

Original Research

The effects of a short-term study abroad program on metacognitive listening strategies

— A case study at Aino University —

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Abstract

In an attempt to evaluate the effects of a short-term study abroad program, the present study examines the results of the listening section of TOEIC practice tests and questionnaires regarding listening strategies the participants employed before and after the program. The results indicated that the scores of the listening section of TOEIC practice tests did not show any significant change after the program; however, the results of a metacognitive listening strategies analysis showed a significant change in one out of five categories, namely not using mental translation. These findings suggest that listening proficiency of learners, especially beginners, might not be easily enhanced by short-term exposure to the language; however, there is a possibility that their listening strategies were modified during the stay in preparation for the enhancement of their listening skills.

Key words: short-term study abroad program, metacognitive listening strategies

Introduction

Facing the challenges of a rapidly aging society and declining birth rate, both the Japanese government and industries are putting a lot of effort into fostering globally competitive human resources to expand their businesses into the global market. Recently, the term “global *jinzai*” (Global Human Resources) is frequently seen in the discourse of Japanese educational institutions with financial support for study abroad programs offered by the government and industries.

According to Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), the number of Japanese university students who studied abroad in 2017 was 105,301 in total (JASSO, 2019). Although it was 8.72% higher than the previous year (96,853 in total) (JASSO, 2017), the number was still far from the Japanese government’s goal of 120,000 in 2020, the year of the Tokyo Olympics (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, 2013). It is obvious that

the Japanese government and educational institutions strongly support study abroad programs because the rate of students who study abroad for a year or more than a year has been increasing (5.11% in 2010, 19.20% in 2017) (JASSO, 2012a, 2012b; JASSO, 2019). Particularly relevant to the present study, it should be noted that the rate of students who study abroad less than one month has also been increasing (49.12% in 2010, 63.51% in 2017) (JASSO, 2012a, 2012b; JASSO, 2019) due to strong promotion from the Japanese government, such as “Short-Stay and Short-Visit scholarship program” (now “study abroad support system”) started in 2011 by JASSO and “TOBITATE! (Leap for Tomorrow) Young Ambassador Program” started in 2014 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (MEXT, 2015). The main purpose of these short-term study abroad programs is providing language training and cross-cultural experience. Therefore, the programs usually offer

language training courses to learn the target language in the morning, tourism-oriented activities in the afternoon and homestay to have interactions with their host family in the evening. The program we offered to our students is similar to the typical program, but has some differences as we will describe in the following section.

Short-term study abroad program at Aino University in 2018

1. Overview

Aiming to foster a global mindset, Aino University (AU) has established the “International Medical Training course,” a short-term study abroad program, as a selective course in 2016 (Watanabe et al., 2017). The program is run during the summer vacation and gives the students a chance to participate in a three-week course held at Griffith University (GU) in the Gold Coast, Australia. The course is officially called “Global Study for Paramedical Staff.” As the name suggests, during this program students visit healthcare settings and medical education facilities and have an opportunity to experience the differences in medical systems between the two countries, such as medical care, medical education, and medical insurance. This is what makes our program unique and we hope that our students will use the experience to become active in the global society in the future. Since this program is still in its infancy, we do not yet have any data on the long-term results it will produce.

The question posed in this paper is whether the program is effective in improving English communication skills. Understanding the details of the program is important in order to understand its effects, so the program schedule for the 2018 course is shown below.

2. Schedule

There were two orientations before departure and students were asked to take a TOEIC practice test and answer a questionnaire twice, once before and once after their stay in Australia. Optional English conversation lessons were available to students once a week during the first semester prior to departure. During the stay, the students participated in a three-week English training course at the English Language Institute of GU (GELI) with students from other countries. The classes were conducted in the morning five days a week (see Table 1). Students were separated into three groups based on proficiency, and the goal and content of the classes differed by group. Each class had 15 students or less and provided simple conversation-based tasks or writing tasks. During lunchtime, the students ate lunches prepared by their host families and had a chance to interact with AU faculty members, who came to the institute to check students’ health and safety. Students had free time on weekdays in the afternoon to do their assignments, do some sightseeing and spend time with friends. Our program also included a homestay, giving the students a chance to experience local culture

