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The Effect of Audio-visual Materials in the EFL Classroom:

Developing Intercultural Understanding and Listening Skills

Kayo YOSHIDA

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the effectiveness of audio-visual materials in FL (foreign language) learning in order to develop intercultural understanding as well as listening skills in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom context by examining Japanese university students learning English in Japan. This research employed questionnaires to examine the perception and motivation of 85 first-year university students who attended listening classes at a university. The participants felt interested in the places which were shown in the audio-visual materials and recognized the differences in cultures and lifestyles between the foreign countries and Japan. In addition, the majority of the students found that it was effective to learn foreign languages with DVDs/videos and their motivation of learning the target language increased. It was also found that the variety of visual information related to facial expressions, gestures and settings of the conversations greatly facilitated their listening comprehension of the stories and increased their awareness of the culture in the EFL classroom.

外国語学習における視聴覚教材の使用は、リスニング能力の向上のみならず異文化知識を養う上で非常に効果的であると考えられる。本研究は、日本で英語を学習する大学1年生85名にアンケート調査を実施し、約4ヶ月にわたる週1回のリスニングの授業において、視聴覚教材が学習者の文化的意識や学習動機にどのような影響を与えるのかを調査した。結果として、大多数の学習者が映像で紹介された国や都市に関心を示し、日本と海外における生活や文化の相違を認識したことが明らかになった。また、学習動機が向上し、視聴覚教材が外国語学習に効果的であると感じた学習者がほとんどであった。さらに、映像による視覚的情報（話者の表情、ジェスチャー、会話が行われている場所、など）が話の内容を理解する上で、非常に重要な役割を果たしていることも判明した。したがって、視聴覚教材を効果的に授業に取り入れることで、EFLの学習環境においても文化的意識を向上させることが可能であるといえる。

Keywords: audio-visual materials, multimedia, foreign language learning, intercultural understanding, cultural awareness
視聴覚教材、マルチメディア、外国語学習、異文化理解、文化的意識

1. Introduction

A number of researchers have pointed out that it is imperative to combine teaching language with the culture for developing the proper use of the target language and reducing miscommunication (Holmes, 1992; Kramsch, 1998). For example, Brown (2000) emphasizes the relation of language and culture; “A language is a part of a culture, and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture” (177). Rogers and Medley (1988) suggest that audio-visual material has become a rich source of linguistically and culturally authentic material for the classroom, and define it as “a naturalness of form and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language as used by native speakers” (468). DeRolf (1996) also recommends activities with audio-visual materials especially for Japanese students; “the use of video in the classroom is a powerful tool in helping break down language learning barriers that are often built up in Japanese students after years of studying grammar and translation” (2).

Therefore, it is worth examining the effective use of audio-visual materials in order to teach foreign languages and the culture. Since there are not many empirical studies focusing on Japanese students learning English and developing their intercultural understanding and motivation with the episodic audio-visual materials, the author conducted this study with the following research questions:

- 1) What are the roles of audio-visual materials in learning English effectively in the EFL classroom context?
- 2) What cultural aspects in the audio-visual materials do students find different from the ones which they experience in Japan?
- 3) What kinds of visual factors facilitate listening and understanding the contents of the audio-visual materials?

2. Literature review

2.1 Research on FL learning with audio-visual materials

Empirical studies on the use of multimedia to improve students' FL proficiency are relatively recent, and the majority of them have focused on listening comprehension (Rubin, 1990; Secules et al., 1992). However, there is very little research on the effectiveness of audio-visual materials to improve cultural awareness in FL classroom settings. Martinez-Gibson (1998) reported that FL students recognized cultural content of FL commercials after viewing the video and having discussion. Herron et al. (2002) found that the use of journalistic videos for intermediate-level French learners facilitated obtaining specific cultural knowledge, whereas their previous research (1999, 2000) showed that the use of episodic videos also improved the overall cultural knowledge of the first-year elementary-level French students. Most FL teachers have realized that audio-visual materials provide learners with cultural contexts sufficient to stimulate their intrinsic interest, since they can introduce authentic sociolinguistic elements into the classroom without the necessity of travel (Lafford, & Lafford, 1997; Muyskens, 1994; Cambre et al., 1992; Lutcavage, 1990; Wildner-Bassett, 1990). Hennessey (1995) suggests that foreign films often contribute to motivating students and raising their interest.

2.2 Negative views of multimedia use in FL classrooms

Recently the availability of multimedia resources for FL education, such as a wide selection of DVD (Digital Versatile Disc) and Internet-based materials, has increased, and the extensive use of these materials with technology has enhanced students' understanding the target language and their cultural knowledge (Bush, 2000; Chun, & Plass, 2000). As mentioned above (see 2.1), a number of FL educators have reached a consensus that culture needs to be an integral part of FL teaching and can be taught effectively with audio-visual materials.

However, there are other researchers who have negative views of multimedia use for FL learning. For example, Just and Carpenter (1992) point out that it is not easy for students to process cultural elements included in videos because their capacity to process information is limited. Cook et al. (1988) report that there are many teachers who are afraid of using technology and multimedia resources in the classroom, even though the necessary facilities are available. McCoy (1990) also mentions that teachers who are not good at using multimedia need to be trained to

design effective video-related activities.

In order to minimize the frustration of instructors as well as learners, the appropriate audio-visual materials should be selected carefully and the tasks associated with them also need to be tailored to the students' abilities. Swaffar and Vlatten (1997) suggest using commercials and newscast excerpts, or short segments of longer videos (up to 3 minutes), and also avoiding materials which include too much unfamiliar vocabulary so as to prevent learners from being overloaded with new information.

