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The Value of a Summer Intensive English Communication Course

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The Value of a Summer Intensive English Communication Course

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Abstract

This study investigated the value of a summer intensive English communication course. The three-week course was completed by 29 adult Japanese learners of English at the Fukuoka Institute of Technology. Communicative language teaching was provided every weekday to learners who were assigned to three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. A statistical comparison of pre- and post-tests scores on the CASEC English proficiency test indicated no significant differences in scores as a result of the course. However, a thematic analysis of the learners' overwhelmingly positive responses to the course's exit-questionnaire made it evident that students believed that the intensive course had been quite beneficial in the development of their English communicative abilities.

Key words: *communicative language teaching, pre- and post-test, intensive English communication course, adult Japanese learners of English, exit-questionnaire*

1 Introduction

Intensive English language-learning courses refer to courses in which the hours of instruction that would usually be distributed over a long period are concentrated into a shorter period. These courses attract learners because they allow them to concentrate their study of English into short periods when time is limited, such as when students have little time to prepare for a study abroad or when their busy schedules only allow them to study English during off peak times, like during their summer break. Can condensing learning into a short period result in English development? Moreover, is there a risk that students will lose their motivation when they study English every day for several weeks? This article addresses those concerns by reporting on a three-week summer intensive course on English communication at Fukuoka Institute of Technology (FIT), which was organized and taught by the authors. The results of pre- and post- test language measures and exit-

questionnaires answered the questions above. The authors found no statistically significant increase in scores on the language measure from pre- to post-test, but the students' responses to the exit-questionnaire indicated that they were engaged in the intensive course and had positive impressions of it as an educational experience.

2 A review of literature on intensive language courses

Intensive second language (L2) training programs were popularized by their role in preparing US servicemen for duties in linguistically diverse Europe during the Second World War (Serrano, 2007). Contemporary intensive programs are qualitatively different from their military antecedents. They no longer focus on rote memorization but instead promote L2 learning through the communicative use of the L2.

Research into modern intensive programs indicates that intensive study of a language is beneficial for different types of L2 learners. Several studies of intensive English-language learning programs in Quebec, Canada revealed

that intensive ESL instruction was quite effective for L2 development for French-speaking grade 5 and 6 students (Spada & Lightbown, 1989; Lightbown & Spada, 1994, 1997). In these intensive programs, children received English lessons nearly all day, every weekday, for five months, and then they took their regular school subjects in their first language for the remainder of the school year. These students showed greater development in English and more positive attitudes toward the language than French-speaking students who received the same amount of instruction distributed over a longer period of time.

Research has demonstrated that adults also benefit from intensive L2 instruction. Serrano (2011) compared the development of adult Spanish-speaking learners who received 110 hours of ESL instruction over seven months to those who received the same number of hours over a 4.5-week intensive summer course. She found that intermediate-level ESL learners in the intensive course outperformed the learners in the comparison group who had received the distributed ESL instruction. In another study demonstrating the effectiveness of intensive L2 courses for adults, Serrano, Llanes, and Tragant (2011) compared Spanish-speaking learners of English who received five hours of English instruction per day for 4.5 weeks to a group of Spanish-speaking learners on a study abroad in the United Kingdom who were taking content courses in English as well as ESL courses for 8-12 hours a week. Both groups were given pre-tests and then post-tests 15 days later. The development for the intensive course participants was found to be equal to that of the study abroad group. Evidence of the benefits of intensive L2 instruction is not limited to the learning of English. Xu, Padilla, and Silva (2014) compared the development of English-speaking students who received 88 hours of instruction in Mandarin Chinese over a 22-week semester to those who received the same number of hours of instruction in a four-week summer intensive course. Xu et al. found that the intensive course learners performed equivalently to the comparison group of learners on nearly all areas of Chinese that were tested.