Table 1 Schedule

DAY	DATE	DAILY ACTIVITIES	
1	29-Aug-18	Arrive and transfer to GU Gold Coast Campus and meet host families	
2	30-Aug-18	GELI - orientation and placement test	
3	31-Aug-18	Gold Coast Show Day (Public Holiday)	
4	1-Sep-18	Free Day	
5	2-Sep-18	Free Day	
6	3-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Independent Learning
7	4-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Independent Learning
8	5-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Independent Learning
9	6-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Facility tour 1- Gold Coast Private Hospital
10	7-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Independent Learning
11	8-Sep-18	Free Day	
12	9-Sep-18	Free Day	
13	10-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Facility tour 2 - Nursing lab tour and afternoon tea with GU students
14	11-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Independent Learning
15	12-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Independent Learning
16	13-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Independent Learning
17	14-Sep-18	Direct Entry Program	Independent Learning
18	15-Sep-18	Meet GELI for departure	

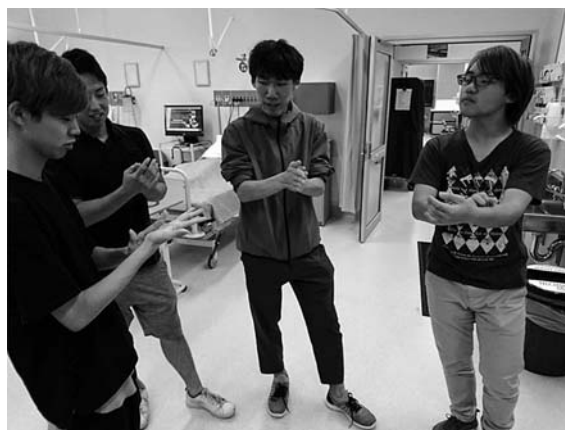
through interactions with their host family. Students spent time with their host family in the evening and sometimes on weekends. The students spent one night at a hotel prior to departure. Upon return, students were required to give a presentation about what they had learned during the program in Japanese (see Watanabe et al., 2017 for further details).

It is particularly worth noting that there were two special tours: “Gold Coast Private Hospital tour” and “Nursing lab tour and afternoon tea with Griffith University students.” Gold Coast Private Hospital offers the highest standard of nursing care, giving the students an opportunity to see cutting-edge facilities with the latest technology in 24-hour emergency rooms, rehabilitation rooms and private rooms in the maternity ward. The tour included an overview of the hospital, followed by students being shown around the hospital facilities, along with the coordinator who was GU’s English short course administrator and two AU faculty members. Since the overview and tour included many technical terms, a faculty member translated what was said if students did not understand the content. Therefore, the students’ attention might occasionally have been on the Japanese translation. The tour had some restrictions (e.g., students were not allowed to talk and had to use disinfectant on their hands in some areas) as it is a hospital. There was a question-and-answer session, where the differences in medical systems were discussed, especially concerning the medical insurance system. The tour was a total of one hour.

The “nursing lab tour” was conducted on September 10th at building G16 of GU. Two faculty members of GU guided students and showed some medical and educational devices in the lab, including all the latest technology. First, they observed the effectiveness of hand washing using the Hand-Hygiene Training System¹ (Photograph 1). Then they learned about cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), the method used to save people whose heart or breathing has stopped. CPR was demonstrated using a human manikin equipped with devices showing the pressure level on the manikin, after which every student had a chance to try the method themselves (Photograph 2). The laboratory also contained a robot that can simulate a patient with a weak pulse, high blood pressure, irregular respiratory rate, and other symptoms to assist in training for non-invasive procedures for medical students. The robot can also talk, scream for help and even cry in pain (Photograph 3).

After the tour, eight GU students, half of whom were Japanese language majors, and 18 AU students gathered at an afternoon tea party in hopes of cultivating a mutual friendship (Photograph 4).

Since the students had significant exposure to English during the program, we also wanted to



Photograph 1



Photograph 2



Photograph 3



Photograph 4

see the effects of this program on the students' language learning. The number of studies on the effects of short-term study programs is increasing, allowing us to draw some conclusions from previous research.

Effects of short-term study abroad programs

Research suggests that higher quality educational interventions are required for short-term study abroad programs due to their short period. Therefore, previous research on short-term study abroad programs has focused on their effectiveness with the aim of improving these programs. These studies used two assessment methods: objective assessment and subjective assessment. Objective assessments measure the effects on students' language skills, especially listening, through written and/or oral tests. Subjective assessments look at effects on learning strategies, especially for listening, motivation and attitude using questionnaires. Both assessment methods provide useful information.

