

How Do Students Perceive Their Listening Skills Through a Three-Week Study Abroad Program

Yukiko Yasuda

Introduction and Background

For many young adults, going abroad and learning about different cultures can be a life-changing experience. Also learning a foreign language is best done in an immersion setting. Recently, most higher education institutions in Japan offer their students opportunities to study abroad. However, the number of Japanese students going abroad to study is declining, especially in long-term programs in favor of shorter-term programs of a month or less (Harris, 2010). It is assumed that tuition for schools and the need for university students to stay in Japan for job-hunting are the main reasons for this decrease. For those reasons, short-term study abroad is becoming more preferable. Morita (2010) pointed out that it is popular amongst universities as well as the students because they can take a lot more students compared with long-term study abroad, and as for students, they are not required to have high language proficiency.

Short-term study abroad programs are usually conducted during school

holidays, and at least 350 out of 600 or so Japanese higher education institutions send their students to English speaking countries; Australia, Britain, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, or the United States on a regular basis in July – August or February – March (Blanche, 2002). Some programs are incorporated into a university degree, and others are voluntary. Regardless of what kind of study abroad, the experience significantly influences students' lives. As Pigott (2011) describes, from the students' point of view, study abroad gives a life-changing experience first, and an opportunity to improve language skills comes second.

There is an ample amount of research on positive outcomes of short-term study abroad. Some studies identified increased motivation and improvement in attitude towards learning the language (Bodycott & Crew, 2000; Geis & Fukushima, 1997), and students gained self-efficacy and confidence by living in an English speaking country and learning intensively from native speakers (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). Increasing motivation is very important to learn a second language. The learners' motives for studying the target language plays powerful roles in how they engage in language learning (Allen, 2009), and most importantly, the key to success is upon the attitude and motivation of the individuals (Ellis, 1994).

On the other hand, while studying abroad for four to six months has better and more visible results in improving the language, there are no clear results in shorter-term programs (Jackson, 2010). He also mentioned that students with 400 or less TOEIC score mostly had a hard time and gained little in studying abroad. Although Davidson (2007) stated that students are unlikely to see the development of linguistic and cultural proficiency in six weeks or less, Morita (2010) found that there were remarkable changes in language learning strategies that students used in a two week study abroad program. Kuno (2010) studied students' improvements of various lan-

guges skills in a three-week study abroad. He found that there was no significant improvement in vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension, on the other hand, there was a slight improvement in listening to and understanding short utterances.

Purpose of Study

This study attempts to answer the following two questions:

- 1) Does the three-week study abroad affect the listening skill of students with limited English language proficiency?
- 2) How does students' perception of their listening skill relate to the score?

The Study Abroad Program

Any student at Kobe Gakuin University are eligible to apply for the three-week study abroad program at the University of Adelaide, Australia in February – March. However, the maximum number of participants is 24. Applicants are to have a short interview with a chaperon and the members are chosen in October. The students have orientation sessions about twice a month until the departure, which include a description of the program, the formalities and filling in the paperwork for going to Australia, payment, and English lessons.

The students live in a homestay setting and attend the language school at the University of Adelaide for three weeks. The class hours are from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p. m., Monday through Friday. The English Language Center (ELC) at the University of Adelaide offers a few different kinds of programs in accordance with the students' purpose and the length of their study. In the program of four weeks or more at ELC, students are mixed with stu-

dents from other countries. Since our program is three weeks long, the classes are homogeneous, and the students are divided into two groups of twelve by their placement test score. The classes are conducted only in English and taught by experienced native teachers. Not only do they study English in class, but also they visit museums, the local chocolate factory, and the market as a part of class components. As a highlight of this program, students go on a three-day and two-night trip to Kangaroo Island accompanied by a chaperon and two Australian guides. The ELC has an “English Only Policy,” therefore the students are constantly encouraged to speak only in English, and no other Japanese student lives with the same home-stay family.

