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When English education isn't what it seems: Outcomes from a pilot study in Japan

Chika Yamamoto Rosenbaum [iD]

Department of Economics, Nagoya University of Commerce and Business, Nagoya, Aichi, Japan

Abstract

Despite the desire of Japanese students to improve their English language skills, a lack of confidence has led to a fear of participating in activities designed to boost that very confidence. What if a program requiring communication in English were advertised as something other than an intercultural exchange program? Could this promotional strategy mitigate the fear of participation? Would it still accomplish the goal of motivating further English education? This paper discusses the results of offering a pilot program, which involved activities with native English speakers and was instead advertised as a non-paid internship focusing on tourism and artificial intelligence. The post-program survey shows that while Japanese students were most attracted to and satisfied with the aspect of working with companies, they found their experience in communicating in English to be the most rewarding and challenging.

Keywords Japanese students, English communication, intercultural exchange, internship, artificial intelligence, AI

1. Introduction

Today, English communication has become one of the most valued educations in Japan. Since a growing number of Japanese companies expect new employees to be equipped with these language skills, universities in Japan have promoted language education through courses, study abroad programs, and other extracurricular activities (Sponseller 2021). However, the acquisition of language skills, especially conversational language skills, has not been easy for Japanese students, and many scholars have attempted to solve the puzzle of why Japanese students fail to master the language (e.g. David 2018; Yamaoka 2009; Saito 2006; Reesor 2003). Existing explanations include an inherent physiological inability of the Japanese ethnic group to speak the language, common personality traits of Japanese students (this includes the common disposition of being shy or being fearful of failure), the lack of qualified English teachers, and the hardship of offering all-English classroom in the mostly homogenous society (David 2018; Yamaoka 2009; Saito 2006).

Study after study find that the Japanese students' lack of confidence in their language skills is one of the biggest impediments to their decision to participate in study abroad or domestic activities involving interactions with foreign students, known as intercultural exchange (IE). For example, Burden (2020) argues that Japanese students tend to be more inward-looking and risk-averse, especially when they lack confidence in their foreign language skills. This lack of confidence is reflected in the tendency of Japanese students to score lower on English tests compared to students in other countries (Ikemoto 2013). Recently, based on survey data from 627 students at a large public research university, Rosenbaum et al. (2024) find that over 70% of the Japanese students maintain a moderate to high level of interest in study abroad and IE programs. At the same time, the authors find not only that 95% of students at the same Japanese university expressed one or more concerns about these programs but also that one of the biggest concerns is their lack of confidence in foreign language skills. Previously, Kojima et al. (2015) also find that among 147 surveyed students at another public research university, concerns about interacting with foreign students and lack of confidence in English language skills were some of the most significant issues in promoting global learning. To summarize, the existing literature suggests that a large number of Japanese college students are motivated to improve their language skills through action-learning programs offered at their universities. However, student apprehension and doubt in their foreign language skills has been an obstacle for Japanese students to participate in those activities designed to mitigate such fears.

What if a program designed to improve language skills is offered as something else, by highlighting benefits other than the linguistic one? Could this promotional strategy mitigate the fear of participating? Does it still accomplish the purpose of motivating further English education or improving foreign language skills? This paper discusses the results of running a pilot program, which was designed for students at a Japanese university to improve their English communication skills but advertised as something other than an IE program. The results demonstrate that

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while the Japanese students were attracted to and satisfied with the advertised aspects of the program, the program still sparked notable reactions from students in regards to communication in English, as they saw it as the most rewarding and challenging facet of their experience.

2. The Pilot Program

Imagine a program in a Japanese university setting that involves interactions with students from different countries. Such a program would most likely be labeled as an intercultural exchange program, and an appropriate department of the university would advertise the IE program as an opportunity for the Japanese students to improve their foreign language skills. Students who would love to improve their language skills or are already comfortable communicating in different languages would be more likely to participate in that program. However, as the previous literature has indicated, there is the presumably sizable portion of Japanese students who are not confident and are worried about their language skills despite their interest in learning foreign languages. Would they join the IE activity?

A pilot program was offered at a Japanese university in May of 2024. Unlike usual, this program was advertised as something other than an intercultural exchange program. The idea is to mitigate the fear and worry that the Japanese students might have when they consider participating in activities involving interaction with foreign students. The program was instead promoted as a short non-paid internship in two different metropolitan areas, Nagoya and Tokyo, incorporating two popular subjects—tourism and artificial intelligence (AI).

