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The Analysis of a Short Study Abroad Program at ICU

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Abstract

With the popularity of studying abroad on the rise, a closer look at the effects of ICU's SEA Program were taken into consideration for this study. Due to a variety of changes having occurred since Watanabe's (2000) study of the SEA Program, an updated look at the program was deemed necessary. The TOEFL ITP pre-test and IELTS post test scores of 333 students in the ELA Program were statistically analyzed. Special attention was paid to any differences in English gains between the students who had participated in the SEA Program and those who had not. In addition, a comparison of the test scores between the students who had experienced homestay was made with the scores of those who had stayed in a dormitory. While a small effect was found in the first comparison, there did not appear to be a statistically significant difference in the second comparison. The effect of further variables on the gains in English in connection with the SEA Program should be considered in the future.

Study abroad programs have been popular around the world for a variety of reasons. In 2003, to meet the needs of students in an increasingly globalized world and particularly to raise Japanese people's motivation to learn English, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or MEXT, started promoting a study abroad program for high school and university students (MEXT, 2003). More recently, MEXT started a special project which aimed at doubling the number of both high school and university students who will study abroad by 2020 (MEXT, 2013). Additionally, in 2014, 37 universities in Japan were chosen to implement a "top global university project," and 24 of these initial 37 were expected to promote Japanese society's "internationalization" (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, 2010). Due to these attempts, in 2015 the number of university students who studied abroad, including short study abroad programs, increased by 3,237 to 84,456 over the previous year (MEXT, 2017).

Despite its popularity, the effectiveness of a study abroad program on second language learning is still unclear. Ellis (2008) claimed that although it is often believed that learners are likely to achieve higher L2 proficiency in natural settings than educational settings, this assumption is not always true. He added that it is important to examine the aspects of linguistic competence and concluded that learners in natural settings tend to improve oral fluency as well as pragmatic competence, while those who learn in educational settings tend to acquire higher grammatical knowledge, although he also acknowledged that individual differences among these learners exist.

Study abroad programs are also a controversial topic in the field of applied linguistics. For instance, many studies on this topic have been conducted, but these studies were conducted from various perspectives and contained many variables. Coleman (2009) pointed

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out 20 parameters for study abroad research such as “academic context,” “age,” “proficiency prior to departure,” and “accommodation” (p. 183). He categorized “duration” into five different lengths: (a) two to six weeks, (b) below one semester, (c) one semester (including summer semester), (d) one year or two semesters, and (e) full degree program (p. 183). Furthermore, the definition of study abroad varies. For this, in order to distinguish study abroad from migration, Kinginger (2009) defined study abroad as “a temporary sojourn of pre-defined duration, undertaken for educational purposes” (p. 11). She explained that, “a study abroad experience may fulfill degree requirements or may provide enrichment within a home-based degree program, normally at the post-secondary level” (p. 11), and that, “study abroad, according to this definition, also includes the cases of individuals who go to another country or region temporarily and for educational reasons, often involving language learning” (p. 11). Following her own definition, she classified research on study abroad into four categories: (a) outcomes-based research on general proficiency development and on aspects of communicative competence; (b) studies of specific learner activities believed to correlate with language development; (c) ethnographies and case studies; and (d) mixed-method studies combining qualitative inquiry with measurement or other documentation of language learning (Kinging, 2011, p. 60). In her more recent work, she summarized and reported on the findings of research on study abroad (Kinging, 2013). First, in general, study abroad has the possibility to foster learners’ language skills in all aspects. Second, study abroad can be especially helpful to develop learners’ skills needed for social interaction. Lastly, there are massive individual differences in these studies. Thus, study abroad is a complex issue, and therefore, it is essential to pay attention to these variables when previous studies are examined.

In the Japanese university context, many researchers have investigated this issue but their findings seem to be inconsistent. For example, Tanaka and Ellis (2003) examined the effectiveness of a 15-week study abroad program quantitatively. They compared the TOEFL PBT scores of 166 participants before and during the study abroad program by conducting *t*-tests, and explored whether linguistic changes would happen. They found that the overall TOEFL scores improved during the study abroad program and that the largest gain was confirmed in the grammar section, called Structure/Written Expression, whilst the smallest gain was seen in the listening section. In contrast, Fujio (2013) investigated the effectiveness of a one-month study abroad program qualitatively by focusing on two participants. By analyzing interview data, she found that both participants improved their language skills in terms of the amount and complexity of their oral production, turn-taking style, fluency, and use of communication strategies. Fujio continued her study and measured whether the same progress could be seen one year after they came back to Japan (Fujio, 2014). Interestingly, she confirmed that the learners were able to maintain only the amount and complexity of their language production.

