an English Department has, or has had, at least one study abroad program, often in collaboration with a sister school (Drake, 1997). Recently, however, six factors have caused a decrease in the number of programs. The first three are economic and the latter three cultural. Economic factors are the Asian economic crisis; the rise of the dollar; and the increasing number of high quality, low cost commercial tours being marketed. Cultural factors are: the greater willingness of Japanese youth to travel independently; a growing preference for long term trips; and a 1994 policy change in which the Ministry of Education began supporting long term study programs (Monbusho, 1997); The combination of these factors has caused a number of schools to modify their offerings. Short-term study tours are still common, but many schools are offering semester or year abroad programs as well. Kansai University of Foreign Studies, for example, sends from 100 to 200 students abroad annually to spend a year at one of 80 affiliated foreign universities.

Admittance to such programs is usually done on a first come, first serve basis, but some schools screen applicants with interviews or examinations. The concern here is more as to whether or not applicants will be troublemakers, rather than the assessment of their English abilities. Japan has strong *parentis en loco* values, and the school is usually held responsible for any trouble the participants get into.

Since Japan is a high context culture (Hall, 1989) with a strongly external locus of behavioral control – peer pressure, societal mores and pressure from authority – when these controls are removed, Japanese youth are more likely to engage in dangerous experiment than their Western counterparts. Therefore, most schools apply strict rules regarding curfews, drinking alcohol, and personal excursions.

For what purpose do Japanese institutions of higher learning offer such study tours? There seem to be three. The first is related to marketing. Going to a foreign country is one of the primary ambitions of Japanese students, especially ESL students. Benson (1991) found that the top two reasons Japanese college students say they study English is to go abroad. Therefore, offering escorted study abroad tours – thus, “safe” and acceptable to parents – adds to a school’s appeal. In fact, with the drastic decrease 18-year olds in the Japanese population, many schools see their study tours as a way to survive an enrollment crisis (Kelly, 1998).

The second purpose is educational. Unlike students studying ESL in English-speaking countries, ESL students in Japan, China, Korea and Thailand have little outside exposure to the language they are studying, and few chances to experience the target culture. For such students, a study abroad trip acts as a practicum for their studies. They are often given graduation credits for participating. Both society at large and the educational community place a high value on such experience, which is why this purpose, contact with the foreign culture, is usually considered the most important (Asaoka & Yano, 2009).

The third purpose is also educational, but educational in terms of behavior modification rather than educational in terms of content. It is also the purpose most closely related to this study. It is implicitly assumed that students enrolling in a study abroad program will study the language of the country they are bound for harder before they go. Their becoming better at the language provides three benefits. The students will be less likely to have problems while abroad, the school has partially achieved its educational mission, raising their levels of proficiency, the program might have motivational effects on students.

Motivation is rarely a problem for ESL students already living in and studying English in an English speaking country, but it is the major problem for EFL students studying English in their home country (Wigzell & Al-Ansari, 1993). In English-speaking countries, frequent interaction with native speakers and a desire to integrate with the local community promotes mastery of the language. East Asian countries, however, do not have such stimuli. Since the benefits of mastering English are distant and uncertain (certain employment opportunities and a chance to communicate with foreigners if one goes abroad) motivation tends to be slack.

Wigzell and Al-Ansari call this problem “the problem of wastage and low productivity in foreign language courses” (p. 303). In countries like Japan, where college English students are generally considered lackadaisical and where “carrot” approaches to motivating students are preferred to “stick” approaches (Singleton, 1993), curriculum designers are in constant need of ways to get their students to study English. It can be presumed, that to at least some extent, study tours serve this purpose (Asaoka & Yano, 2009).