Thus, the research indicates that intensive courses are beneficial for a variety of L2 learners. We found no evidence suggesting that the results would be any different for Japanese learners of English, so we hypothesized that our intensive English communication class would benefit the students at FIT. However, we were concerned that the FIT summer intensive course might not be as effective as previously studied intensive L2 instruction programs because less L2 instruction was provided. The FIT course was shorter than previously investigated intensive courses: it was just

three weeks in length, and the students only received 90 minutes of English instruction per day. Because this year was the inaugural year of the FIT summer intensive course, we were eager to determine empirically whether our hypothesis that the three-week intensive English course would be beneficial for students was correct, and that is the purpose of this study.

3 Method

3.1 Study background

FIT is a university in western Japan offering undergraduate and graduate programs in engineering, information engineering and socio-environmental studies. To increase students' exposure to, and practice in, English communication, a three-week summer intensive English course was organized by one of the authors, a professor of English at FIT. The course was taught by the other author, a native English speaking expert in communicative language teaching with an MA and PhD in second language education and nearly two decades of L2 teaching and L2 teacher-training experience in Japan and in several post-secondary institutions in Canada.

3.2 Participants

The 29 participants in the course were undergraduate and graduate students at FIT. All but four of the students were male. Participants were assigned to beginner, intermediate, or advanced classes based upon their scores on the pre-test described below. With the exception of one Chinese and one Thai student, all of the other students were Japanese. Few students had either experienced learning English through communicative language teaching or traveled to English-speaking countries. All of the students felt that communicating in English was very challenging.

3.3 The course

The beginner, intermediate, and advanced classes met for 90 minutes every weekday for three weeks from late July until mid-August. The course goal was to improve students' communicative ability, focusing particularly on the development of English speaking, listening, and vocabulary. The secondary aims were to improve students' international cultural knowledge, grammatical accuracy, and test-taking skills. The course used multi-media instructional materials, including teacher-created activities, YouTube video clips, and Scanlon's (2013) *Q: Skills for Success Listening and Speaking Level 1* textbook (and the related supplementary online materials). The following topics were covered:

Introductions (chapter 1), Employment (chapter 2), Culture (chapter 3), Story-telling (chapter 4), Vacations (chapter 5), Humour (chapter 6), Music (chapter 7), and Fear (chapter 10). Corrective feedback was provided implicitly and explicitly during and after communicative tasks, and both peer-correction and self-correction were encouraged.

Each class aimed at accomplishing the course goals. Classes started with a crossword-puzzle competition between groups which fostered oral interaction and reviewed vocabulary from the previous class. Students were regularly reminded that “vocabulary is easy to get, but also easy to forget,” and as such required regular review.

Next, a two-way speaking and listening communicative task was used to introduce and practice the new vocabulary for that day. In this task, students competed against each other in teams, racing to dictate sentences containing the new vocabulary to a fellow team-mate who had to beat other teams in accurately writing the dictated messages on the board. This task proved very popular with students. It also effectively promoted a focus on both meaning and language form as the students enthusiastically negotiated both meaning and form in English in order to gain points for their group. The high level of engagement in this task combined with the diffusion of attention onto the whole group ameliorated the reluctance to risk speaking, which is a significant problem for Japanese learners of English; a problem that left unchecked makes the automatization of English conversation impossible.

The next portion of the class used the textbook’s audio clips and transcripts to teach active listening skills in three steps: 1) anticipation, 2) confirmation, and 3) reflection. First, the students had to work together to anticipate what the content of the audio clip would be by answering the pre-listening questions in the textbook and using hints such as the title of the clip or the accompanying textbook images. After listening to the clip for the first time, students had to talk to each other to determine whether other students had come to the same conclusions as they had about what they had heard. They then listened a second time to confirm that they had been correct or to settle any disagreements between themselves about what they had heard. Finally, they listened for a third time while reading a transcript of the clip. While doing so, they were instructed to underline parts of the transcript that they could understand when they read, but found challenging to understand when they listened without the transcript. They were instructed to reflect on the material that they had underlined in order to notice where they had listening weaknesses and consider what caused them and how they could overcome them.

Finally, each class included a structure-focused communicative component covering a range of subject matter, including grammatical or phonetic features or speaking skills such as the use of signal words (e.g., first, after that, finally).

