

Exploratory Investigation into Successful and Less Successful Learners of English with Interviews

Keita Yagi and Tetsuya Fukuda
English for Liberal Arts Program
International Christian University

Abstract

Previous analyses revealed that the students in an English program at a bilingual university in Tokyo significantly improved their English proficiency over their first year. Further statistical analyses such as structural equation modeling, however, were unable to discover what factors contributed to the improvement positively or negatively. Thus, to investigate what factors contribute to the success of English learners in the English program, we asked both successful and less successful students how they studied during the first year of their university education in and out of class. The results showed that successful and less successful learners employed no different learning strategies, but two factors, English-speaking selves and test familiarity, emerged as possible factors that might influence the improvement of their English proficiency.

We have been analyzing the test scores obtained from TOEFL ITP and IELTS primarily to evaluate how effective an English education program is in improving the students' English proficiency over the first year (i.e., Erdelyi, Fukuda, & Yagi, 2018; Yagi, Erdelyi, & Fukuda, 2018). As a result, it has been found that students generally improve their English by one CEFR level every year, which is a huge improvement. We have also found that the students with lower levels of English proficiency tend to gain more than those with higher levels of English proficiency, perhaps because in the English program, the lower levels of students take more English classes. On the other hand, our hypothesis that the participants in the study abroad program in summer improve more than those who stay in Japan was rejected. Those who take the same number of English courses in Japan as in the study abroad program improved as well. This led to our question of what factors other than the learners' initial level of English and numbers of English classes contribute to the improvement of English proficiency. To this end, we decided to embark on a longitudinal study employing an exploratory sequential mixed methods design in which we first investigate differences between successful learners and less successful learners by interviewing them, and then examine the possible factors with a larger number of participants with questionnaires.

Following the decision described above, we collected the data of various kinds of learning experiences over the first year at university by interviewing both successful and less successful learners of English. In the English education program, students improve their English proficiency

levels by one CEFR level on average, but some students stay at the same level. We analyzed the interview data to find the strategies that those learners employ.

Literature Review

In the literature review, we discuss two topics: language learning strategies and interviews as a research tool. To investigate whether successful learners and less successful learners study English differently, we decided to examine whether these learners employ different strategies in their learning. We also believe that employing interviews as a research method should be rationalized.

Language Learner Strategies

Although the strategies that language learners employ have been extensively studied for decades (Cohen & Macaro, 2007), it was not until recently that a consensus was attained as to how to define language learning strategy, when researchers got together and discussed the definition, and Cohen (2011) defines it as “thoughts and actions, consciously selected by learners, to assist them in learning and using language in general and in the completion of specific tasks” (p. 682). In the following two paragraphs, we overview language learning strategies in general and specifically in independent learning.

Oxford (2018) pointed out that language learners employ strategies in different contexts. It depends on where they are: in the classroom, at home, online, or in other contexts. The choice of strategies depends on many factors: cultural beliefs, educational background, personal preferences, and other factors. Based on this diversity, Oxford further discussed four key points in analyzing strategies in language learning: (a) learners’ preferences, such as visual and auditory, (b) final targets from high proficiency to low, (c) skills to improve, such as speaking and writing, and (d) purposes, such as professional development and personal enjoyment. Recognizing the diversity summarized in this way, researchers have found evidence that some strategies are effective in certain situations, but another issue to consider is “how research findings can inform pedagogy” (Pawlak, 2019, p. 1). Empirical evidence we generate becomes beneficial only to the extent to which it translates into our everyday instruction. In this regard, our findings from this research should lead to improvements in what we do as language instructors in our classes.

Compared with the studies based on classroom contexts, research on independent language learning settings is new. Until the mid-1970s, individual learners’ learning styles were largely overlooked, but more attention has been paid to it recently (Hurd & Lewis, 2008). According to White (2008), strategies that learners employ in independent learning settings include keeping diaries, intensive vocabulary learning, use of websites, and study abroad opportunities. As in any other factor in language learning, the employment of these strategies varies depending on the individual, and according to Benson and Gao (2008), these variations have been explained using three major approaches: internal and external approaches (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005), context and tasks (e.g., Levine, Reves, & Leaver, 1996), and experience and agency (e.g., Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001). The first approach employs quantitative methods such as questionnaires, and the second and third approaches employ qualitative methods such as observations and interviews. Based on the extensive reviews of literature, Benson and Gao concluded that strategies are woven into contexts

of learning, and in contrast to classroom learning, language learners in independent settings create the environment and situations for themselves.