2.3 The important roles of audio-visual materials

It has been proven that audio-visual information improves the level of learners' comprehension compared with learning with audio-only materials (Swaffar, & Vlatten, 1997; Herron et al., 1999, 2000, 2002). In addition, audio-visual materials enable learners to recognize the particular behaviors, facial expressions and gestures which might be different according to the gender, age, character, and role of the actors and actresses. Such features, which learners can identify mainly with the visual information, are very helpful for improving learners' cultural awareness (Law, 1980; Secules et al., 1992; Lutcavage, 1992). Even elementary level language learners can image themselves in situations similar to those shown in the DVD or video, and imitate the body language and facial expressions with proper intonation and word choices (Swaffar, & Vlatten, 1997). Hogan-Brun and Whittle (1998) point out that the audio-visual materials also need to be integrated with other activities, such as discussion or role playing in FL classrooms, in order to improve learners' discourse strategies from the viewpoint of functional, para-linguistic and social dimensions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The respondents to this survey were 85 Japanese university students who aimed to improve listening ability in EFL classrooms. They belonged to the following two groups:

Group 1) 43 first-year university students who participated in an English listening class (intermediate level) once a week. The class used a textbook together with the attached DVD taken in the UK.

Group 2) 42 first-year university students who participated in an English listening class

(lower-intermediate level) once a week. The class used a textbook together with the attached DVD taken in the USA.

Students in the each group were divided into two classes and there were around 20 students in each classroom. Every class had a 90 minute lesson per week and the course lasted 14 weeks starting in late-September and ending in early-January. The students were taught by the same Japanese teacher throughout the course.

3.2 Materials used in the surveyed classes

In each class, a textbook was used every week and students watched the textbook DVD attached to the textbook for about 20 minutes in total per lesson. The textbook includes various types of exercises to check the comprehension of the story, such as questions to check new vocabulary, questions with multiple or True/False choices, and dialogues with blanks to fill in, etc. The DVD which was shown to Group 1 was taken in Oxford, UK and focused on British people who were living together in the same house. Students could mainly learn how the British people think and act through their normal lives. On the other hand, the DVD for Group 2 was taken in San Francisco, USA and focused on a Japanese traveler visiting many different places in the USA and interacting with local Americans. Students could learn common conversations in practical situations which most travelers may encounter during their journeys.

3.3 Procedure and design of the survey

This research was conducted in the 4 classes which focused on improving English listening ability, and a questionnaire survey was carried out at the end of the course in early January, 2009. The questionnaire was written in Japanese and included open- and closed-ended questions. Most closed-ended questions were followed by either four- or five- point rating scale, with the choices of either “often, sometimes, seldom, never” or “strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree”. The data from the closed-ended questions was mainly shown as the percentage of participants’ answers with graphs.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings and analysis of the questionnaire survey

This section reports the results from the questionnaire survey. Questions which

are focused on here are mainly closed-ended and categorized under the following five themes:

1. General interest in foreign countries and places [Q1-4]
2. Recognizing the life and culture of other countries [Q5-8]
3. Motivation and the effect on learning [Q10-13]
4. Level of the audio-visual materials [Q14-15]
5. Process of the comprehension [Q16-22]

4.1.1 **General interest in foreign countries and places**

In this section, the results from the following four questions are presented in order to examine the students' general interest about foreign countries and places.

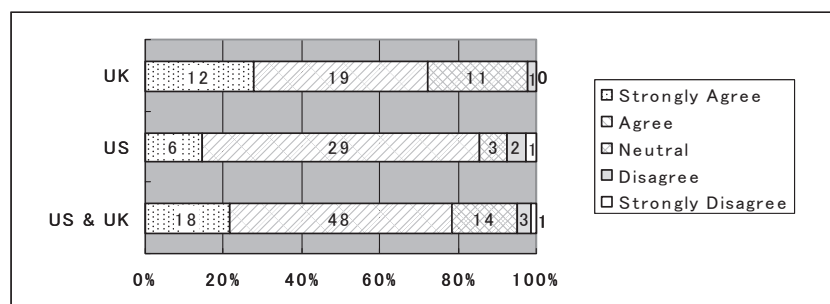
Q1: I felt I would like to visit the country (UK / USA) .

Q2: I felt I would like to visit the city (Oxford / San Francisco) .

Q3: I felt I would like to go abroad.

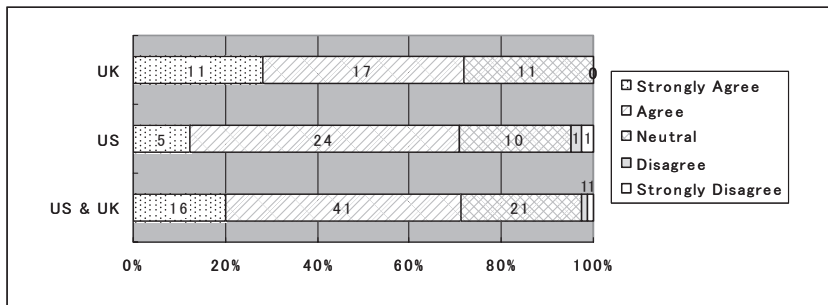
Q4: I felt that I am interested in other countries.

[Figure 1] Q1: I felt I would like to visit the country (UK / USA).



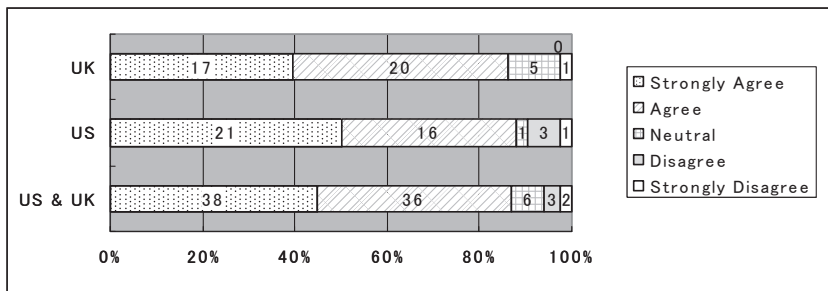
The answers to question 1 show that nearly 80% of the students (66 out of 84) felt that they would like to visit the country introduced in the DVD. As regards Group 1 students who watched the DVD taken in the UK, 72% of them (31 out of 43) agreed with this feeling, and more than 85% of Group 2 students (35 out of 41), who watched the DVD taken in the USA, felt the same. Group 2 students could see various places visited by a Japanese traveler, while the DVD for Group 1 mainly focused the living place and other surrounding areas. Thus, Group 2 students had more chance to see different scenes than the students in Group 1.