Millions of dollars are spent on organizing and partaking in these trips, but to date, no research exists to confirm or refute the assumption that students will be motivated to study English harder, and achieve higher scores before going. Some studies on motivation and achievement have been conducted on language students after they have returned from abroad (Drake, 1997; Kitao, 1993; Klepinger, 1998; Matsuda & Gobel, 2003; McKeown 2009; Ono, 1996; Teweles, 1996), and a couple of attitudinal studies have been done on students before they go (Kitao, 1993; McKeown; Yashima & Viswat, 1991), but no clear research on achievement has been conducted on students before departure.

1.2 ESL Achievement

Higher rates of achievement in ESL have long been associated with study application. This is especially true amongst ESL teachers who “would describe a student as motivated if he or she becomes productively engaged in learning tasks and sustains that engagement, without the need for continual encouragement or direction” (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991, p. 480). Extensive research has shown that an interest in the target culture has positive effects on achievement (Benson, 1991; Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Gardner, Day, & MacIntyre, 1992; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Ramage, 1991; Skehan, 1991), but it is unclear as to whether the integrative interest leads to achievement or achievement leads to integrativeness (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). Gardner, himself, who initially pointed out this relationship, claims that numerous studies show a correlation between attitude and achievement (Gardner et al., 1992), but also concedes that other factors, such as classroom conditions, ameliorate the effect.

Research on classroom attitudes, stemming from Good Learner Theories in second language acquisition (SLA), have identified positive classroom behavior as related to achievement and more importantly, the relationship of self-image and task engagement (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). In particular, learners tend to avoid tasks that they perceive as too challenging or not challenging enough. These latter views parallel the self-efficacy and goal-related theories in psychology. As a result,

recent theories of SL motivation, all of which have been defined by achievement, include self-confidence as a construct (Clément et al., 1994; Crookes & Schmidt; Gardner et al., 1992; Spolsky, 1988).

Within the last ten years, extensive SL research has been done on the relationship between achievement and learning styles (also referred to as “learning strategies”). A number of studies on learning styles show correlations with attitude and achievement (LoCastro, 1994; Oxford, 1990; Reid, 1987). In a study done by Ellis, for example, the learning styles seemed closely connected to a “positive affective orientation” (1995, p. 259) towards language study.

In what way do learner beliefs about themselves, such as cognitive ability, L1 linguistic aptitude, mastery orientation, etc. influence achievement? Pintrich, Roeser and De Groot (1994) found that students who focus on learning and mastery are more likely to have higher self-efficacy, less test anxiety, and show higher levels of motivation. Even more important, they are more willing to study in ways that lead to deeper learning:

...students who had positive motivational beliefs, which included a general intrinsic orientation focused on learning and mastery, positive perceptions of interest and value regarding course material, and high self efficacy beliefs, were more likely to report using self-regulated learning strategies that will result in deeper processing of the material and better understanding. At the same time, students who reported higher levels of test anxiety were less likely to be self-regulating.” (p. 155-6)

In asking whether these positive beliefs drive cognitive engagement or whether it occurs the other way around, the researchers found that these two factors are probably reciprocal. Of even greater import was their finding that both of these conditions are not “fixed” learner characteristics, but can be influenced by the classroom context. Interesting materials, some choice of tasks, good explanations, and the chance to work with other students was more likely to result in the students focusing on mastery and learning. In other words, teachers can influence achievement.

This perspective slightly differs from one proposed by Wigzell and Al-Ansari, who claim that “High achievers are usually driven by a strong inner desire to learn and generally learn successfully in any kind of learning environment” (p. 313), but this latter point of view comes from personal observation rather than research. What Wigzell and Al-Ansari’s research did find, however, concurs with Pintrich,

Roeser and De Groot's 1994 findings. "Low achievers, however, tend to be much more sensitive variables in their learning environment," such as teacher attitudes, materials, means of assessment, etc. They suggest that successful instruction requires the teacher to give less attention to managing the environment and more attention to fostering a desire to learn (p. 313).

