The Short-term Study-abroad Program, centering on student motivation and self-efficacy beliefs

James C. House
The Short-term Study-abroad Program, centering on student motivation and self-efficacy beliefs

James C. House

Abstract

This paper attempts to begin answering the question: How effective are short-term study abroad programs in raising the motivation level of Japanese university students to study English?

The research project was limited to students who attended the Cambridge summer program 2008 held under the auspices of the Meiji University Center for International Programs. Pembroke College Office of International Programs managed the program and the students were accommodated at Hughes Hall.

This program differs from the present three other programs offered by Meiji U during the summer (York U and McMaster U in Canada and Sheffield U in the UK) in that it focuses on content, rather than on purely English language learning. However, students do receive 3 hours of English language training to support their studies each day.

This research project used qualitative research methods in the form of interviews to assess the effectiveness of the program in raising motivation levels and in identifying areas for further research.

Methodology

The methodology for the 2008 students was based on qualitative research methods rather than the questionnaire approach. Students were interviewed extensively on their first day at Pembroke College, Cambridge. A native speaker of English, with another native speaker in support, interviewed each student for 5 minutes. A third native speaker observed the session, which lasted for over three hours. The entire session was recorded.

James C. House : School of Information & Communication, Meiji University
On the last day of the course all of the students were again interviewed and recorded. This time the allowance given for interviews was 3 minutes because of time restraints. The same native speaker interviewed the students and another native speaker again observed the interviews.

The purpose of the first interview was to ascertain the level of motivation of the students at the start of the course and the purpose of the second interview was to discover if this level of motivation had risen or diminished.

The first interview contained ice-breaking questions and closing remarks to make the interviewee feel at ease. In the final interview these sections were substantially reduced because it was felt the interviewees were more relaxed after 4 weeks in an English-speaking environment and after having been through the experience before with the same interviewer.

The interview questions were constructed after consultation with teachers on the program and with a Japanese teacher of English who was at Cambridge and who had extensive experience teaching Japanese university students. The questions were tested to make sure they were understandable to the average student. Repetitions and re-phrasing were allowed.

The recordings and the transcriptions made from the interviews gave indications as to the nervous state of the students at the interviews and also to their relative comprehension abilities.

This paper will concern itself with the second interview only. The first interview will form the center of a paper to follow.

The 2nd Interview

The questions for the 2nd interview were as follows:
1. Do you like English more now than before you started the course?
2. Has your English improved over the 4 weeks of the program?
3. What are the reasons for improvement or non-improvement?
4. Would you like to live, study or work abroad in the future? If so, where and doing what and if not why not?
5. Has this course changed you in any way?
6. What is the difference between studying here in Cambridge and in Japan?
The Short-term Study-abroad Program, centering on student motivation and self-efficacy beliefs

The above questions were arrived at after extensive discussions with the class English teachers (Tiffany Greene and James Sharp), the RA (Samantha Bennett) and Japanese university lecturer in English (Michiko Miyoshi). MM also tested the questions for understandability for average Japanese students.

The questions were asked in the above order but the interviewer was given the right to alter the phrasing of the questions in order to make them more comprehensible to the student. The interviewer was also allowed to break up long questions into their composite parts for the same reason. She was also allowed to interject reassurances to make the interviewee feel more at ease. This degree of latitude meant that the above six questions were extended or some times compacted according to the needs of the student. There were also times when this latitude enabled the interviewer to lead or prompt the student into certain responses or sometimes to override the student under time pressures or answer the question for the student. This is a danger of the dimensional method of research but as long as we are aware of it we can recognize when and where these negative effects on the research occur.

Rationale behind question 1
The purpose of the first question was to discover whether in the subjective view of the participant s/he felt that s/he was more favorable towards English or not. Personal or affective views of a subject can fundamentally affect a student’s attitude to study. This positive or negative attitude influences the efficiency of the student’s approach to studying; it will affect the amount of study that a student spends on the subject, the amount and quality of contribution to class and the quality of consideration given to project/essay work and, in the case of language, how far the student is willing to interact with others in the target language. Therefore this question was key to allowing us to understand whether motivation towards the target language had improved or not.