Furthermore, Watanabe (2000) conducted a quantitative study at the International Christian University (ICU). He evaluated the English program by analyzing the TOEFL PBT scores before and after the program. He also compared the TOEFL scores between the students who took part in a 6-week study abroad program and those who did not. His research results indicated that the study abroad program was effective because those who participated in the overseas program gained significantly higher scores than those who did not. Particularly, for the students who were at intermediate and high intermediate proficiency levels, progress in the listening section was impressive, whereas for the advanced level students, improvement in the grammar section was the greatest.

Watanabe’s (2000) study did not distinguish whether the participants lived with a host

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family or in a dormitory with other international students who belonged to the same study abroad program. However, since “accommodation” is one of the variables (Coleman, 2009, p. 183), this difference should be considered in the comparison. According to Kinginger’s (2009) analysis of the previous studies on the advantages of homestay, learners who stayed in family homes usually regard their homestay experience as advantageous by stating that they were able to have more chances to speak the target language. On the other hand, she illustrated such benefits depend on what kind of relationship the learners and their host family develop by referring to two case studies: one that relayed a positive experience and the other that relayed a negative experience (Kinging, 2009). Interestingly, one quantitative study employing *t*-tests which compared the gain scores of students who stayed in family homes with the ones of those who lived in dorms showed contradictory results (Rivers, 1998). The researcher found that homestay students tended to gain lower scores in speaking and listening than dorm students, but these homestay students tended to gain higher scores in reading. Since this study examined American learners in Russia, compared a larger number of dorm students with a smaller number of students who stayed in homes, and included old data which were collected from 1976, it may be inappropriate to apply the results to modern settings. That said, this research explores the effects on outcome by the type of accommodation learners have experienced.

Thus, although there are many studies which focused on Japanese university students who study English as well as some studies which investigated the impact of accommodation, it is important to remember each study includes many variables. In this respect, Watanabe’s (2000) study seems most comparable. However, there have been several changes since Watanabe’s study that might now affect his results. First, in 2012, the English program at ICU experienced a curriculum reform. In addition, as Kinginger (2013) noted, “study abroad in the age of Facebook is not the same phenomenon it was years ago” (p. 7). Therefore, the effectiveness of the short study abroad program needs to be examined again, considering the possible change of the students’ environment and increase in online communication. Moreover, since IELTS scores are now being used as the exit test, it has become necessary to devise a new way to compare TOEFL scores and IELTS scores. In addition, in Watanabe’s (2000) study, accommodation was not taken into consideration, but as Rivers’ (1997) study showed, accommodation can be an important variable when we analyze the data. For these reasons, it is significant to examine the effectiveness of the study abroad program at ICU again.

In the current study, the following research questions (RQs) were investigated.

RQ1 To what extent do the language proficiency test scores of the learners who took part in the study abroad program differ from those who did not participate?

RQ2 To what extent do the language proficiency test scores of the learners who stayed in homes during the study abroad program differ from those who stayed in dorms?

Methods

This study was conducted at ICU, a bilingual university in Tokyo. At ICU, the English program curriculum has been developed to meet the students’ needs. In order to facilitate their needs a significant curriculum reform was made in 2012; the students participating in the English program started to be classified into four different proficiency levels as opposed to the previous program’s three (English for Liberal Arts Program, 2015). To divide the students into appropriate proficiency levels, the TOEFL ITP test was administered in April in 2015. As

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a result, 20 students were placed into stream 1 (high advanced), in which the TOEFL scores were over 613, 85 students were in stream 2 (high intermediate) where the scores ranged from approximately 550 to 640, 349 students were in stream 3 (intermediate) where the scores were approximately 440 to 590, and 121 students were placed in stream 4 (low intermediate) where the scores ranged from 370 to 490 (English for Liberal Arts Program, 2015). Test scores alone were not the deciding factor, so other criteria were utilized, such as writing samples and interviews. As an exit test for the ELA, IELTS was used. Stream 1 students took the test in November in 2015, stream 2 and 3 students took it in March of 2016, and stream 4 students were examined in June of 2016. While the TOEFL was mandatory, the IELTS was not. Out of the 575 students who enrolled in the program, 569 students took the TOEFL fully, 344 students took the IELTS, and 342 students took both TOEFL and IELTS. Out of those students who took both the tests, nine students whose TOEFL scores were 640 or above were eliminated from the analysis to avoid a ceiling effect. As a result, the scores of 333 students were analyzed in this study.

In 2015, 208 freshmen participated in a six-week short-term study abroad program called the SEA Program. According to Coleman (2009), this length belongs to the first category, (a) two to six weeks. This program also fits the definition of study abroad given by Kinginger (2009). The students studied at 11 locations with various accommodation options. Table 1 shows the universities, the number of students, the number of weeks the students stayed at home or in a dorm, and the groups used for data analysis. With regards to accommodation, 83 students experienced homestay, 95 students lived in a dorm for the entire time or the majority of the time, and 40 students experienced three weeks in each setting.