Research on achievement tends to take the approach suggested by cognitive psychology and constructivist learning theory: that achievement depends on choice. In particular, it depends on a decision to act, which is also defined as motivation. The most complete model of factors influencing this decision has been developed by Williams and Burden (1997). They reviewed the current theories in cognitive psychology and integrated them into a process-oriented theory with the decision to act at the center. Influencing the individual's decision are two sets of dimensions, internal factors and external factors. The internal factors interact dynamically in a non-linear fashion, and "affect the level and extent of learner's motivation to complete a task or maintain an activity" (Williams, 1997, p. 137). These factors, while affecting each other are also subject to influence from the other set of dimensions, external factors, where again, the interaction is dynamic.

1.3 Language Tests, Proficiency, and Academic Success

The major tests of English, TOEFL, MLA, and Michigan Tests, are products of the 50's and 60's, the "golden age of test development" when psychometric theories reigned (Savignon, 1995). However, objective tests have been heavily criticized from their inception as having dubious validity in relation to overall English ability (Wigzell & Al-Ansari, 1993). Studies with Japanese have shown that TOEFL scores correlate with learning styles (Ozeki, 1995), but interestingly, are not effective in predicting overall academic success (Light, Ming, & Mossop, 1987). Some relationship exists, but it is minimal and other factors seem to have more impact. Various studies, however, have shown a relationship between diligence in study and achievement on standardized tests (Brown, 1995). 1996, Teweles did a comparative study with Japanese and Chinese college students studying English. He found that general tests of English were a better predictor of later performance than motivational assessments. The question remains, however, whether a perceived need to master English before going abroad will affect motivation and higher rates of achievement in the period before departure. This is the question this study is seeking to answer.

1.4 Research Question

Did students enrolled in the one semester study abroad program get higher scores on the Michigan English Placement Test, Form B, which was administered before departure, than those students who were not enrolled?

1.5 Research Hypothesis

The research hypothesis is that the college students enrolled in semester study abroad program will achieve higher scores on the pre-departure Michigan English Placement Test than students not enrolled.

2. Method

The purpose of this study was to compare achievement between two groups of students, those enrolled in a study abroad program and those not. A post hoc experimental research methodology was used. This methodology requires a null hypothesis and alternative hypothesis, which are tested by analysis of data by inferential statistics.

2.1 Participants

Thirty-two first-year college students were enrolled in the study abroad program. This was the experimental group. They seemed to be typical students, at least according to the opinions expressed by the four faculty on the study abroad committee. In terms of English ability, their scores on an English pre-test showed a normal distribution. The Michigan Placement Test, Form A, test was given to all incoming students at the beginning of the year. The general population average was 42.4 out of 100 possible points, while that of the test group was 44.3. The rankings of the enrollees among the 248 test takers (see Table 1) showed slightly better than average scores, but also indicate that the enrollees fit well into the overall population.

Table 1 Distribution of Experimental Group Pre-Test Scores

ranking:	scores above average				scores close to average			scores below average		
	19	22	54	83	103	106	107	129	207	219
test statistics					max	min	av	st dev		
total pop.					56	32	42.4	9		
experimental group					76	24	44.3	8		

Note. The figures above represent the relative rankings of the experimental group amongst all first year students in the English Department. The rankings are based on scores from the Michigan English Placement Test, Form A, which was given in April, at the start of the semester. "1" represents the top score and "240" the bottom score.

An informal questionnaire was given to the applicants in the study abroad program in which they were asked as to whether they had become more interested in studying English after signing up for the program. 100% of the participants responded that they had, but as was discussed in the literature review, self-reported motivational beliefs among Japanese do not always correlate well with performance.

In a Case 1 parametric comparison of two groups, the experimental group is compared with the population from which it was drawn. In a Case 2 study, however, it is compared with a control group (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991, p. 250). The experimental group is small, and thus more likely to differ in distribution from the general population (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991, p. 100). Therefore, in order to maintain rigor, a stratified random sample was selected for the comparison group. This control group of thirty-three students was stratified on the basis of English proficiency and class grouping characteristics of the treatment group. For each student in the treatment group, three students were selected from the 240 students not enrolled on the basis of: (a) having nearly identical scores on the previous Michigan English Placement Test (Form A, administered in April) and (b) belonging to the same class grouping, thus being taught by the same teachers in the same courses.