Reaction to question 1
Although this question is very simply stated and may seem to beg the answer “yes” in fact students were quite thoughtful in answering it as illustrated by answers such as “More, much more” or conversely “Maybe more” or “I think, more.” Some 13 respondents simply repeated the word “more” but even among these there were students who said “More!” in an emphatic and enthusiastic way or repeated the word “More, more” that suggests they were not simply taking the cue from the questioner but were making the answer their own.

Statistics
36 of the 38 interviewees answered with varying degrees of certainty that they
liked English more after the course than before. 2 answered that they were not sure but even these were more disposed to answering positively with “Maybe more” or “I think, more.” One student answered “Little bit more” which was taken as a positive but is marginally so.

**Rationale behind question 2**

This question leads on from question 1 because if we assume increased motivation leads to an increase in ability in the language then the answer to this question should reveal whether this hypothesis works. In fact, results cast some doubt over this hypothesis. Motivation may have an effect on language acquisition but it may not have an effect in proportion to the positive expression stated in the previous question. Other factors may have equal or greater importance.

**Reaction to question 2**

The reaction to this question was more guarded than to question 1. There may be a number of reasons for this. Students may have felt that it was not their place to make judgments on their progress in learning the language or they may have thought that a subjective judgment was not sufficient for the purposes of the interview or they may simply not have thought about this before and could not frame a quick answer to the question. Typically respondents used the formula answers “I think so” or “I guess so” or “I hope so” that indicates uncertainty, a lack of confidence and/or a desire to have their modest hopes of improvement affirmed. Only 13 students had a definite unconditional positive answer to this question.

**Statistics**

24 of the 38 interviewees answered positively to this question, 12 were unsure and 2 were negative. In reality, as has been mentioned earlier it is very difficult to be able to register any discernible objective improvement in language ability in such a short time. Although there is a possibility that this can occur. What the statistics reveal is that students who may have enjoyed the month in Cambridge can still be less convinced about their actual improvement. Even a student who admitted to improving his English added, “it didn’t improve as I expected.” Others elaborated, “my everyday conversation is improving now” and “A little, but maybe grammar’s down.” One student answered seemingly negatively “I think my English is getting worse because...there is many things, more and more things I want to say and I can’t say that now.” In fact the student is articulating the frustration students of language feel when they have reached a new level in their language ability and are trying to come to terms with the dissatisfaction of not succeeding at that new level.
Rationale behind question 3
We could predict that just asking students if their language ability has improved could lead to a self-effacing reply or a vague response. We wanted to ask the question "why" to get the student to think of concrete supporting evidence for his/her answer. In this way we hoped to find out whether the initial answer would actually be reinforced anecdotally or not. This would enable us to validate the response to the previous question. We also wanted to know what kind of experiences in or out of the classroom affect students' learning—some events or factors that stand out when the student is challenged to find an answer under the pressure of an interview. Such factors could have important effects on motivation.

Reaction to question 3
Students said they noticed an improvement in their English ability largely because they had spoken with their T.A.s and their teachers every day in English or with their friends or other people outside of the program. The practice of the act of speaking English seemed to loom large in most students' explanation of their increased ability. Others said they could express themselves, could convey their feelings and could simply speak more than they could before. One student referred to her initial interview on her first day in Cambridge when she could hardly say a word to the interviewer but pointed out that in the second interview she could speak out. Other students referred to the fact that they now enjoyed speaking or could now say more things in different ways than they could before. Others referred to an improvement in listening comprehension. One student noted that when she first arrived it sounded like her instructors were just saying "banana, banana." She could not connect meaning to the sounds but now she could follow what was being said. Another said she could understand questions better and could respond more quickly. Others talked about a lessening of tension or worry when speaking English, that they could relax as a result of the month long intensive course. There were two negative comments. One student admitted to mostly speaking Japanese with his classmates. This particular student is known to the researcher, who has assessed him as being an upper intermediate level student. It is curious that he felt the need to speak Japanese. One reason could be the peer pressure of his male classmates with whom he formed a group. Another student said that he wanted to learn pronunciation and this was not taught on the course. Lastly, two students mentioned that they had been praised by British people for their good English and this made them believe their skills had improved.