Even though the same textbook was used for all three classes, level differences among the three classes were addressed by increasing or decreasing the number of lesson activities and the degree of challenge that those activities presented to the students. For example, the advanced class typically completed extra structure-focused activities. Moreover, a task such as the dictation task described above was often simplified for the lowest level students, requiring them to only convey words or phrases rather than entire sentences. Similarly, the lower level students were often provided letters or other extra hints to assist their completion of the daily vocabulary-review crossword tasks.

3.4 Language measure

Pre-tests were given to all participants one week prior to the commencement of the intensive course. The pre-tests facilitated level placement and allowed for us to measure development when we compared those pre-test scores to the scores on the post-tests which were completed within a week following the course.

The internet-based Computerized Assessment System for English Communication (CASEC) test was chosen as the language measure because it is a convenient, affordable test that does not consume as much of students’ time as other popular proficiency tests. CASEC tests students’ knowledge and ability in four areas: vocabulary, phrasal expression and usage, ability to comprehend the main idea of listening passages, and the ability to listen for and understand specific information.

To determine whether the students developed their English ability as a result of the course, a paired-samples *t* test was conducted to compare the mean CASEC scores on the pre- and post-tests.

3.5 Exit questionnaire

The students were asked to complete an exit-questionnaire after the final class in the course. The questionnaire consisted of seven items that elicited students’ impressions about the following: course outline, course planning, instructor, class size, feelings about enrolling in the same kind of course again, and feelings about enrolling in courses from the same instructor in the future. These items were measured using Likert scale responses which ranged from very good, to bad or from very strongly to not at all depending upon the question. The questionnaire also invited students to pro-

vide comments on their general impressions of the course.

To analyze the questionnaires, percentages of the multiple choice responses were calculated. In addition, responses that were provided in Japanese were translated into English, and all of the responses were analyzed for emergent themes.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Language measure

Only 19 participants completed both a pre- and post-test. The results of a paired-samples *t* test indicated that the mean score on the CASEC post-test ($M = 440.95$, $SD = 110.47$) was not significantly higher than the mean score on the pre-test ($M = 439.11$, $SD = 106.44$), $t(18) = 0.21$, $p > 0.05$. Thus, there was no statistically significant increase in CASEC scores from before to after the treatment. Again, it must be borne in mind that only 19 of the 29 participants completed both a pre- and post-test. Perhaps the result would have been different had all students taken the test.

It is also possible that the amount of instruction was simply not intensive enough to cause an increase in scores from the pre- to post-test. We had been concerned that three weeks might be too short of a period, especially because the lessons only lasted 90 minutes per day. The total instruction time was just 22.5 hours per student. In contrast, the intensive programs that have resulted in significant L2 development have had much more instruction. For example, the program in Serrano et al. (2011) included 110 hours of instruction over 4.5 weeks, and Xu et al. (2014) included 88 hours in four weeks. Perhaps future intensive programs at FIT would benefit from longer daily classes and an extra week of classes.

Another factor that should be considered when interpreting the results from the language measure is whether the CASEC test was the appropriate language measure to use in this investigation. One of the primary goals of the intensive course was to promote the development of English speaking ability. However, CASEC has no spoken component to determine whether there was development in this key area of English communication. It is unfortunate because much of the class was dedicated to eliciting and practicing spoken English, but there is no way to quantitatively measure whether development in speaking resulted from the course. In future years of the FIT intensive course, it might be beneficial to follow Serrano (2011), Serrano et al. (2011), and Xu et al. (2014), and conduct pre- and post- oral production tests.