[Figure 2] Q2: I felt I would like to visit the city (Oxford / San Francisco).



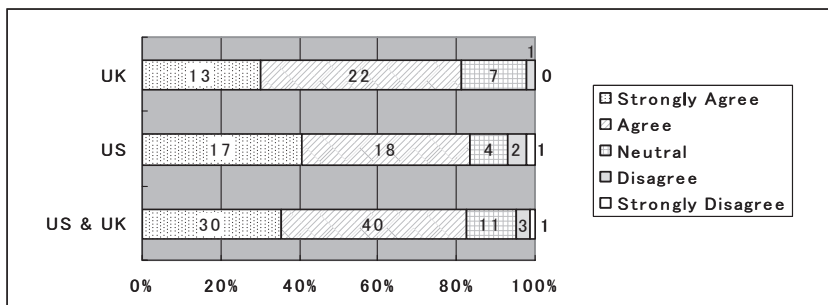
The result of question 2 also discovered that around 70% of the students felt that they would like to visit the city shown in the DVD (UK: 28 out of 39, US: 29 out of 41) and there was only two students who disagreed with this idea.

[Figure 3] Q3: I felt I would like to go abroad.



According to the responses to question 3, a majority of the students (over 85%) felt that they would like to go abroad after learning English with the audio-visual materials. In addition, half of the students in Group 2 students chose “Strongly Agree” (21 out of 42), while 40% of Group 1 students chose the same (17 out of 43).

[Figure 4] Q4: I felt that I am interested in other countries.



The answers to question 4 indicate that 35 students in both groups (over 80%) agreed that they felt interested in other countries. 30% of Group 1 students and 40% of Group 2 students **strongly agreed** with this idea (UK: 13 out of 43, US: 17 out of 42). Like the answers to question 1, more students in Group 2 are interested in foreign countries, since they probably can see a wider variety of places introduced in the DVD than Group 1 students.

4.1.2 *Recognizing the life and culture of other countries*

In this section, the results from the following four questions are introduced and it is explored how students recognize the life and culture of other countries.

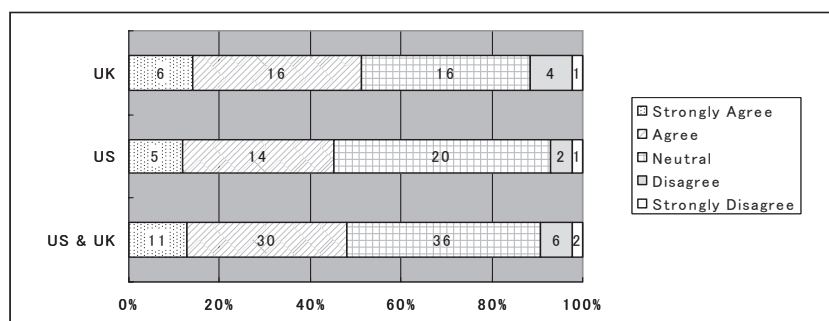
Q5: I could imagine the life in the country.

Q6: I felt the difference between life in the country and life in Japan.

Q7: I could learn about the culture of the country.

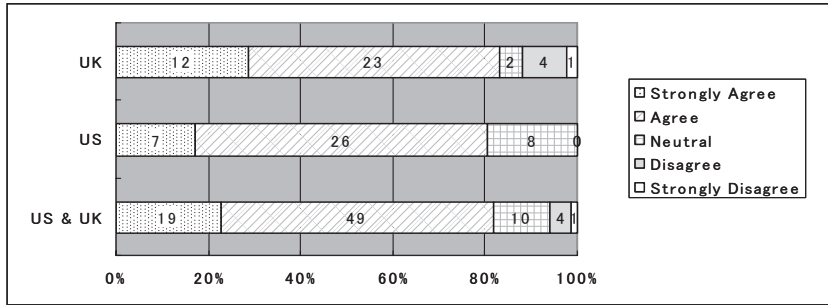
Q8: I felt the difference between the culture of the country and Japanese culture.

[Figure 5] Q5: I could imagine the life in the country.



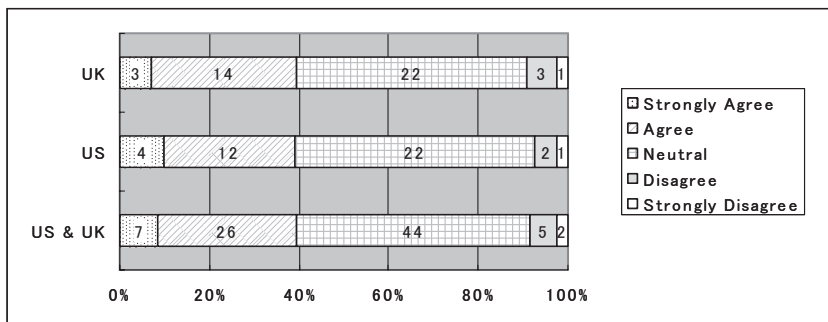
According to the answers to question 5, about half of Group 1 students could imagine life in the UK (22 out of 43), and a few less students in Group 2 felt the same (19 out of 42). Furthermore, 37% of Group 1 students and 47% of Group 2 students chose “Neutral” to this question (UK: 16 out of 43, US: 20 out of 42). As mentioned in 3.2, Group 1 students watched the DVD which focuses on British people who are living together in the same house, and the DVD for Group 2 is about a Japanese traveler visiting many different places in the USA. Therefore, it might be easier for Group 1 students to imagine the life in the country.

[Figure 6] Q6: I felt the difference between life in the country and life in Japan.