Table 1
SEA Program Sites and Modes of Accommodation

University	<i>n</i>	HS	D	Group
A	24	6	0	HS
B	20	6	0	HS
C	19	6	0	HS
D	20	6	0	HS
E	20	3	3	
F	20	3	3	
G	25	1	5	D
H	20	0	6	D
I	20	0	6	D
J	20	0	6	D
K	10	0	6	D

Note. HS = homestay; D = dormitory

To make the comparison easier, we eliminated the third group that experienced an equal amount of both homestay and dorm-stay. Since the study incorporated two different institutionalized tests, the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was used to make the comparison possible (Educational Testing

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Service, 2017; Eiken, 2017; IELTS, 2017). More precisely, the test scores from the entry test (TOEFL) and those from the exit test (IELTS) were converted to the CEFR levels first, and then the improvements were represented with a scale. Following this, independent *t*-tests were conducted for the purpose of examining whether it is possible to say the two groups of students improved in different ways.

Results

RQ1 (To what extent do the language proficiency test scores of the learners who took part in the study abroad program differ from those who did not participate?) was answered by dividing the participants into two groups; those who took part in the study abroad program (SEA), and those who did not (Non-SEA). Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the two groups. Of those students whose scores were examined in this study, 142 students participated in the study abroad program, and 191 students did not. When their pre-test scores and post-test scores were converted to the CEFR levels, it was found that the SEA students improved their English by 1.18 in the CEFR levels on average, while the Non-SEA students improved by 1.07.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of SEA and Non-SEA

Group	<i>n</i>	Pre		Post		CEFR	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
SEA	142	500.66	41.92	5.73	.52	1.18	.50
Non-SEA	191	528.25	50.00	6.12	.75	1.07	.52

Then, to compare the two groups in terms of gains in English skills, an independent *t*-test was conducted. There was a significant difference between the SEA and Non-SEA participants; $t(331)=2.02, p=.04$. The results show that those who participated in the study abroad program improved their English more than those who did not. In this study, the effect size, Cohen's *d*, was obtained, following Plonsky's (2015) suggestion, and it was 0.22. According to Cohen (1989), the effect size was small.

RQ2 (To what extent do the language proficiency test scores of the learners who stayed in homes during the study abroad program differ from those who stayed in dorms?), was answered in the following way. As can be seen in Table 1, the participants were divided into three groups; 83 students who stayed in a home during the entire study abroad program (HS), 40 students who stayed in a home half of the time and lived in the dorm during the other half, and 95 students who lived in the dorm for all or the majority of the study abroad program (D). In the current study, only those who took both the tests in HS and D were compared, with the second group excluded from the analysis. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the two groups.

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Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Homestay Students (HS) and Dormitory Students (D)

Group	<i>n</i>	Pre		Post		CEFR	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
HS	57	497.61	37.86	5.84	.44	1.21	.41
D	56	505.36	49.01	5.85	.66	1.13	.57

In order to examine the inferential statistics of the two groups for gains in the CEFR level, another independent *t*-test was conducted, but no significant trend was found between the two groups; $t(111)=0.91$, $p=.36$, and its effect size was $d=0.16$. The result shows that the students in HS and D improved their English to similar extents.

Discussion

When those who participated in the study abroad program (SEA) and those who did not (Non-SEA) were compared, it was found that the SEA students gained more English proficiency than the Non-SEA students. Even though Non-SEA students also studied English in Japan, the results are understandable. Those who participated in the study abroad program were exposed to more English for a longer time. However, the effect size was small, which is also understandable considering the time between the pre-test and the post test, and the various factors involved in the general improvement of the English ability and the additional English classes the Non-SEA students must attend.

As for the comparison between those who stayed at home (HS) and those who stayed in the dorm (D), no statistical significance was found, and its effect size was less than small. As was seen in Kinginger (2009) and Rivers (1998), the experiences may be too complex to detect differences in such a simple analysis as *t*-tests. Nonetheless, if we see the descriptive statistics in Table 3, the average TOEFL score of HS was 497.61 and that of D was 505.36, whereas the average IELTS was 5.84 and 5.85 respectively. Although a simple *t*-test might not be able to detect differences, the differences might exist. Therefore, more complex statistical analyses or qualitative analyses should be conducted to help detect these differences.

Conclusion

In order to examine the extent to which students experienced gains in English proficiency in the study abroad program, two research questions were answered: RQ1 To what extent do the language proficiency test scores of the learners who took part in the study abroad program differ from those who did not participate? and RQ2 To what extent do the language proficiency test scores of the learners who stayed in homes during the study abroad program differ from those who stayed in dorms? As a result of two independent *t*-tests, the first research question was answered in the affirmative, but the second research question was answered in the negative.

This study only examined the students in one cohort and, in the future, attention should be paid to other cohorts of students. Also, differences cannot be attributed solely to the study abroad program, so a more sophisticated analysis could be applied to the data, such as the construction of a model with a number of possible factors that could influence

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improvements in English. For example, the location of the study abroad school as well as their language learning experience prior to entrance into the university could be added to the statistical model.

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