The two-day program also consisted of group activities with 25 students visiting Japan from a public university in Singapore, whose official language is English. Since students from the partner university speak very little Japanese, the program was facilitated in English. However, this language matter was rarely highlighted at the time of recruitment. Nor was the language skill (e.g., test score) required in order to participate in the program. Instead, three key features were emphasized as the signature aspects of the program: an internship, the learning of AI, and a visit to Tokyo. Figure 1 below is a part of the brochure used to recruit Japanese students. In the brochure, the word "English" is not mentioned. Rather, the program overview is stated in English along with the explanation in the Japanese language, and the partner university is mentioned.

Figure 1. Part of the brochure used for recruiting Japanese students

The theme of the first day was the promotion of tourism in the city of Nagoya, located in the Aichi prefecture of Japan. The Japanese students were expected to work in groups, including the students from Singapore, to interview foreign tourists visiting a famous shrine called *Atsuta Jingu* about reasons for their visit and possible improvements the city could make for tourists. The theme of the second day was the effective application of Generative AI tools. Students were invited to the headquarters of a Japanese branch for the worlds' top technology company located in Tokyo and work in the same groups to come up with ways to utilize Generative AI in our everyday lives. On both days, students were expected to provide group presentations reflecting on their activities. On each day, we invited the employees of a local travel company from Nagoya and the tech company who played a role in providing the group assignments, while students were considered as non-paid interns working on these assignments.

We chose internship as a framework for this program because previous studies in international education suggest that students tend to be more motivated to participate in global learning programs when they see these programs would expand their career opportunities (Rosenbaum et al. 2024; Howard 2014; Hansen & Loucky 2010). We also incorporated the topic of AI into the internship to attract male students, since the previous literature shows that female students are more likely to engage in global learning (Sponoseller 2021; Pruitt 2021). The topic of tourism was strategically chosen for the first contact between Japanese and Singaporean students as a topic that everyone can relate.

The recruitment of the Japanese students began two weeks before the kickoff, after a series of negotiations among all personnel from universities and companies involved in the program. Due to the unavailability of office rooms at the tech company, the date for the second part of the program was scheduled within the final exam week for the Japanese university, which eliminated the chance for many of the students to join the program. Moreover, because of such short notice, the program was unable to secure any financial support from the university or elsewhere, and Japanese students with the intent to participate were expected to pay over $200 in travel expenses, including their meals. The opportunity was

announced through the university website as well as in a couple classrooms. Ultimately, eight students committed to participate in the two-day program, and six out of the eight students volunteered to participate in the post-program survey used for the discussion in this paper.[1]

3. Program Results

This section discusses the results of the pilot program based on the post-program survey filled by six out of the eight participants from the Japanese university. The participating students who volunteered to complete the survey included a freshman, two sophomores, two juniors, and one senior student. One of the participants identified as female and the others all identified as male students. The academic major of three students who participated and completed the survey was International Studies, while the major of the remaining three students included in this discussion was Management. According to the survey question asking students to self-evaluate their English level, one responded to be at the "native speaker" level. Three students responded to be "elementary," and two students responded to be "conversational."

As previously mentioned, this pilot program was offered as a short non-paid internship featuring inbound tourism and AI in the Nagoya and Tokyo areas. We rarely mentioned anything about the required English communication with the students from Singapore. This strategy proved successful. It worked in a way that other aspects of the program appeared to be more attractive to students. In the survey, students were asked to answer which parts of the program attracted them to join by rating the five different aspects of the program based on the level of attraction. Figure 2 exhibits the answers to the survey question. In the bar graph, the darkest blue means students rated the aspect of the program to be most attractive. The results show that students found working with companies to be the most attractive part of this program and rated the interaction with students from another university as the second most attractive part of the program. Intercultural communication using English only appeared to be the third most attractive part about this program, followed by the learning of selected topics and a visit to Tokyo.
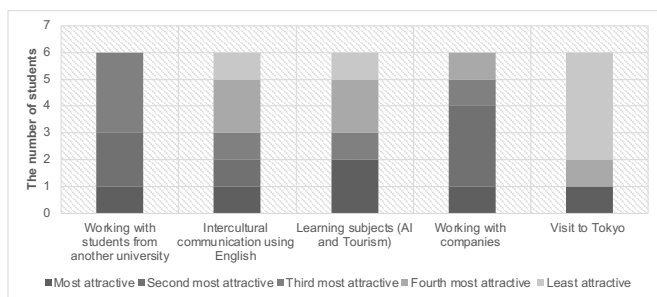
Figure 2. What parts of the program were students attracted to prior to participation?