2.2 Apparatus

The standardized Michigan English Placement Test (commonly referred to as "the Michigan test"), Form B, was administered to all students at the end of the first semester, before the experimental group departed. The test scores are the dependent variable. The test is a general test of English machine scored on a 100-point basis with listening and grammar sections. In 1977, studies on the reliability of the test were conducted by the publisher, the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan. Estimates on internal consistency range from a low

of $r_{tt}=.89$ to a high of $r_{tt}=.94$ while parallel forms reliability estimates are all $r=.89$ or above.

2.3 Design

Dependent variable-achievement. Achievement was defined in terms of proficiency on the Form B Michigan English Placement Test.

Independent variable-enrollment. Enrollment was defined as having enrolled in the study abroad program, participating in the orientation meetings and staying enrolled in the program until the Form B Michigan Test of English was administered.

Experimental group. The experimental group was defined as first-year Japanese college English language majors enrolled in a study abroad program.

Control group. The control group was defined as first-year Japanese college English language majors not enrolled in a study abroad program, who showed similar levels of aptitude in English as the experimental group and took the same classes.

Study abroad program. The study abroad programs were one-semester English education programs conducted at universities in two English-speaking countries.

2.4 Procedure

A post hoc study examines the influence of events after they have occurred, so even though the English Department set up the following conditions as an informal experiment of its own, the “treatment” was not purely experimental. A post hoc study “tells us ‘what is going on’ rather than ‘what caused this’” (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991, p. 100), but is commonly used to analyze test results (p. 101).

Nevertheless, the students were subjected to these procedures: Students in the treatment group were informed of their acceptance into the program three weeks after the semester started. At this time, they were also informed that if they failed any classes or their teachers reported poor attendance or poor classroom behavior, they might be dropped from the program. They were also encouraged to try to raise their scores on the second Michigan test. In this way, their integrative motive to study was bolstered by an instrumental motive. Following this one orientation meeting and five informal meetings afterwards, there was no further formal treatment, although students might have been encouraged by teachers or family members. The treatment group and control group then attended one semester of ESL classes at the Japanese college. The students within each group took the same

classes but were taught by different teachers. However, for every student in the experimental group, there were three students in the control group in exactly the same classes.

Scores from the Michigan English Placement Test, Form B, were raw numerical scores with a maximum of 100. The tests were machine scored by the researcher and other staff.

2.4.1 Null Hypothesis

Students enrolled in the study abroad program have no statistically significant difference at the .05 level in scores on the Michigan English Placement Test scores than students not enrolled.

2.4.2 Alternative Hypothesis

Students enrolled in the study abroad program achieved statistically significant, at the .05 level, higher scores on Michigan English Placement Test than students not enrolled.

2.4.3 Level of Significance

A mid-value level of significance, $p=.05$, was used.

2.4.4 Region of Rejection

A one-tailed region of rejection was used. $df=(n_1+n_2-2)=126$. The critical value for t is 1.35.

2.4.5 Statistical Test

The difference in performance means between the two groups can be observed by simply examining the means, but by doing so, it is possible to confuse differences in the samples with differences in performance. To accurately assess group differences, the differences must be placed "in a sampling distribution of such differences" (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991, p. 258). The proper statistical test to find this distribution is the independent t-test, which is basically the difference between means divided by the standard error of the difference between means. Therefore, the dependent variable was analyzed by the t-test for independent sample means.