Some studies have shown effects on language

skills, demonstrating significantly different scores on proficiency tests before and after the program (Kimura 2006, 2009, 2011; Nonaka, 2008; Shimazaki et al., 2015; Taura et al., 2009) even in a short period of time (see Table 2). Previous studies generally find an improvement in listening and speaking abilities, especially for low proficiency learners (Nonaka, 2008; Shimazaki et al., 2015; Yoshida & Kodera, 2009). However, these findings were not universal (Nonaka, 2005; Otsu and Satake, 2016; Suzuki and Hayashi, 2014; Yoshida and Kodera, 2009). Some studies believe that the cause of such mixed results is uncontrollable independent variables such as participants' proficiency level, location of homestay, motivation, etc. Others argued that this is a result of variability in the quality and quantity of L2 exposure (Shimazaki et al., 2015; Shiozawa, Yoshikawa & Ishikawa, 2010).

Some studies have shown effects on strategies, since learners' language skills are deeply related to metacognitive strategy use. First, we need to clarify some terms. Strategies can be interpreted as "the thoughts and actions that students use to complete a task successfully" (Chamot, 2009, p.53). There are three broad categories of strategies: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies and social/affective strategies (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). According to Berne (2004), good listeners can use multiple strategies while listening. Using metacognitive listening strategies, they can reflect on themselves while listening to understand what they hear and retain information. In contrast, beginners have a tendency to understand the information word-by-word and try to translate it into their mother tongue without, or to a lesser extent, using background knowledge. In other words, weak listeners tend to rely on bottom-up cognitive strategies.

There are some studies showing changes in

Table 2 Previous studies using objective assessments

Research	Country	Period (week)	Number	Tests (Listening)	Results
Kimura (2006)	New Zealand	3	19	EIKEN	↗
Kimura (2009)	New Zealand	3	19	EIKEN	↗
Kimura (2011)	New Zealand	3	14	EIKEN	↗
Nonaka (2005)	U. S.	3	51	TOEFL	→
Nonaka (2008)	U. S.	3	29	TOEIC IP	↗ Lower level group ↗
Otsu & Satake (2016)	U. S.	4	21	Michigan English Language Institute (ELI) Testing	→
Shimazaki et al. (2015)	Germany	3	10	DOKKEN	↗ Only for beginners
Suzuki & Hayashi (2014)	U. K.	3	19	CASEC	→
Taura et al. (2009)	New Zealand	3	21	TOEFL	↗
Yoshida & Kodera (2009)	Australia	2	15	CASEC	→ Lower level group ↗

metacognitive listening strategies. Shimazaki (2016) investigated the effects of the instruction of connected speech features on learners' listening skills, strategies and attitudes and found some improvements such as word recognition and listening comprehension (partially), as well as modifying of listening strategies and attitudes. The author used the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ, Vandergrift et al., 2006) and found that participants relied less on their L1 and began planning before listening. Taguchi (2017) showed the importance of metacognitive listening strategy instruction in EFL classrooms using the MALQ (Vandergrift et al., 2006). The study found that teaching metacognitive listening strategies did not particularly enhance scores of listening tests, but promoted the use of metacognitive strategies themselves. It also showed a weak correlation between metacognitive listening strategy use and listening performance. The authors believe that low proficiency learners should learn basic bottom-up and top-down listening skills before learning metacognitive listening strategies.

Shimazaki et al. (2015) reported the effects of a short-term study abroad program to Germany on language skills and metacognitive listening strategies. They found that the effect on language skills was seen only for beginners. Also, MALQ analysis (Vandergrift et al., 2006) indicated that listeners felt less difficulty when listening to German and their listening self-efficacy (the belief listeners have in their own listening abilities) was enhanced after the program ("person knowledge" category in MALQ).

The present study will use both assessment methods to measure the efficacy of our short-term program. Although using the objective assessment seems to produce inconsistent results, we can predict that AU students' listening skills will have improved because most students are beginners. As for the subjective assessment, there is only one study which assessed metacognitive listening strategies using MALQ. The study showed the participants' strategies were partially modified.

Research questions and hypotheses

The aim of this paper is to discuss the effects of a short-term study abroad program on EFL learners' listening skills. Three research questions were addressed:

RQ1. Does the short-term study abroad program enhance listening comprehension of EFL

learners?