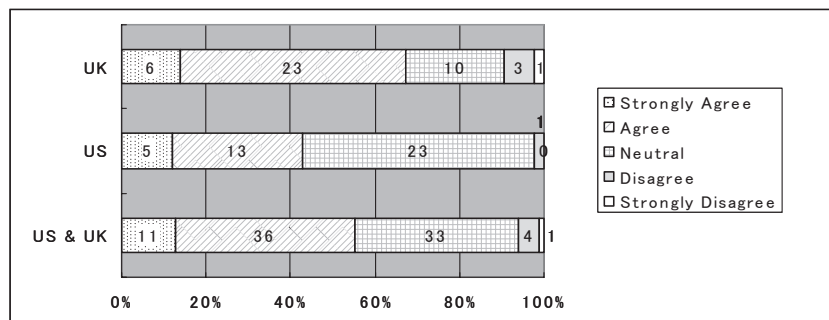
The answers to question 6 revealed that over 80% of the students recognized the difference in the life of other countries shown in the DVD (UK: 35 out of 42, US: 33 out of 41), and none of the students in Group 2 disagreed with this idea.

[Figure 7] Q7: I could learn about the culture of the country.



For question 7, both groups had very similar answers. Half of the students chose “Neutral”, and nearly 40% of the students in both groups agreed with this idea. Students might be able to pick up some cultural aspects through the stories shown in DVDs, however, it might be difficult to understand what the culture of the country actually is since the visual information in the audio-visual materials is very limited and the meaning of culture is very vague in this question.

[Figure 8] Q8: I felt the difference between the culture of the country and Japanese culture.



Unlike the answers to question 7, the results of the two groups from question 8 were slightly different. Well over half of Group 1 students felt that the culture in the foreign country was different from ours (29 out of 43). However, more than half of Group 2 students chose “Neutral” to this question (22 out of 42). Similar to question 5, it might be easier for Group 1 students to recognize the cultural differences since they could see aspects of the foreign life through the story in the DVD (see 3.2).

4.1.3 *Motivation and the effect on learning*

In this section, the results from the following four questions are presented for investigating the students’ motivation and the effect on FL learning with audio-visual materials.

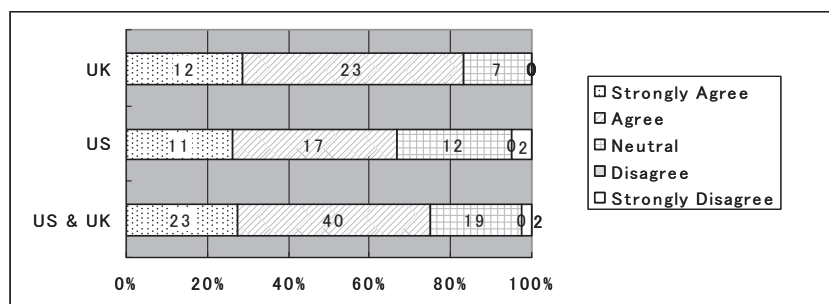
Q10: I think my motivation to study English increased through watching the audio-visual materials.

Q11: I think watching DVDs is effective for learning language.

Q12: I think I could learn authentic (natural) English.

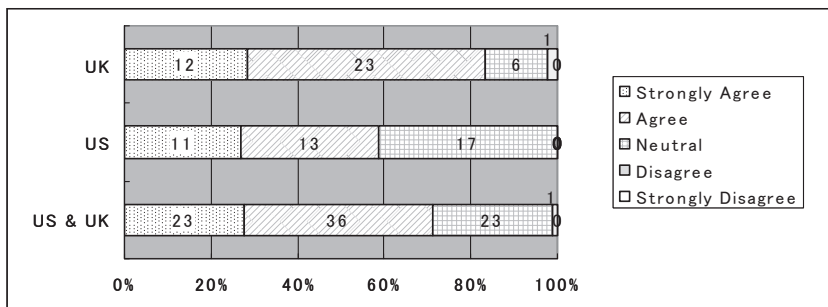
Q13: I think my listening ability increased.

[Figure 10] Q10: I think my motivation to study English increased through watching the audio-visual materials.



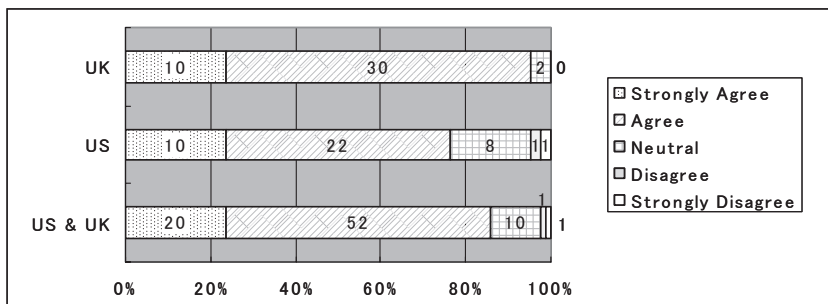
The responses to question 10 clearly show that the use of audio-visual materials highly increased the learners’ motivation. More than a quarter of the students in each group **strongly agreed** that the motivation to study English increased through watching DVDs in the class. Over 80% of Group 1 students agreed with this feeling, and two-thirds students in Group 2 also felt the same (UK: 35 out of 42, US: 28 out of 42). The English level of Group 1 students was relatively higher than the one of Group 2 students, so this might be the reason why more students in Group 1 felt their motivation to learn English increased with the use of audio-visual materials.

[Figure 11] Q11: I think watching DVDs is effective for learning language.