One empirical study that investigated the strategies that English learners employ was conducted by Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004). In this study, the researchers examined how Chinese university students learning English as a foreign language carried out their out-of-class English learning through interviews, diaries, and email. They collected data from nine successful and nine unsuccessful second-year students. The current study employed a similar research design, but was different in that we interviewed first-year students in a Japanese university.

Interviews as a Research Tool

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), an interview is a “conversation that has a structure and a purpose” and researchers introduce the topic and critically follow up on the participants’ answers to the questions (p. 3). An interview can be placed on a continuum ranging from unstructured through semi-structured to structured. The current research employed semi-structured interviews, in which interviewers go into interviews with a general idea of where the interview will go, but not all questions are predetermined. Nunan (1992) summarizes the three advantages of semi-structured interviews. First, it gives the interviewee a certain amount of power and control. Second, it gives the interviewer a great deal of flexibility. Finally, it gives “one privileged access to other people’s lives” (p. 150), in that participants might share some profound insights into the topic that we are researching.

Our purpose is to explore the factors that might be influencing the improvement of English ability among first-year students while the topic to be investigated was fixed to the strategies that students employed. Thus, the most appropriate data collection method was interview, and the way of interviewing was semi-structured.

Research Questions

Based on the discussions above, we investigated the following research questions:

RQ 1. What strategies did learners use inside the English program? Are there any differences between successful and less successful students?

RQ 2. What strategies did learners use outside the English program? Are there any differences between successful and less successful students?

RQ 3. What other factors might account for improvement or lack of improvement of their test scores?

Method

Context

The study was conducted at a private bilingual university in Tokyo in 2019. In this university, all the students who need to improve their English skills have to study in a semi-intensive English program during their first and second years. Soon after they enter the university, they take TOEFL ITP as a placement test. Based on the test score, their academic background, and supplementary placement interviews, they are placed into four different levels. Among the target cohort who completed the first-year English program in the academic year of 2018, there were 20

Successful and Less Successful Learners

high-advanced (TOEFL ITP 620–673), 106 intermediate-high (557–653), 373 intermediate (460–573), and 122 intermediate-low (370–483) students. As an exit test of the English program, they have a chance to take IELTS at their university for free. The university offered a one-day test preparation seminar and distributed textbooks for free just a few months before the IELTS test for those who wanted to prepare for it.

Participants

The participants in this study were all second-year students who completed the first-year English program. To avoid the ceiling effect, we eliminated the data from 20 students who belong to the high-advanced level. In the remaining three English levels, since the exit test was not mandatory, there were 339 students who took both TOEFL ITP and IELTS. Initially, we contacted 30 “successful” students (10 for each level) who improved their test scores most and another 30 “less successful” students (10 for each level) who had least improvement in their test scores. However, due to their lack of interest or busy schedule, only six students (four successful and two unsuccessful) volunteered to have an interview. Table 1 summarizes the participants’ English level and their test scores. Because this research incorporated two different institutionalized tests, the Council of Europe’s Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was employed to make the comparison possible (Educational Testing Service, 2011; IELTS, 2020).

Table 1

Description of the Participants

Name	successful or less successful	English level	TOEFL total	IELTS total
Yuko	successful	Intermediate → intermediate-high	500 (B1)	6 (B2)
Kota	less successful	intermediate-high	630 (C1)	7 (C1)
Etsuo	successful	intermediate	540 (B1)	7.5 (C1)
Aiko	successful	intermediate-low	457 (A2)	5.5 (B2)
Takeru	successful	intermediate-low	447 (A2)	6 (B2)
Fumiko	less successful	intermediate-low	470 (B1)	5 (B1)

Note. Yuko changed her English course from intermediate to intermediate high from September 2018.

There were two participants from the intermediate-high level. While Yuko (all the names in this paper are pseudonyms) improved her CEFR level from B1 to B2, Kota’s CEFR level did not change; his CEFR level on both tests was C1. From the intermediate level, one student, Etsuo, who improved his CEFR level from B1 to C1, participated in this study. Finally, from the intermediate-low level, three participants took part in this study. Both Aiko and Takeru improved their CEFR level from A2 to B2, whereas Fumiko’s CEFR level did not change; her CEFR level was B1 on both tests. When these participants were invited to participate in the research, the researcher was able to access their student ID and email address only, not their real name. It turned out that the researcher had taught Yuko, Etsuo, and Fumiko when they were first-year students. Thus, the interpretation of the data by the researcher could have been affected as he knew the students. Concurrently, the students’ responses may have avoided providing any negative information as they knew the researcher.