RQ2. Does the short-term study abroad program change listening strategies of EFL learners?

RQ3. Does listening comprehension of EFL learners relate to listening strategies of EFL learners?

The following hypotheses were constructed based on previous studies:

H1. The short-term study abroad program will improve the scores of listening tests of beginner EFL learners.

H2. The short-term study abroad program will partially change listening strategies of EFL learners.

H3. There will be a weak correlation between listening comprehension and metacognitive listening strategies of EFL learners after the short-term study abroad program.

Methods

1. Participants

The participants consisted of first- and second-year nursing, physical therapy and medical engineering majors at Aino University (eight females and 10 males). Their native language was Japanese, and none had spent any extended period of time (longer than a month) in an English-speaking environment. In addition, seven students regularly took part in weekly extracurricular English conversation lessons and three students sometimes showed up to the lessons.

2. Material

As an objective assessment of the participants' proficiency, a TOEIC practice test was used (Educational Testing Service, 2016) and MALQ (Vandergrift et al., 2006) was used as a subjective assessment of participants' metacognitive strategies (see Appendix). The questionnaire assessed five factors in listening using a 6-point Likert scale: Strongly agree (6)-Agree (5)-Partly agree (4)-Slightly disagree (3)-Disagree (2)-Strongly disagree (1). The first factor, "planning and evaluation" (Items 1, 10, 14, 20 and 21) stands for "the strategies that listeners use to prepare themselves for listening, and to evaluate the results of their listening efforts." The next factor, "directed attention" (Items 2, 6, 12 and 16) assesses "the strategies that listeners use to concentrate and to stay on task." The third factor, "person knowledge" (Items 3, 8, and 15) means "listeners' perceptions concerning the difficulty presented by L2 listening and their L2 listening self-efficacy." The fourth factor, "(no) mental

translation” (Items 4, 11 and 18) assesses “the strategies that listeners must learn to avoid if they are to become skilled listeners.” The last factor, “problem-solving” (Items 5, 7, 9, 13, 17 and 19) evaluates “a group of strategies used by listeners to make inferences - such as strategic guessing - and to monitoring these inferences.” Vandergrift et al. (2006) reported the internal reliability of these factors, which were from .68 (“directed attention”) to .78 (“mental translation”) (p. 446). The questionnaire consisted of 21 questions which were all translated into Japanese and presented randomly using an online survey tool called SurveyMonkey. Students were able to complete the questionnaires at their own pace on their cell phones.

3. Procedure and Data Analysis

Students took a TOEIC practice test twice, before (TEST 1) and after (TEST 2) the stay in Australia, as part of the requirement to get course credit. Students were given two hours to complete the test under the supervision of a faculty member. Following the test, students answered the online questionnaires. Some items (items 3, 4, 8, 11, 16 and 18) needed to be scored reversely for data analysis. Due to the small sample size (18 in total), all data were analyzed using non-parametric tests. Significance level was set at .05.

Results

According to the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test, there was no statistically significant difference

between pre- and post-TOEIC practice test results for the listening section (see Table 3). However, the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that median post-MALQ ranks, *Mdn*=3.600, were statistically significantly higher than median pre-MALQ ranks, *Mdn*=3.400, $Z=-2.200$, $p=.028$. As was presented in Table 3, there was a significant difference in the “(no) mental translation” category before and after the program. A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test indicated that median post-MALQ ranks in the “(no) mental translation” category, *Mdn*=3.500, were statistically significantly higher than median pre-MALQ ranks, *Mdn*=3.300, $Z=-2.000$, $p=.048$. In addition, there was no correlation between the results of the listening section of the TOEIC practice test and MALQ.

Discussion

This research investigated the effectiveness of a short-term study abroad program on EFL students’ language learning. Regarding the first hypothesis we posed (the short-term study abroad program will improve the scores of listening tests of beginner EFL learners), we did not see any significant change after the program. However, it is possible that uncontrollable factors could have affected the test results.