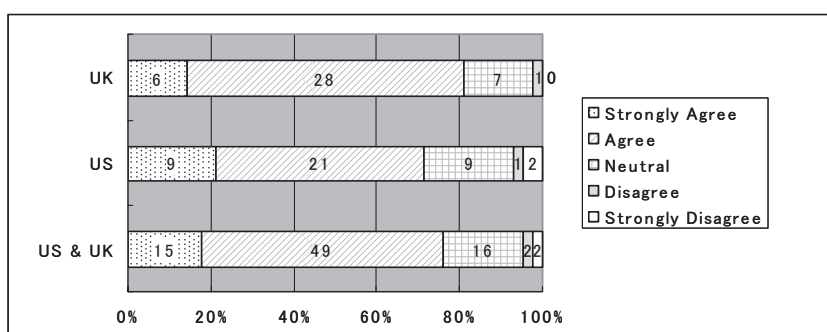
The answers to question 11 are very similar to those to question 10. The same number of students in Group 1 chose “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” in both questions (Strongly Agree:12, Agree:23). Regarding Group 2 students, 11 students strongly agreed with this idea like question 10, but slightly more students chose “Neutral” to this question. In total, over 70% of the students agreed that watching DVDs is effective for language learning (59 out of 83).

[Figure 12] Q12: I think I could learn authentic (natural) English.



It might be difficult for students to define what real “authentic (natural)” English is, but the following is what they felt in answering question 12. The same number of students in both groups (10 out of 42) **strongly agreed** that they could learn authentic (natural) English through watching DVDs in the class. The material shown to Group 1 included conversation only by British people, while Group 2 students always listened to conversation between a Japanese girl, who speaks fluent English, and local people (see 3.2). This is probably the reason why over 95% of the Group 1 students agreed with this feeling (40 out of 42).

[Figure 13] Q13: I think my listening ability increased.



The answers to question 13 made it clear that a majority of the students in both groups felt their listening ability increased at the end of the course. For example, 80% of the students in Group 1 agreed with this feeling (34 out of 42), and 70% of the Group 2 students felt the same.

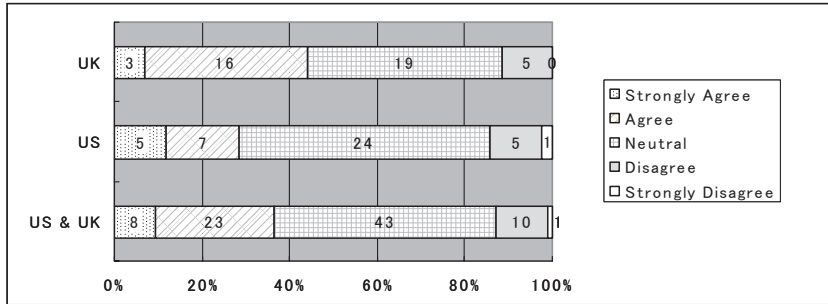
4.1.4 *Level of the audio-visual materials*

In this section, the results from the following two questions are introduced in order to examine the level of the audio-visual materials employed in the surveyed classes.

Q14: I felt the level of the conversation in the audio-visual materials is high.

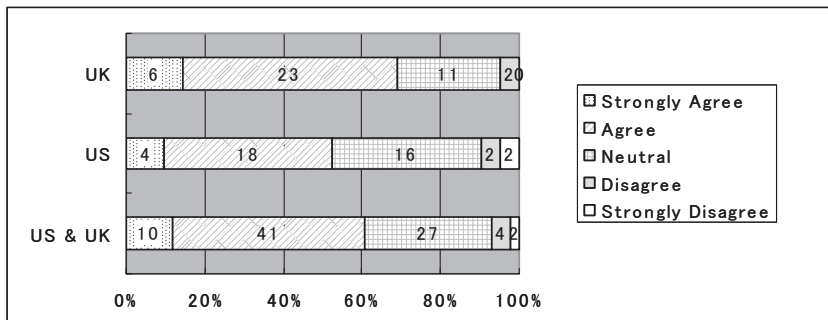
Q15: I felt the speed of the conversation in the audio-visual materials is fast.

[Figure 14] Q14: I felt the level of the conversation in the audio-visual materials is high.



It is obvious from the responses to question 14 that the levels of the conversation in the audio-visual materials were relatively high, since only around 5 students in each group disagreed with this idea. In Group 1, the number of students who chose either “Strongly Agree” + “Agree” or “Neutral” is the same (each 19 out of 43), whereas the number of Group 2 students who chose “Neutral” is twice as many as the students who chose “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” (SA/A:12, N:24). In fact, the level of the DVD shown to Group 2 was easier because of the specific setting which focuses on a Japanese traveler visiting many places in the USA.

[Figure 15] Q15: I felt the speed of the conversation in the audio-visual materials is fast.



Even though there were not many students who felt the levels of the conversation in the audio-visual materials were very high according to the question 14, the answers to question 15 showed that a majority of the students felt that the speed of the conversation in the DVDs is fast. For example, nearly 70% of Group 1 students agreed with this feeling (29 out of 42), and over half of Group 2 students felt the same (22 out of 42). This result might support the idea that the visual aspects of the materials help learners’ comprehension of listening conversation.

4.1.5 *Process of the comprehension*

In this section, the results from the following seven questions are presented for investigating the process of learners' comprehension of English conversation in audio-visual materials.

Q16: How much did you understand the content of the audio-visual materials after the first viewing?

Q17: I felt that I didn't understand what the speakers said in the conversation.

Q18: I predicted the meaning of unknown words.

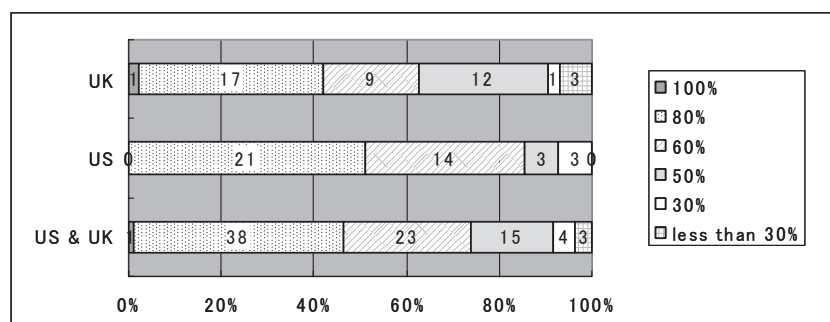
Q19: I felt uneasy when I didn't catch the words.

Q20: I could understand the content of the story better as I repeatedly watched the DVD.