Figure 3 shows the answers to the post-program

question about which parts of the program were most satisfactory after their participation. Compared to the answers to the previous question shown in Figure 1, the result was not significantly different. According to the students who completed the survey, working with companies appeared to be the most satisfactory part of the program, followed by the aspect of working with students from another university, and the learning of the selected subjects. Intercultural communication using English was rated as the fourth satisfactory or second least satisfactory aspect of their experience. The location aspect was rated as the least satisfactory aspect, as it was ranked as the least attractive part of the program.
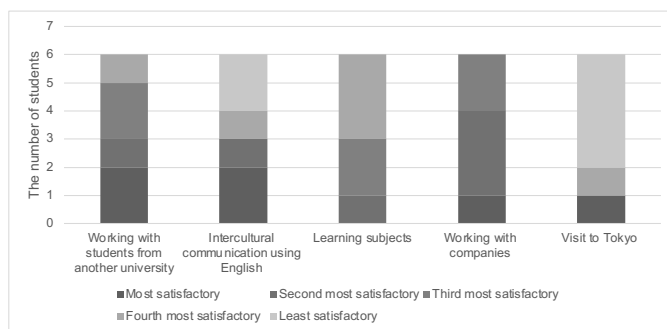
Figure 3. What parts of the program were most satisfactory after the participation?

Overall, these survey results indicate that, except for the location factor, students were attracted to the program for the benefits that were advertised, and the program produced the outcomes as advertised. Students were the most attracted to the aspect of working with companies in the two-day internship program, and they felt the most satisfied to do so. Students were also attracted to work with students from another university, and they felt the second most satisfied to do so. In other words, students might have cared less about the language of choice. Even if this program was offered in the Japanese language by working with students from another Japanese university, they might have come anyway.

Now the question is, was this pilot program completely ineffective to motivate further English learning or improve the students' intercultural communication skills? In other words, did this aspect of this program generate no reaction at all from students? Gladly, the answer is no. First, all participating students were fully aware of what they were getting into. Despite the promotional strategy, the Japanese students understood that that this was an active learning involving communication using the English language, and all students who self-evaluated their speaking level to be elementary or conversational expressed that they were nervous and worried about this aspect of the program. According to the post-program survey, 83% of students (=5 students) stated that they were very nervous to participate in the program, and 50% of students (=3 students) expressed that they were worried about the program before participating. The student who self-

where the survey was taken.

evaluated his English skills to be at the native level was the only person who responded that they were confident and not worried about the program.

As the program began, students who expressed their worry did participate in the group work and presentations, although their level of contribution was, objectively speaking, much less than that of students from Singapore or the native-level Japanese student. For example, their contributions to the group presentations were limited to introducing the title of the presentation or introducing themselves as members of the group. When student groups were interviewing tourists from foreign countries at the shrine in Nagoya, Singaporean students led the interviews while most of the Japanese students took an active role in listening. The good news is that their way of participation did not seem to discourage or create tension among the members of the group. The student groups stuck together during their work and during their breaks and kept conversations going in any way they could. All groups appeared to find some type of friendship at the end of the program. Despite the language barriers, Japanese and Singaporean students exchanged their contacts and took photos with each other. In the end, one thing was crystal clear; Japanese students did the best they could to make this experience fun, engaging, and beneficial. The post-program survey also confirmed that 100% of students, or all six students who completed the survey, answered that they had a great time, and none of the students said that they felt stressed in the end.

Equally important, the survey demonstrates that students reacted remarkably to the English language and communication aspect, although the language aspect was not rated as the most attractive or satisfactory part of the program. More specifically, all six students chose the language aspect as the most rewarding and at the same time the most challenging experience in the program. Figure 4 shows the answers to the survey question, asking what kind of feeling students had about each aspect of the program. The results show that all six students who completed the survey reported feeling enjoyment while communicating in English, and the largest number of students also stated that they felt challenged at the same time. None of the students reported that they felt challenged from the aspect of interacting with students from another university, and only one student reported feeling challenged while working with companies or learning about AI and/or tourism.
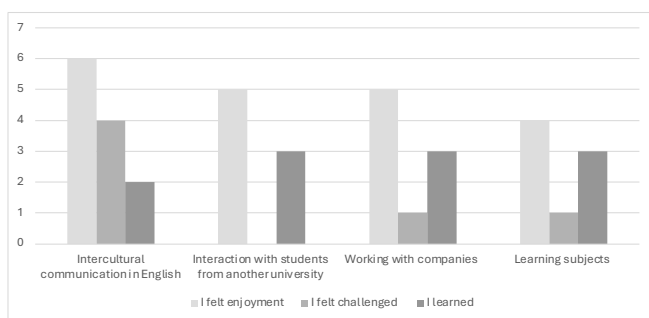
Figure 4. Students' feelings about aspects of the program.

In the survey, students were also asked to share what part of the program was most rewarding and what was obtained intellectually out of the experience. The question translated in English through ChatGPT is as follows. *What did you gain the most from this program? Additionally, how do you feel that what you gained will connect to your future?* The following are students' comments translated in English through ChatGPT.

"The visit to the company allowed me to understand my attitude toward speaking English, the enjoyment of international exchange, and the appeal of foreign-affiliated companies. It was an opportunity that clarified where I would like to work in the future."