The current study confirmed hypothesis 2 (the short-term study abroad program will partially change listening strategies of EFL learners) to some extent, which is in accordance with previous research. Unlike the findings of Shimazaki et al. (2015), the present study found a significant

Table 3 The results of the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test

Assessment Method	Instrument	Pre <i>M (SD)</i>	Post <i>M (SD)</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>p</i>	
Objective	TOEIC All	73.500 (12.509)	74.000 (14.504)	0.000	1.038	n. s.
	TOEIC Listening	38.944 (7.878)	36.000 (7.252)	2.000	1.951	n. s.
	TOEIC Reading	32.389 (6.835)	36.000 (7.252)	-2.000	0.044	*
Subjective	MALQ All	3.400 (0.413)	3.600 (0.493)	-2.200	0.028	*
	Planning/Evaluation	3.300 (0.906)	3.700 (1.030)	-1.900	0.054	n. s.
	Directed Attention	4.000 (0.718)	3.900 (0.956)	0.400	1.331	n. s.
	Person Knowledge	2.800 (0.956)	3.300 (1.045)	-0.900	0.375	n. s.
	Mental Translation	3.300 (0.8105)	3.500 (1.258)	-2.000	0.048	*
	Problem Solving	4.000 (0.550)	4.200 (0.879)	-0.900	0.378	n. s.

difference in the “(no) mental translation” category. This suggests that the students’ ability to process English without, or with less, reliance on Japanese enhanced after the study abroad program. As L1 can hinder overall processing of L2 input, it is better for learners to decode without depending on their mental translation system. As stated before, AU students are beginners and may have a tendency to depend on L1. However, it appears that they gradually started to decode L2 smoothly through meaningful interaction with their host families, GU instructors, classmates, and others they met during their study abroad. We believe it is this interaction which makes the short-term study abroad program valuable. The most important finding was that students’ listening strategies changed even if they did not get any specific instructions regarding listening strategies. Though further research is necessary to support these hypotheses, the results suggest that qualitative changes can be seen in the students’ language learning.

Finally, correlation analysis results do not support hypothesis 3 (there will be a weak correlation between listening comprehension and metacognitive listening strategies of EFL learners after the short-term study abroad program). Since only one study so far has shown this result, this topic should be addressed further in the future.

Conclusion

We should state two limitations to the current study: the lack of a control group and small sample size. However, the case study of Aino University suggests that learners’ metacognitive listening strategies were modified after the short-term study abroad program in preparation for the enhancement of their listening skills. Further research is needed to show more concrete and long-term data, but the findings of this preliminary study are promising. We believe that continuous support for language learning by higher educational institutions is crucial to nurture “global *jinzai*.” We need to continue improving our short-term study abroad program in order to broaden our students’ horizons and help them meet the demands of our global society.

Note

1. The Hand-Hygiene Training System has been shown to improve hand hygiene, but it is difficult to maintain compliance among medical workers (Kwok et al., 2015).

Appendix

Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ)
(adapted from Vandergrift et al., 2006, 2012)

1. Before I start to listen, I have a plan in my head for how I am going to listen. (Planning / Evaluation)
2. I focus harder on the text when I have trouble understanding. (Directed Attention)
3. I find that listening is more difficult than reading, speaking, or writing in English. (Person Knowledge)
4. I translate in my head as I listen. (Mental Translation)
5. I use the words I understand to guess the meaning of the words I don’t understand. (Problem Solving)
6. When my mind wanders, I recover my concentration right away. (Directed Attention)
7. As I listen, I compare what I understand with what I know about the topic. (Problem Solving)
8. I feel that listening comprehension in English is a challenge for me. (Person Knowledge)
9. I use my experience and knowledge to help me understand. (Problem Solving)
10. Before listening, I think of similar texts that I may have listened to. (Planning / Evaluation)
11. I translate key words as I listen. (Mental Translation)
12. I try to get back on track when I lose concentration. (Directed Attention)
13. As I listen, I quickly adjust my interpretation if I realize that it is not correct. (Problem Solving)
14. After listening, I think back to how I listened, and about what I might do differently next time. (Planning / Evaluation)
15. I don’t feel nervous when I listen to English. (Person Knowledge)
16. When I have difficulty understanding what I hear, I give up and stop listening. (Directed Attention)
17. I use the general idea of the text to help me guess the meaning of the words that I don’t understand. (Problem Solving)
18. I translate word by word, as I listen. (Mental Translation)
19. When I guess the meaning of a word, I think back to everything else that I have heard, to see if my guess makes sense. (Problem Solving)
20. As I listen, I periodically ask myself if I am satisfied with my level of comprehension. (Planning / Evaluation)
21. I have a goal in mind as I listen. (Planning / Evaluation)

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