Q21: I felt the audio-visual aids facilitate the understanding of the content.

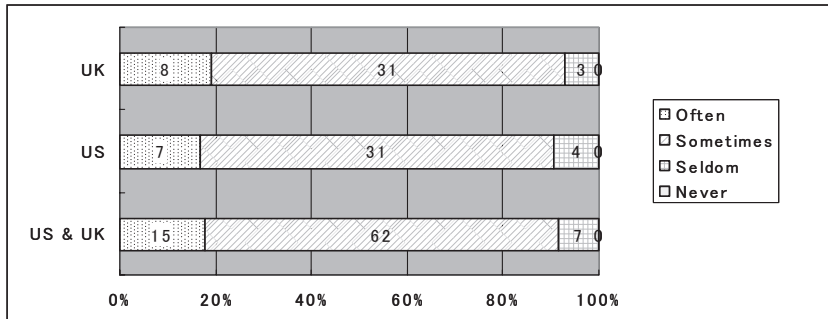
Q22: After watching the DVD around 3 times, how much of the story do you think you understood?

[Figure 16] Q16: How much did you understand the content of the audio-visual materials after the first viewing?



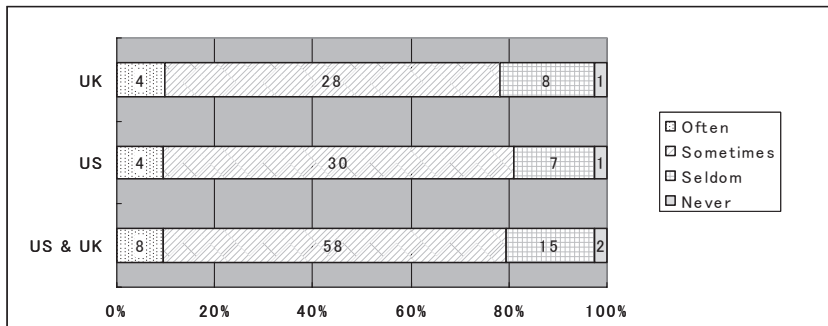
According to the responses to question 16, a majority of the students could understand most of the DVD stories after the first viewing. For example, over 40% of Group 1 students said that they understood nearly 80% of the conversation, while around half of Group 2 students answered the same. There are only a few students who understood less than 30%. I wonder if the same result would come when they listen to the same conversation without visual aids.

[Figure 17] Q17: I felt that I didn't understand what the speakers said in the conversation.



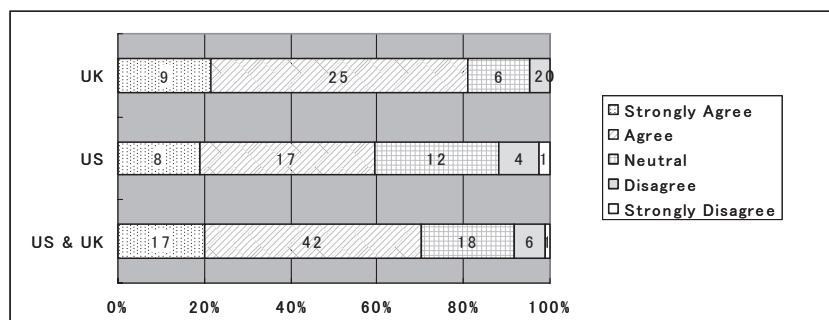
Even if most students could understand around 80% of the story after the first viewing (Q16), over 90% students in both groups **often or sometimes** felt that they didn't understand what the speakers said in the conversation (UK: 39 out of 42, US: 38 out of 42). The answers from both groups are very similar, and only a few students chose "seldom" and nobody chose "never" for this question.

[Figure 18] Q18: I predicted the meaning of unknown words.



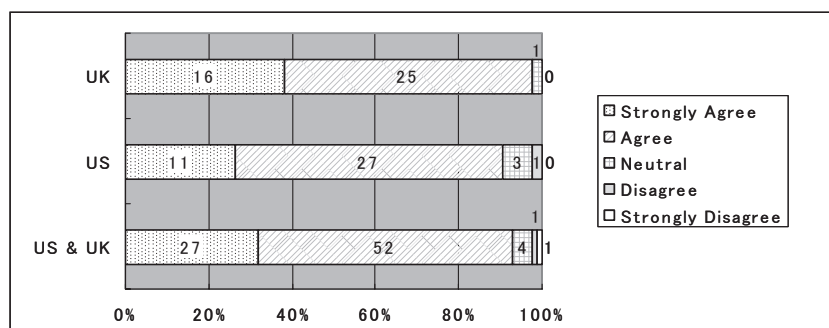
It is also interesting to know that around 80% of the students in both groups **often or sometimes** predicted the meaning of unknown words, even though the teacher didn't tell them to do so (UK: 32 out of 41, US: 34 out of 42). According to the answers in question 17, more than 90% students **often or sometimes** felt that they didn't understand what the speakers said in the conversation. Therefore, it is likely that students guessed the meaning of unknown words or phrases several times with some visual support.

[Figure 19] Q19: I felt uneasy when I didn't catch the words.



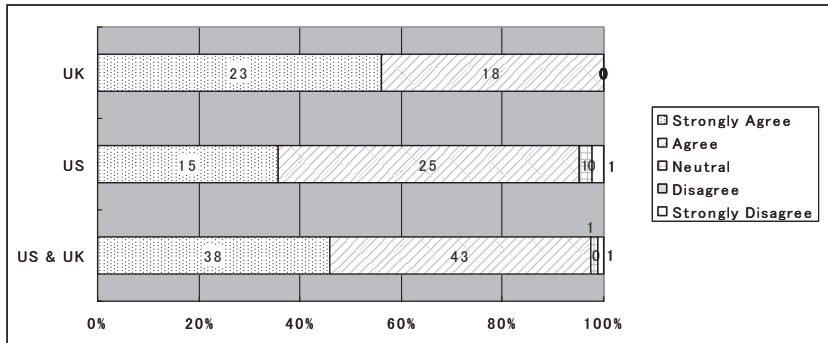
The answers to question 19 showed that there were many students who felt uneasy when they didn't catch some words in the conversations. For example, 80% of Group 1 students agreed with this feeling (34 out of 42), and 60% of Group 2 students felt the same (25 out of 42). In fact, more difficult vocabulary appeared in the DVD for Group 1 because it focuses on conversation only among British people.