"I was able to learn about my English abilities. Since I don't usually use it and thought I wasn't good at it, what left the biggest impression on me was that I could understand more than I expected. Additionally, I was so focused on keeping up with the conversation that I couldn't join in smoothly. Moving forward, I want to study [the English language] so that I can improve my output. It motivated me to engage in learning English."

"Communication [in English] is not something I absolutely can't do; surprisingly, I can manage it. The barrier has been lowered compared to before, so I feel taking the first step will now be easier."

"I was able to understand my current situation [about the English language] well. In particular, I want to improve my lack of English skills. Moving forward, I aim to develop my English proficiency and conversation skills."

"I was able to make connections with students from a university in Singapore. I feel that these connections will be valuable for future opportunities abroad or when starting something new."

"I believe it [the most rewarding part of the program] was the intercultural experience. For example, when we visited Atsuta Shrine, there was a member in our group researching Japanese omamori [charms], so I was able to talk about how to buy and carry omamori from a Japanese perspective. Additionally, when buying lunch, everyone used credit cards, so I asked about the cashless situation in Singapore and gained new knowledge that I hadn't known before. By being involved in things I wouldn't normally investigate due to a lack of interest, I was able to make discoveries. Through this experience, I learned to think about things from a broader perspective, my curiosity was stimulated, and it led to a willingness to challenge new fields and pursue personal growth."

Another question in the survey asked students to share what part of the program was most challenging to them. The question translated in English through ChatGPT is as follows. *Please tell us what was the most challenging aspect of this program. Additionally, how do you feel about that challenge now?* The following are students' comments translated in English through ChatGPT.

> *"The most significant challenge in this program was thinking in English and engaging in English discussions. However, I struggled to participate in the conversation smoothly, which made me feel that I need to further improve my English proficiency."*

> *"Office tours and explanations are in English, so there was a possibility that I wouldn't understand and might not be able to learn. Since I don't usually use English, I was anxious, but I was able to understand, which boosted my confidence. Also, I think this experience helped me diminish my sense of discomfort with English."*

> *'Speaking up and presenting in English. I wish I could have been in a better state to talk more.'*

> *'The challenge was the interview in English at Atsuta Shrine. Since I rarely have the opportunity for field research, it was a valuable learning experience."*

> *"It was challenging to discuss internet-related topics in English with students from other universities. It was quite difficult, but meaningful."*

> *"It's about communication in English. While I felt the necessity of English, I had been avoiding learning it until now. This challenge was a bold step for me. Before the exchange, I was anxious about what would happen if things didn't go well, but I managed to communicate using the words I knew. It was very rewarding when I felt understood by the other person. Despite not being fluent in English, I was able to build a good relationship with students from Singapore, even with limited conversation. Through this experience, I learned that there are things more important than words. I felt that with empathy, understanding, and a sincere attitude, one can connect with others beyond language barriers. From such experiences, I realized the importance of communication [is] not solely dependent on language, which has encouraged me to confidently engage in cross-cultural exchanges."*

To summarize, nearly all comments about the rewarding and challenging experiences were about their intercultural communication involving the English language, and the word "English" was clearly mentioned in every single comment except two. This outcome suggests that, while students decided to participate in this program for other reasons, the aspect of communicating in English undoubtedly sparked reactions and feelings that they could not ignore and appeared to have motivated them to pursue further English education.

4. Concluding Remarks

A couple key implications are drawn from this pilot program. First, even when students have little confidence in their foreign language skills, they would participate in an intercultural exchange program so as long as it benefits them, one way or another. In this case, most students who participated in the pilot program found the internship aspect to be the most attractive part of the program.

Although they appeared to have concerns about the program requiring them to speak English, they still managed to capitalize on the benefits offered by the program. In other words, the fear of participating in the program using English was mitigated by the promotional strategy. As previously mentioned, the use of English was rarely highlighted at the time of recruitment. But no one felt deceived by the way of advertisement. Rather they just accepted the fact that English would be used in this non-paid internship opportunity with the travel and IT industries, which appeared to be the biggest reason for their excitement.

Second, even though students found that communication in English to be the most challenging experience, they also felt that it was the most rewarding experience. While Japanese students' shyness and hesitancy are often the focus of research on international and second language educations, this program confirms that it takes only a day or two for the Japanese student to overcome the fear of failure and language barriers. In other words, this pilot program showed us that a combination of appropriate advertisement strategies and program content that provides various benefits to students can be the key to promoting the participation in intercultural action learning in Japan as well as further English education among Japanese students.

Chika Y. Rosenbaum is Associate Professor at Nagoya University of Commerce and Business. Her current research interests include the empirical analysis of active learning, political and international education.
Email: chikayamamoto0104@gmail.com

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