2.4.6 Assumptions

It was assumed that the Michigan English Placement Test was a valid, reliable, and accurate predictor of general English achievement (Hatch & Lazaraton, 1991, p. 530). The test measures specific areas of English that do not cover all English skills (Olshtain et al., 1990, p. 26), but it was assumed that study done in class was significantly reflected in the achievement scores on the test. It was also assumed that the students who received treatment were similar in English aptitude to the control group and that both groups were representative of the general population of English students at the institution.

Limitations

Generalization of the results of this study are limited to the English majors at the institution. Another limitation is the possibility of a Type II error. A higher level of achievement actually existed, but it was not statistically detected because the size of sample was too small, the probability setting was too stringent, or there was too much variance between the populations (Grizzle & Rankin, 1996, p. 50).

3. Results

At the end of the first semester, all the students at this college were given the Form B Michigan Placement test of English to measure their achievement. The English proficiency scores were analyzed by computer. For comparison purposes, a stratified random sample control group was established on the basis of scores and class groupings in the Michigan Form A pretest, given in April. The scores of the experimental and control groups were then compared and can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 Comparison of Sample Scores on Michigan English Placement Test

groups:	Experimental	Control
<u>n</u>	32	96
mean	47.2	44.7
maximum	32	28
minimum	66	68
standard dev.	8.57	9.23

Note. This data was collected from the Form B Michigan English Placement Test administered in July.

Test results for the two groups were then statistically analyzed by an independent one-tailed t-test with a 0.05 region of rejection. Equal variance was assumed. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Independent T-Test of Experimental and Control Group Means

	N	MEAN	STDEV	SE MEAN
test	32	47.22	8.57	1.5
control	96	44.72	9.23	0.94
	T= 1.35	P=0.18	DF=126	

Since the resulting probability result of 0.18 was greater than the region of

rejection, $p = 0.05$, the null hypothesis failed to be rejected.

4. Discussion

All the students who signed up for the semester abroad program had said they were motivated to study English before going. They had one semester to put this claim into action. Likewise the program planners urged them to study harder as well, especially since this was one of their purposes for making the program. Yet, the students who had enrolled in the study abroad program did not show higher rates of achievement in the semester before departure than students who had not enrolled. This throws the secondary purpose of many Japanese study abroad programs, to motivate the students to study English, into question.

It cannot be determined whether the students enrolled in the programs did not show higher levels of achievement because they did not study any harder than the other students, or because they did, but were hampered in learning. Assuming they did study harder as they said they would in the questionnaires, then their lack of gains might reflect recent discoveries about the brain: that learning is heavily affected by immediate felt needs, including language needs, rather than predicted needs.

The brain evolved as a tool for survival, and so, it is choosy when it comes to the information it decides to keep. It usually passes over things it has little immediate need for. Often, especially in EFL contexts, we approach language learning as a kind of educational banking. We prepare learners for needs we expect them to have someday with little consideration of how hard and shallow that kind of learning will be. Expecting our students to learn a language and wait for a chance to use it is just as frivolous as expecting someone to buy a train ticket and wait for a reason to go to that destination. (Kelly & Sandy, 2008, p. 27)

Problems with generalizing from the results comes from three possible sources of error. On one hand, the sample was extremely small, only thirty-two students. This small size decreases the reliability of the statistical test, since t-tests are based on distribution means (Isaac & Michael, 1995). Another possible source of error might be the use of a standardized English tests to measure achievement, since some studies show these measures to be faulty (Wigzell & Al-Ansari, 1993). Finally, the existence of poor study habits in students of weaker aptitude (Olshtain,

Shohamy, Kemp, & Chatow, 1990), might have hidden the fact that the enrollees actually did study harder, even though their achievement test scores showed no increases. Therefore, this study should be viewed as only exploratory, not definitive.

5. Conclusions

Despite self-assessments in which students enrolled the study abroad program claimed they were highly motivated to study English, they showed no significant increase in achievement over the students not enrolled. Therefore, it can be concluded that at least one possible objective, to induce students to study harder, is not being met. The common assumption that students given the opportunity to go abroad will study English harder is not supported.

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