[Figure 20] Q20: I could understand the content of the story better as I repeatedly watched the DVD.



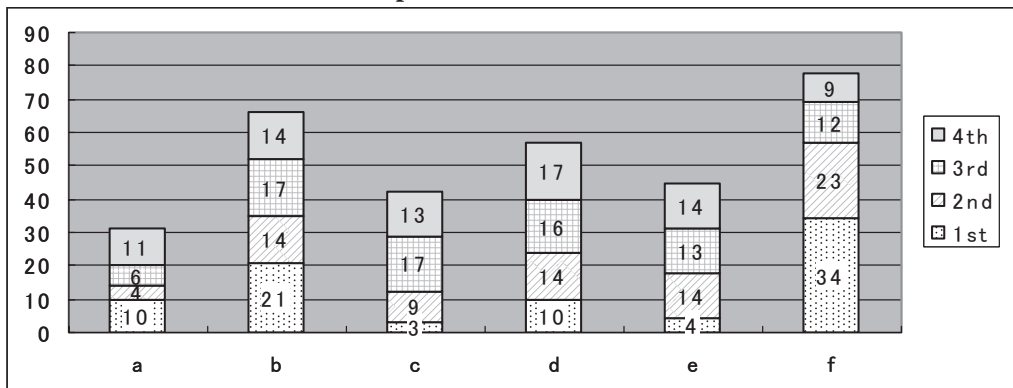
As we can predict the answers of question 20 easily, quite a high percentage of the students felt that they could understand the DVD story better as they watched it repeatedly (around 3 times per lesson). More than a third of Group 1 students **strongly agreed** with this idea, and nearly 100% students chose either "Strongly Agree" or "Agree" to this question. 90% of the Group 2 students also agreed with this idea, and a quarter chose "Strongly Agree".

[Figure 21] Q21-1: I felt the audio-visual aids facilitate the understanding of the content.



The answers to this question made it clear that audio-visual materials help learners to understand the conversations. In Group 1, over half of the students **strongly agreed** with this feeling (23 out of 41), and everyone chose either “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” to this question. More than a third of Group 2 students also **strongly agreed** with this idea (15 out of 42), and everyone, except for two students, chose either “Strongly Agree” or “Agree”.

[Figure 22] Q21-2: Why did you think so? Please choose the possible reasons from the choices given below, and put them in order according to the level how helpful the factor is.

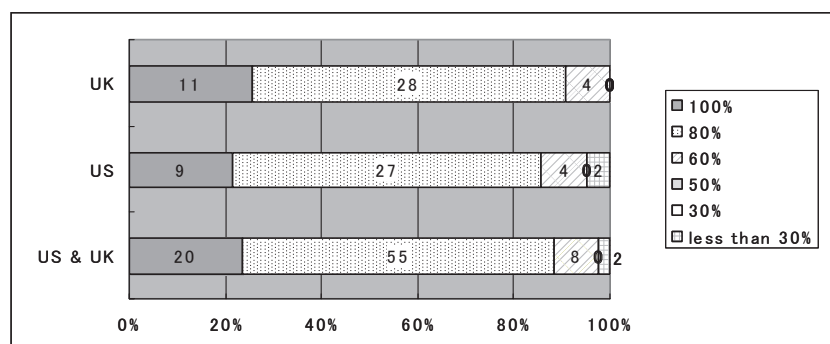


- a. *pronunciation & intonation*
- b. *facial expression*
- c. *vocabulary in the conversation*
- d. *relationships between actors / actresses*
- e. *body language*
- f. *places and settings where conversation is held*

For question 21-2, respondents needed to choose the four most helpful factors for understanding the conversation in the DVDs, and it was found which visual factors significantly facilitated learners’ comprehension. According to Figure 22,

item (f) “*places and settings of the conversation*” was selected by over 90% of the students (78 out of 85). In addition, 40% of them chose this item as the most helpful factor (34 out of 85). Nearly 80% of the students also chose item (b) “*facial expression*” (66 out of 85), and almost a quarter of them regarded this factor as the most helpful factor. Item (d) “*relationships between actors and actresses*” was also chosen by almost 70% of the students (57 out of 85). Most of the helpful factors are related to non-verbal features which students can see in the audio-visual materials, and the item (a) “*pronunciation & intonation*”, which is not a visual factor, gained the lowest support.

[Figure 23] Q22: After watching the DVD around 3 times, how much of the story do you think you understood?



The answers to question 16 showed that around half of the students could understand nearly 80% after they watched DVDs the first time (UK: 18 out of 43, US: 21 out of 41). According to the responses to question 22, over 90 % of Group 1 students felt that they could understand nearly 80% after watching the same DVD around 3 times (39 out of 43), while more than 85% of Group 2 students felt the same (36 out of 42). It is also revealed that there were only 10 out of 85 students who understood 60% or less even after watching the DVD three times.

4.1.6 Results from open-ended question

There is only one open-ended question which required students to describe the most impressive parts of the story (Q9: Please describe the most impressive parts [scenes / contents] in the story).

Several students in Group 1 felt it strange that people who were neither family members nor friends were sharing the same house because “it is unusual in Japan”. And one student wrote that it was surprising to know there was an

interview to select a new flatmate. Some students were also impressed with one of the beginning scenes in which flatmates were fighting about cleaning their place because the relationships among them did not seem good. A student remembered very well the emotional intonation of an utterance; “Who’s going to clear that up!”. However, nearly ten students were impressed with the very last scene, which was unexpected, because two out of four flatmates suddenly fell in love.