The 2010 Academic Year’s three-week study abroad program commenced on February 11th and returned to Japan on March 6th. 24 students participated and a chaperon (author) accompanied them the entire period. The students were supposed to take an online placement test provided by ELC before leaving for Australia. However, due to a technical problem, they did not have the opportunity this year.

On the first day of school, the students were divided into two groups at random and worked on some tasks in English. According to the director of the teaching department, there was no significant difference in proficiency among them, and they decided to carry on the program with those two groups. Each class had two teachers and each of them taught the class depending on the day of the week. A total of four teachers took care of the Kobe Gakuin University students for three weeks.

Participants

24 participants, 15 male students and nine female students, were from four different departments (Law: 11, Business Administration: two, Hu-

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manities: eight, and Rehabilitation: three). Nine of them were first year students, 12 were second year students, and three were third year students. Only two students had been to an English speaking country before the program. All of them had relatively limited English proficiency. The participants were chosen by a short interview with the chaperon in the mid-October and they had a meeting twice a month in the total of six sessions including two survival English lessons by the chaperon.

Questionnaires written in Japanese were distributed to the participants at one of the orientation sessions in November. The result of the survey described their original reasons for applying for this program (Table 1) and worries/concerns about studying abroad (Table 2). The students could choose one main reason for question 1 and could choose 1 or 2 in question 2.

Table 1. *Q1: What is the reason for participating in this program?*

Reasons	Number
1. To gain the new experience of going abroad while attending university	7
2. To improve one's English	6
3. To gain a useful experience to apply to job-hunting and work	3
4. Was encouraged by friends or senior students who have been abroad	8
5. Other	0

Table 2. *Q2: What are the current worries/concerns about studying abroad?*

Worries/Concerns	Number
1. To go abroad for the first time	3
2. To have limited English skills	20
3. To live in a homestay setting by myself	9
4. To get on well with other members	3
5. Other	2

The students' reasons for participating in this program vary and only 25% of them mainly focused on improving their English. Most of the students were aware of their limited English proficiency and it was their main concern before going to Australia. Upon their return, the students were asked how they feel about English. All of the students had a positive opinion after the three weeks: 48% of them said that they like English more than before and 30% of them said that they did not like English much before the program, but they like it now. 22% of them hated English, but they do not dislike it now. Overall, the students came back with a positive attitude.

Methodology and Materials

In order to see how the participants' listening skill changes over time, the listening test was conducted three times with 30 questions each; a few days before the departure, at the end of the program in Australia, and two months after coming back from Australia. The students' scores were measured by Listening Part two "Questions and Responses" of TOEIC. The material was extracted from a published TOEIC preparation workbook. Section two of TOEIC assesses the examinee's ability to listen to a prompt and choose the appropriate response, and it also has high frequency of idioms in the utterances (Gilfert, 1996). Since the students study English mainly for communication purpose rather than academic at ELC and live with a homestay family, it was assumed that they would encounter plenty of "question – answer" situations.

The participants took the first test three days before leaving for Australia. The second test was held two days before coming back to Japan following two questions about their perception on the first and second test results:

Q1) How did you do compared to the previous test and

Q2) (with Q1) Why did you assume so?

After finishing the questionnaire, they had a brief discussion on why the listening was difficult for them. The third test was held two months after coming back from Australia with the same questions followed by.

Results and Discussion

There were 30 questions in each test. Table 3 shows the slight change in average points between the first and second test and there is a noticeable drop in the minimum score for the second test.

Table 3.

Test	Ave.	Max.	Min.
1st test	12.04	17	8
2nd test	13.16	18	5
3rd test	12.86	17	9

The students were asked to describe why listening in general is difficult for them after the second test. They noted that the speed of utterances and their lack of vocabulary are the two main reasons for difficulty in listening. As mentioned before, Part II in TOEIC frequently uses idioms. Since most of the students had limited vocabulary, it was difficult to understand the meaning of the sentence. In one student's opinion, she said that it was easier to capture the meaning when the sentence started with 'Wh-' questions, but she had a hard time to do the same when sentence started with 'Did' or other question forms. Therefore, students need to familiarize themselves and practice with a wider variety of question answer structures rather than only focusing on 'Wh-' questions in order to get a higher score in the section.