Statistics
8 students clearly stated that it was the interaction with their T.A.s and teachers in the classroom on a daily basis that led to improvement. 3 students pointed to the
fact that they now actively enjoy speaking English. 4 students said that they could
now express themselves better than before. 5 students said it was the constant
practice of speaking English everyday that led to improvement. 1 student said
that she was actively trying to speak more. 6 students mentioned that their
listening comprehension had improved. 1 student said that she could say things in
more ways than before. 1 student said that she could answer more quickly than
before because both her listening and her speaking had improved. 2 students said
that they had been praised for their English ability by people who were not on the
program. 1 student said that because he spoke mainly Japanese on the course his
English did not improve. 1 student criticized the program for not providing
pronunciation practice. The variety of responses to this question seems to suggest
that students had given some thought to the reasons for their improvement and
although we cannot measure their improvement we can say that all of the proffered
reasons could be considered valid reasons for improvement or lack thereof.

Rationale behind question 4
This question was deemed relevant because we wanted to know if the students had
any external motivation for learning English. Clearly living, studying or working
abroad as future goals would provide external motivation for studying English and
coming on this program.

Reaction to question 4
A large percentage of the students indicated they wanted to go abroad again,
mostly for study. A smaller percentage wanted to work abroad and about the same
number was unwilling or unable to go abroad for study, work or living again. This
would suggest a need among the students for English in academic settings, which
this program was specifically set up to provide.

Statistics
26 students said they wanted to go abroad again for living, work or study. 5 said
they were not able to go abroad again or were unwilling to do so. 7 said they
were unsure. 11 said they wanted to go to the United States. 9 mentioned the
UK. 7 said they wanted to come back to Cambridge. 1 said “all countries.” 1
mentioned Asia and/or Europe. 1 mentioned “English speaking countries.” 1
cited Canada, 1 Australia and 1 New Zealand. 1 specifically said he wanted to
live in New York City.

16 students said they wanted to go abroad to study. 1 student specified an MBA
program. 6 students said they wanted to work abroad. 1 student specified
“commerce” and another “management consultant” or “stock trader.” 1 simply
wanted to go abroad for leisure. 4 students said they wanted to live abroad and 1
said that he wanted to live abroad when he was old.

**Rationale behind question 5**
This question attempts to get the students to think about whether this program has had any effect on them as students and individuals. We wanted to know whether or not they would indicate that this program had led them to be more positive language learners.

**Reaction to question 5**
The reaction to question five was very largely positive. Nearly all the interviewees noticed a change in themselves. These changes were brought about through interactions with their friends on the course, or with other people they met, or by their T.A.s or by their experiences.

The majority of students mentioned the improvement in their English ability as in “I can speak English in daily life” or “Before I came here I had no confidence in my English skill” or “I realize the importance of conversation. I realize I like talking.” Others commented on a wider change to do with their perspective on life. With comments such as “[I] can do things by myself” or “friends and TA’s changed me after talking about love and life.” Clearly a large minority of the students felt that the change they experienced while on this program was more than just linguistic or even cultural. Other students did talk about their deepening of cultural awareness while on the program with such comments as “I experienced a lot in the UK [that] I never experienced before” or “I never thought I wanted to live abroad; now I do” or “I can understand English culture” or “I accepted British culture and food.” A number of students pointed out that they now felt a lot more positive about English with “Maybe I’m more aggressive because I have to express my ideas more clearly” or “I’ve got more active and positive” or “I have become more positive.”