As regards Group 2, a few students found it is interesting to have a barbecue party in a garden with the following comments; “Americans seem to have a lot of parties with friends, but we seldom do in Japan”, “I also would like to experience a barbecue party”, “The food there looks delicious”, etc. Some students mentioned house-related things, such as; “The house/garden of the host family is very big”, “It is convenient to have a shower booth in the guest room, while Japanese houses usually have only one bathroom”. Others were impressed with the beautiful views of San Francisco (Golden Gate Bridge with mountains behind, downtown with a steep slope, etc.). There were also some students who were interested in the scenes held in a restaurant or an open-terrace café, and they recognized how manners, food and atmosphere differed from the ones in Japan.

4.2 Discussion of key findings

This section aims to answer each of the research questions by focusing on key findings, and develops the discussion by reviewing the empirical research explained above.

1) What are the roles of audio-visual materials in learning English effectively in the EFL classroom context? [Research Question 1]

It was found that a majority of the students felt interested in visiting the foreign countries and places shown in the audio-visual materials (see 4.1.1). Although it would have been better to conduct this survey before and after the course of watching DVDs to compare the data, the result proves that the materials could “introduce authentic elements into classroom without the necessity of travel” and “stimulate learners’ intrinsic interest”, and enhance learners positive views of going abroad (Lafford, & Lafford, 1997; Muyskens, 1994; Cambre, et al., 1992; Lutcavage, 1990; Wildner-Bassett, 1990).

In addition, this study revealed that most students felt that watching DVDs is effective for learning foreign languages and their motivations to study English also increased (see 4.1.3). It is probably because they thought that they could learn

authentic (natural) English through the materials, as about 80% of the participants answered in question 12 (Rogers, & Medley, 1988; Lutcavage, 1990; DeRolf, 1996; Hennessey, 1995). This research did not employ a survey to measure the improvement of learners' English ability, but a majority of students, in fact, felt that their listening ability increased during this course. This supported the findings of Rubin (1990) and Secules et al. (1992) described above (see 2.1).

2) What cultural aspects in the audio-visual materials do students find different from ones which they experience in Japan? [Research Question 2]

The survey questions 5 to 8 explored how students recognize the life and culture of the foreign countries shown in the DVDs, and it was found that around half of the participants could imagine the life in the foreign country and nearly 40% of them felt they learned some aspects of the target culture (see. 4.1.2). In addition, well over 80% of students felt the differences between the lives in the foreign countries and those in Japan (Martinez-Gibson, 1998; Rogers & Medley, 1988; Lutcavage, 1990; Bush, 2000; Chun, & Plass, 2000) (see 4.1.2).

Group 1 students who watched the DVD focusing on the life of British people felt more strongly that the culture is different from ours than Group 2 students who watched the DVDs about a girl traveling in the USA. This study did not focus on any specific knowledge about the target culture, but it is clear that learners recognized differences in life and culture of foreign countries through the audio-visual materials. This result endorses the findings of Herron et al.(1999, 2000) which proved that the use of episodic videos improved overall cultural knowledge.

3) What kinds of visual factors facilitate listening and understanding the contents of the audio-visual materials? [Research Question 3]

According to the results from the questions which investigated the levels of the audio-visual materials (Q14 & 15) and the process of learners' comprehension (Q16 - Q22), it was found that only 10 out of 85 students felt the level of the audio-visual materials was high, and more than half of them felt the speed of the conversation in the DVDs is fast (see. 4.1.4). Furthermore, over 90% of students often or sometimes felt that they didn't understand the conversations shown in the DVDs, and many students (Group 1: 34, Group2: 25) felt uneasy when they did not catch some words (see 4.1.5). However, a majority of students (Group 1: 39, Group 2: 36) answered that they could understand more than 80% of the story after watching the same DVDs three times. This result did not support the view

of Just and Carpenter (1992) emphasizing the limitation of the learners' capacity to process cultural elements with audio-visual materials. In addition, nearly 100% of the participants (except for 1 in Group 2) agreed that the audio-visual aids could facilitate their understanding (see. Figure 21), and around 80% of the participants tended to predict the meanings of unknown words (see 4.1.5). Figure 22 shows that non-verbal factors, which learners can see mainly in the audio-visual materials, are very helpful for them to understand the story of the materials. Especially the information about the settings or places where the conversations are held, facial expressions and gestures of the actors and actresses were chosen by many students (Law, 1980; Secules et al., 1992; Lutcavage, 1992; Swaffar, & Vlatten, 1997). The answers to the open-ended question tell that students were mainly impressed with the sizes, scales, and beautiful views of the places, and also enjoyed feeling the unique atmospheres, behaviors or manners which they could notice in the DVDs.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the effectiveness of audio-visual materials for developing intercultural understanding and listening skills in the EFL classroom contexts by investigating Japanese university students learning English in Japan. In order to analyze the target situation, a questionnaire was employed as a method to collect data, and major findings related to the three research questions have been discussed.

The findings of this study confirmed that the learners felt interested in foreign places and recognized the differences in culture and life of the countries as a result of the course. Most students agreed that the use of audio-visual materials is very effective for improving their motivation to learn the target language as well as their listening ability, since they felt they could learn the cultural and authentic aspects of the language.

It was also revealed that visual information, such as facial expressions, gestures and settings in the conversation, facilitated learners' understanding significantly, and they seemed able to predict unknown words or parts of conversations due to the visual factors provided in the materials.

Therefore, this study proves that audio-visual materials can be a very effective and powerful pedagogical tool for Japanese students in the EFL classroom to integrate learning cultural aspects into language learning, if the instructors can

employ them successfully with the appropriate facilities (Cook et al., 1988; McCoy, 1990). In addition, it is important to combine other activities such as discussion or role playing with the audio-visual materials (Hogan-Brun, & Whittle, 1998).

However, this research did not measure the learners' listening ability and the cultural proficiency before and after the course with control and experiment groups to get comparative data. It is hoped that the findings in this study endorsed the results of previous research in the similar fields and confirmed that its findings can be applicable to Japanese students learning English in the EFL context.

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