The majority of them felt that the speed of utterances in the listening test was too fast to comprehend. A student said by the time the sentence had already finished he was still trying to understand the first few words and could not quite catch the whole sentence. Another student said that he had difficulty in listening to linkage of sounds in English. Overall, the students' listening skill was quite limited and even though there was a slight gain in their average scores between pre-departure and during their three weeks in Australia, the individual student's scores showed a different result.

Table 4 shows the summary of the individual students' scores and their perceptions on how well they performed on the tests. The students were asked to surmise their test results after taking the second test to see if there was a change in their listening skill before and after attending the study abroad program. They were asked to do the same again after taking the third test to see how it changed after returning to Japan.

For the first survey (between first and second test), eight students assumed that their score was higher than the first test, and only three students (S1, 2, and 24) actually scored one to two points higher. They noted that they could listen and understand words better than the first test. Five other students had similar descriptions on their assumption, but they did not score higher than the first test as they expected. Student 5 scored one point lower than the first test. He thought that his listening was better because he talked a lot with his host family. Even though it was not evident in their scores, having communication with native speakers gave the students confidence in their performance.

On the other hand, 14 students thought that their score did not change much. However, there is an interesting result in this group. Most of the students performed better than the first test. Only two students scored slightly lower. Some students gained three to seven points higher (S13, 14,

15,17, and 18). However, they did not feel that their listening skill improved over the three weeks. Some said that it was easier to listen to English than the first test, but could not answer confidently. Student 9 scored two points higher, but he did not see much of a change, and his assumption was attributed to his lack of communication with his host family. Some students in this group thought that they became somewhat used to English sounds and could listen better, but still had difficulty in understanding the whole meaning of the sentences and choosing a correct response to the questions. Student 16 assumed that she scored lower, but she scored three points higher than the first test. She said that she could not understand the questions.

The second survey was conducted two months after the students returned to Japan. In this survey, only two students assumed that they scored higher with the feeling of that they could listen better than before. However, both of them scored lower than the second test. Fourteen students supposed that there was no significant change in their listening. Unlike the previous survey, half of the group scored lower by one to seven points. Some students said that they did not do so well on the third test and did not see any changes compared to two months ago. Student 3 has started working on TOEIC preparation on her own since she came back from Australia, and she found that her scores were not stable. So she assumed that there was no noticeable change in her proficiency yet. Student 7 scored seven points lower than the second test and he regretted that he always hung out with his Japanese friends and did not try hard to use English as much as possible.

On the other hand, three students (S2, 4, and 19) scored higher than their assumption. However they felt that there was no change in their skills because they did not continue studying English after they came back to

Table 4.

Students	Students' Test Scores and Perceptions		
	1st	2nd	3rd
S1	8 Higher: I could understand words better than the 1st test.	10(+2)	Lower: After coming back to Japan. I didn't listen to English. 12(+2)
S2	12 Higher: I could understand words better than the 1st test.	13(+1)	Not Changed: I didn't keep studying after coming back. 14(+1)
S3	17 Higher: I could listen to the sentence but was not sure which answer was correct.	17(±0)	Not Changed: I don't feel that my ability is stable. 17(±0)
S4	14 Higher: I could understand better than the 1st test.	5(-9)	Not Changed: I feel that my proficiency is going down after I came back. 13(+8)
S5	8 Higher: I talked a lot with my host family.	7(-1)	Not Changed: I couldn't catch up with the speed this time. 12(+5)
S6	16 Higher: I could understand pronunciation better than the 1st test.	14(-2)	Lower: I was used to listening to English when I was in Australia. 14(±0)
S7	14 Higher: I could focus on listening in the 2nd test.	14(±0)	Not Changed: No specific reasons. 11(-3)
S8	12 Not Changed: I didn't see any changes in listening skill.	13(+1)	Not Changed: No specific reasons. 15(+2)
S9	14 Not Changed: I didn't talk much with my host family.	16(+2)	Not Changed: I always hung out with my Japanese friends and didn't use English much. 9(-7)
S10	18 Not Changed: I couldn't concentrate on the test.	16(-2)	Not Changed: I couldn't concentrate on the test. 17(+1)
S11	12 Not Changed: I didn't do well compared to the 1st test.	13(+1)	Lower: I thought it was more challenging than the 2nd test. 9(-4)
S12	12 Not Changed: There were some questions I couldn't answer.	11(-1)	Lower: I haven't studied English since I came back from Australia. 14(+3)