From these responses it appears that students by and large found the experience valuable in the sense of increasing their ability to express themselves in English or increasing their confidence in expressing themselves. They felt that they had contacted real culture and had learned something about British culture and the British people. There was also a feeling that the experience was life-changing for them personally in that they became more open minded and had learned something about themselves.

**Statistics**
Those students who indicated that the program had improved their English ability numbered 8. 10 students believed that their lives had changed or that they had
become more open-minded because of the program. Six students expressed the view that they had become more positive or confident as a result of their stay in Cambridge. A further 6 students said that they had had new experiences or touched real culture or wanted now to live abroad. 32 students answered, “yes” to the question and 4 students answered “no.” Others were ambivalent.

Rationale behind question 6
It is hoped that this question will discover if the students noticed a change in their way of studying or if they noticed how the change in environment (cultural and/or physical) had an effect on how they were studying. One of the traditional justifications of these study abroad program is that by taking the students to an English-speaking country they will improve their skills and attitudes under a different system of education and in a non-L1 environment. This question was to test this assumption. The question itself had to be broad enough so as not to give students hints as to a “model answer” and to allow them to make their own assumptions about what the question might be leading to.

Reaction to question 6
The overwhelming reaction to this question was that students noticed differences in studying in Cambridge from Japan. Nearly half the respondents referred to the different learning styles in the two systems. In Japan students remarked that the classes are very teacher-centered with the lecturer speaking to the students for the class and students not being able or expected to engage in debate with the teacher or other students. In Cambridge on the other hand students said that they were expected to engage in discussion with their lecturer and to exchange views with other students. The students who made these observations were in favor of the Cambridge system rather than the Meiji system even though some remarked that it was very tough for them. This may be because of the limitations of the language ability of the students or because the system was new and challenged them in ways that they had not been challenged before. Some students referred to the difficulty of having to think for oneself or think on one’s feet that is typical of the system at Cambridge. One typical example is “In Japan students don’t say, I have a question.”

A significant number of students felt that the Cambridge system made them think more deeply and for themselves. Others believe that the system in Cambridge requires students to study more aggressively rather than passively listening to the teacher as in Japan. “In England I should be more active in class, speaking and discussing with other people. But in Japan I [am] always passive in class” was a typical response.

Another sizeable minority of the respondents referred to the fact that they were
required or had the chance to speak in English in class and outside. One student commented thus "In Cambridge there are many chances to communicate with many people, speaking English, but in Japan there are no chances to speak much English." Several cited the environment as being more conducive to study. The ease of getting to class, the convenience of living in dormitories (colleges), the high level of education, and the international atmosphere were reasons given for the pleasure of studying in Cambridge. There were some other opinions that cannot be easily classified. One respondent like the TAs, another said the teachers were mainly from the UK and that English teachers (native speakers of English) in Japan are largely from the US. A further view was that a one-month program is not like studying on a regular course, another said that the system is better than Japan, yet another commented that there was a small difference but it was not important, and another respondent said that he/she could study with better students here in Cambridge than in Japan.

Statistics
Of the 37 students questioned 14 stated that the difference lay in the discussion/debate style of classes at Cambridge as opposed to the lecture style in Meiji. 6 students felt that they had to think more deeply for themselves and/or be more aggressive in class at Cambridge. 8 students rated the difference as being one of language and that they had to, or were given the chance to, speak in English and write in English constantly. 3 students pointed to the environment as being an important difference, referring to the ease of getting to class, living in college and the international atmosphere of the city. 6 students had assorted views, 3 of which were positive comments on the program and 3 of which were neutral.

Discussion
“Affective strategies involve emotions, motivation, [and] attitudes which learners can employ to relieve anxiety, self encourage etc. to promote learning positively. Social strategies include actions which language learners use to interact with other learners or native speakers.” (Wikipedia EFL)

It could be said that a trip to the UK for Japanese students to study at Cambridge is an affective strategy “to promote learning positively.” In the above definition motivation is one of a list of affective strategies and although my interviews were structured to center on motivation the answers by students suggest that there was a lot of overlap into the other strategies. The other problem with this definition is that it talks about learners “employing strategies” whereas in the case of the Meiji students the act of studying abroad for a month may have been less focused than that. Indeed, from the responses to the interviews one could postulate that their motives were rather unclear. There was certainly a desire to increase language
skills but with that a sense of going on an adventure (most students had not been abroad before) or a vacation. This is not to suggest that their motives were invalid and it could be stated that their motivation was both integrative and instrumental.