4.2 Students' impressions of the intensive course

Only 22 of the 29 students completed the questionnaire. Their responses were overwhelming positive. First we report on the simple percentages for each item. 86% of the participants indicated that the course outline was very good while the remaining 14% considered it to be moderately good. When asked about the course planning, 86% again indicated that it was very good and 14% that it was moderately good. 100% of the students reported that the instructor was very good. On the topic of class size, 45% felt it was very good, 32% that it was moderately good, and 23% that it was average. When asked whether they would like to take similar courses in the future, 50% said they very strongly would, 32% said they strongly would, and 18% reported that they did not know. When asked if they would like to enroll in future classes with the same instructor, 46% reported they very strongly would, 36% said they strongly would and 18% responded that they did not know. Finally, when asked for their opinions about textbook and teaching materials for the course, 50% said they were very good, 36% noted that they were moderately good, and 13% considered them to be average. These percentages indicate a high degree of satisfaction with the course, with no negative responses and very few neutral ones. There was unanimous agreement that the instructor was very good, nearly 90% agreement that the course outline and planning was very good, and over 85% indicated that they either strongly or very strongly felt that they would like to enroll in similar courses in the future.

This positive response to the course was also reflected in the comments that the students provided. Several themes emerged among these comments. For example, some comments focused on what students had learned through the course: “It was good because I could learn lots of words, collocations, and idioms.”, and “I could understand the basic English grammar.”

As noted above, one of the main goals of the course was to develop listening comprehension, and learners reported that the course helped them develop their listening skills: “I think that my ability of listening to English was improved.” and “By taking this course, I found that I could listen to and understand English.”

Developing speaking ability was another primary goal of the course, and learners reflected on this goal in several comments. Some students noted that speaking challenged them: “Mr. Paul was very cheerful. I couldn't say anything in the class, but I would like to try to make lots of statements next time.” Others came to realize the importance of speaking: “I learned that speaking English is important.”

Still others responded with comments that indicated the class helped them to work on and develop their spoken English: “It was interesting and the abilities of speaking and listening English have been improved.”, “It was good because I could speak English in the game style in the class.”, “I was worried that I couldn’t speak only English, but [now] I am a little bit confident of speaking English.” and “I didn’t like English, but I decided to take this course because I thought it cool to speak English.” I would not like to take the CASEC test before and after the course, but it was very enjoyable to speak English and to make an effort to make myself understood in English.”

Students also commented on the course itself. These responses included some comments which simply reported the student’s enjoyment of the class: “It was very instructive and interesting.”, “This class is good. The teacher is kind.”, “From the viewpoint of teaching, it is very instructive to me, and I also enjoyed learning English.”

“Dr. Paul Quinn was a very good guy, so I could enjoy learning English. It was a very good course, and I would like it to be continued.”

Others commented positively about the intensive nature of the course “It was a short term, but it was very enjoyable.”, and “I found that speaking and listening to English is important in learning English. I could also learn about the essential point to improve the abilities of both speaking and listening. It was an intensive course, so I could concentrate on it every day.”

Finally, many students praised the teaching techniques that were utilized in the intensive course: “I am not good at English, I sometimes couldn’t catch what Dr. Paul Quinn said, but the games which he employed in the course were very interesting. Also, he cited some examples to explain the words which we couldn’t understand, so it was understandable.”, “It was a very enjoyable course because Dr. Paul Quinn made some jokes and because he considered whether we could understand the words which were introduced for the first time in the course.”, “I could not catch up with the speed with which Dr. Paul Quinn spoke, but his gesture helped me understand what he was meaning very much. The contents of the course were also very good, and I could enjoy learning English.”, “Dr. Paul Quinn cited lots of examples, which helped me understand the course. He politely answered my question, too.”, and “This is the first time I took the English course taught only in English, and it was a great experience to me. How to practice listening to English and how to review the stuff I learned in the previous class was unique and understandable.”

5 . Conclusion

This investigation was undertaken to determine whether or not a three-week intensive course on English communication could be beneficial for FIT students. Even though no statistically significant gains were found from the pre- to post- test, the students’ responses to the exit questionnaire make it impossible to deny that the course was beneficial. Clearly the students believe that the primary goal of improving their English communication by developing their listening and speaking abilities was accomplished. Their enthusiastic reactions and testimonials about their accomplishments clearly indicate that it would be highly worthwhile to offer this intensive English program again next year and perhaps for years to come. The results of this study strongly support the conclusion that the summer intensive English communication was a great educational experience for the students at FIT.

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