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	1st		2nd		3rd
S13	10	Not Changed: I couldn't understand much.	16(+6)	Not Changed: I didn't feel that I did well.	15(-1)
S14	10	Not Changed: There were few questions I could answer confidently.	15(+5)	Not Changed: I feel the same as 2 months ago.	10(-5)
S15	10	Not Changed: I didn't understand the meaning of the sentences.	13(+3)	Lower: I don't take English classes and haven't studied since I came back.	12(-2)
S16	10	Lower: I wasn't sure of the questions.	13(+3)	Higher: I felt I could listen better than the 2nd test.	10(-3)
S17	10	Not Changed: I couldn't catch the questions.	17(+7)	Not Changed: I couldn't understand much.	15(-2)
S18	11	Not Changed: I could listen better but didn't understand the meaning.	15(+4)	Higher: I could listen more easily than the 2nd test.	11(-4)
S19	9	Not Changed: I was easier to listen than the 1st test but couldn't choose the answer.	11(+2)	Not changed: I haven't used English much since I came back.	15(+4)
S20	16	Not Changed: I forgot the question as I listen to English.	18(+2)	Not Changed: No specific reasons	15(-3)
S21	8	Not Changed: I didn't see any progress from the 1st test.	9(+1)	Lower: I haven't listened to English much since I came back.	11(+2)
S22	13	Not Changed: I could listen more easily than before but I still have a hard time	14(+1)	Lower: I haven't studied English since I came back.	12(-2)
S23	NA	I didn't take the 1t test.	12	Not Changed: I don't see any change in proficiency.	13(+1)
S24	13	Higher: I could listen to the first question words better than the 1st test.	14(+1)	NA	NA

Japan. Similar reasoning applies to the students who expected their score to be lower in the third test. There was only one student in this group in the previous survey, but there were seven students in the second survey. Most of the students in this group found the reason was their lack of studying after coming back to Japan, and half of them scored lower as they expected. In fact, only seven students could enroll in one or two English classes in the new academic year, and unfortunately some students tried but could not be registered for English classes due to the limitation of the students' number in class. Therefore, some of them did not continue studying English for two months.

Conclusion

This study explored the effect of a three-week study abroad program on the listening of students with limited English proficiency and the relationship between their perception in listening and the test scores. The result of the study showed that there was no significant correlation between students' perception in their listening skill and the test scores found in this study. As Jackson (2010) and Davidson (2007) mentioned, there was a difficulty in finding a significant linguistic difference in short-term study abroad, especially when students have limited proficiency in English. However, one positive finding in this study was that students, even when their proficiency is limited, can be motivated and possibly gain confidence in their performance when they have a lot of opportunities to communicate with native speakers in an immersion setting.

In addition to that, it is important for the administrators and educators to offer students opportunities to continue studying after they return to Japan since they come home with high self-esteem and motivation to study English. Since some students slightly improved in listening and most stu-

dents came back with high self-efficacy and motivation to learn, as Yoshimura and Nakayama (2010) suggested, there needs to be a follow-up program to provide students a way to persevere with their learning. Even though significant changes in test scores could not be seen, all of the students changed their attitude towards learning English to a positive one. Therefore, it can be concluded that this study abroad program left a blueprint to create a newer, more successful, and more organized program in order to increase the number of students who come back from studying abroad, preserve their motivation, and continue studying English at the university in the future.

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