"Subtext 14: [a] The intimate relationships between attitudes and motivation... suggest that the royal path to alerting the individual's motivation is through attitude change. [b] More specifically, increases in attitude towards the second language community and second language course should have a definite impact on the individual's motivation and persistence through the elaboration of inter-ethnic contact programs such as bi-cultural excursions and exchanges." (Clement et al 1978)

Clement is clearly suggesting that the programs such as the Cambridge program have an impact on the student's attitude to learning and this suggests a beneficial impact. This impact has been noticed at the anecdotal level by feedback from teachers in charge of courses at Meiji U on the regular program who state that there is a noticeable improvement in attitude from students returning from such programs. This improvement amongst some students may however be modified by other students who may suffer negative impacts from such programs, although in the case of this study those students would amount to under 10% of the total students interviewed (See analysis above).

"[d] An implication of these results is that programs emphasizing cultural appreciation as opposed to exclusively linguistic outcomes should have a beneficial effect on persistence in second language study." (P694) (Clement et al 1978)

This point is particularly relevant to the Cambridge program in which students take courses in British Society, Art and Architecture, and Science as the core of the program. The language classes are there to support the specialist lectures as well as to improve students' overall competence in the language. Assessing the persistence factor would involve more follow-up research on students who have taken this program in previous years and those who will take it in following years.

**Conclusion**
Tentative analysis of the results seems to reveal an increase in motivation amongst most students and a deeper awareness of their actual ability levels in the 4 macro-skills. Many students mentioned that the experience at Cambridge made them aware of how much more they needed to learn and to do in order to improve their linguistic level.
Some students mentioned that they did not feel their English had improved over the 4 weeks, which is probably a fairly objective assessment. Little actual progress in language learning can be expected over such a short period.

There were comments from students that they were disappointed that their fellow students were speaking too much Japanese during the program. Apart from signaling a need for further research concerning the use of the L1, these observations reveal a seriousness of purpose among certain students that is highly commendable and needs to be supported.

Follow-up research after the students returned to Japan was undertaken. This included questionnaires and interviews. The interviews were recorded on camera as well as on sound and will form a valuable resource for further research. Students were also lent ipods on which their voices and images were recorded so that they could objectively view their own contribution to the research and respond directly to the researcher. This interaction will have significant ramifications for this and future research.

Students from 2007 were contacted and asked to contribute to the research through questionnaires and interviews and their responses will be added to the research as a longer term view of the value of short term study abroad programs and their effect on motivation in language learning.

Only tentative conclusions can be drawn from the present research that has been based solely on the second interview. The next phase will concentrate on the first interview and a comparison between the two interviews that it is hoped will reveal more for better and more effective analysis of this and similar programs.

**Appreciation**

I would like to thank Meiji University for giving me this special research year leave and for the generous funding that made this research possible. Further I would like to thank Dr Alan Dawson, the Director of International Programs at Pembroke College Cambridge for his unstinting support for this research and his many kindesses to me. I am indebted to Pembroke College for making me “Official Visitor” (特別研究委員) for the academic years 2008 and 2009. Also I would be remiss in not expressing my gratitude to the President of Hughes Hall, Sarah Squire, for her kindness to, and understanding of, our students in 2007 and 2008. I had many stimulating conversations with her, the Senior Tutor and many others at the college, which no doubt contributed much to my research and my understanding. I want to take this opportunity to dedicate this small project to Professor Peter Richards, past President of Hughes Hall whose great humanity,
intelligence and playful humor inspired me to re-connect with the University of Cambridge after many years and discover the fruits of so doing.

References