Procedures

One of the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with each of the six participants in his office between July and September 2019. They all took the TOEFL ITP placement test in April 2018 and took IELTS in March 2019, and the questions about how they studied inside and outside the English program during the first year along with their test taking experiences were asked in the interview. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewer to respond and react as the conversation takes place, which enables him to collect richer data. A list of the main interview questions can be found in the Appendix. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes, and the data were collected in their mother tongue, Japanese, so that they could express their ideas more freely than they could in English. The interviews were recorded with the participants' oral and written consent and then transcribed. To increase inter-rater reliability, both of the researchers coded individually, following exploratory coding methods (Saldaña, 2015), and cases were discussed until they reached an agreement if there were some disagreements.

Findings and Discussion

Strategies Employed by the Students Inside the English Program

As for RQ1 (What strategies did learners use inside the English program? Are there any differences between successful and less successful students?), all the six participants commented that they always prepared for their English classes by completing the homework such as finishing a reading assignment, checking unknown words in the reading, and writing an essay because they felt the course content was challenging. In addition, they said they almost always attended the classes and that they participated in discussions in small groups actively. Thus, we could not see any differences in terms of how hard they studied in the English program.

Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons' study (2004) reported while unsuccessful learners tend to preview lessons occasionally and not thoroughly, successful learners tend to preview more seriously and intensively. In this present study, we could not see any differences among the participants. This may be caused by the contextual difference; their study was conducted in China whilst this study focused on Japanese students at a bilingual university.

Strategies Employed by the Students Outside the English Program

As for RQ2 (What strategies did learners use outside the English program? Are there any differences between successful and less successful students?), we could not see any differences. Among four successful learners, three successful students reported that they studied actively outside of the English classes during their first year. For example, Yuko said she regularly talked to her native-English speaking friends in Australia on *FaceTime* to keep her speaking skills. Also, Takeru commented that he wanted to improve all the four skills, and in order to improve his speaking and listening skills, he often watched English movies or dramas on *Amazon Prime* and *Netflix*. Then, he sometimes practiced the technique of shadowing by using these movies. Finally, Etsuo sometimes had a chance to talk to some international students in his club activity in English and often listened to foreign music and checked his favorite artists' SNS. On the other hand, Aiko only used English in the English program.

Similarly, both of the less successful students studied English outside the classroom autonomously. For instance, Kota had a habit of checking *BBC* and *New York Times* on the internet and he continued this habit. Another less successful student, Fumiko, studied for TOEIC because she heard the importance of taking TOEIC from her friends who went to a different university.

Thus, in this interview, except one successful student, both successful and less successful students studied English outside the classroom. This result is different from Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons' study (2004). They found that successful learners tended to set specific objectives by themselves and study even outside the classroom though less successful ones tended not to set particular objectives by themselves and could hardly continue studying English by themselves. The contradictory results in the present study could be owing to the fact that we had fewer number of less successful students who volunteered to participate in this study.

Influential Factors Emerged in This Study

As for RQ3 (What other factors might account for improvement or lack of improvement of their test scores?), there are two potentially influential factors: how clearly the students realized the importance of learning English for their future as well as how familiar they were with the exit test.

English-speaking selves. Inspired by possible selves theory in psychology (Markus & Nurius, 1986), Dörnyei (2009) proposed a concept of ideal L2 self, the future images that learners visualize related to their target language. Based on two quantitative analyses of Japanese high school students' international posture, Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) argued that “[t]hose who are conscious of how they relate themselves to the world tend to be motivated to study English, as they probably visualize ‘English-using selves’ clearly” (pp. 142–143). In the interviews in the current study, except Yuko, whether each participant saw the connection between English learning and their future when they were in the English program was asked. Table 2 shows the results. Both of the less successful students *vaguely* envisioned their English use in their future:

I see English as a tool to expand my network and extend access to various sources. For these purposes, I studied English ... I do not particularly stick to the use of English when choosing a job. If my future job requires me to use English, I will use it. (Kota, intermediate-high, less successful)

I do not have a strong desire to work abroad, but even in Japan, when I start working, I may need to speak English ... So, I thought I would need to be able to handle business English. That was the reason why I thought I would need to study English hard. (Fumiko, intermediate-low, less successful)

On the other hand, two successful students, Takeru and Etsuo, *clearly* explained that they felt the necessity of improving their English for their future:

I think IELTS is a bit expensive ... So I did not want to take it twice ... I wanted to have a good score on IELTS because I wanted to use the score to apply for the exchange program ... I definitely think I will need to go out from Japan ... My

Successful and Less Successful Learners

dad strongly told me that Japanese future would not be bright, so I should go abroad in the future. (Etsuo, intermediate, successful)

The biggest motivation was to be a pilot in the future ... For this, English was necessary. This was the biggest motivation. Another motivation was, as I briefly mentioned before, I would like to study abroad through the exchange program. To be able to apply for this program, I wanted to study English. These were the two strong motivations for me. (Takeru, intermediate-low, successful)

Table 2
The Participants' English-Speaking Selves

Name	successful or less successful	English level	English-speaking selves
Yuko	successful	Intermediate → intermediate high	N/A
Kota	less successful	intermediate high	vaguely
Etsuo	successful	intermediate	clearly
Aiko	successful	intermediate low	x
Takeru	successful	intermediate low	clearly
Fumiko	less successful	intermediate low	vaguely

Note. In the interview, Yuko did not state any information related to English-speaking selves.

Among these five participants who explained their motivation to study English in relation to their future, Aiko was the only student who commented that she did not visualize the necessity of studying English for her future:

I have not thought about my future deeply yet, so I am not sure about whether I studied English for my future ... I am not interested in getting a job related to English ... The reason why I could keep my motivation in the English program was my classmates' attitude. Also, I studied English hard because I was given an opportunity to study English, so I wanted to make use of it. (Aiko, intermediate-low, successful)

Thus, other factors, such as the stimulus from classmates, can help explain why some successful students could keep their motivation, but considering the fact that there was no one who clearly envisioned “English-using selves” among unsuccessful students, whether one can *clearly* or *vaguely* imagine “English-using selves” may be a significant factor to explain the difference between successful and less successful students. Specifically, whether students are planning to use their IELTS test score for the purpose of applying for the exchange program and whether they strongly feel the necessity of using English for their future job may affect their language attainment on the test score.

Test familiarity. The other potential factor can be how familiar students were with the exit test. Among six participants, there were only two participants who had taken IELTS before the IELTS

Successful and Less Successful Learners

test in March, and both of them were successful students. Yuko had taken IELTS twice when she was a high school student and one more time four months before the test in March. Similarly, Aiko had taken IELTS once when she was in high school.

In addition to their test taking experience, it seems that whether they had a chance to study for the test can be influential. Among six participants, four students (three successful and one less successful) said they prepared for the test. For instance, Etsuo took advantage of the university's one-day IELTS preparation seminar and the textbook provided by the university:

I attended the one-day IELTS preparation seminar ... Yes, [it was helpful] because I had never taken the test, so I was able to understand the test format and how I should have prepared for the test ... And I also worked on the IELTS textbook I got for free from the university ... I studied with the textbook just before the IELTS exam. (Etsuo, intermediate, successful)

Unlike Etsuo, the other two successful students who prepared for the test studied by themselves:

[Since I had taken IELTS before,] I knew the test format, but I studied for the test. I remember I started studying for IELTS about two weeks before the test. I looked at the test preparation textbooks I had ... For me, the reading section was most challenging, so I focused on that section when I prepared for the test. (Yuko, intermediate-high, successful)

I want to get a good score on the test because I would like to apply for the exchange program, so I used some websites that I was able to study for IELTS for free if I register for the site. This website allowed me to know what kind of questions would be asked in each section ... I took the test after I knew the test format ... I started this kind of preparation approximately two weeks before the test. (Takeru, intermediate-low, successful)

Thus, both students started their preparation about two weeks prior to the exam, and their experiences might have positively influenced their gains on the test.

In contrast, there were two students (one successful and one unsuccessful) who did not prepare for the test:

At first, I wanted to study hard. But I was too busy at that time because of the classes, so I could not study at all ... When I took the test, I knew nothing about the test format, but I just wanted to know what kind of test IELTS was. (Kota, intermediate-high, less successful)

His comment may indicate the significance of being familiar with the test format for achieving high scores on the test.

However, Fumiko, who was also less successful, told the interviewer that she prepared for the test:

Successful and Less Successful Learners

I joined the one-day IELTS test preparation seminar at the university ... In the seminar, the teacher taught us how to answer some questions, so I tried to remember what the teacher told us when I took the test. The seminar was good because I was able to know the test format ... I also got a free textbook from the university, and I used it roughly just before the test. (Fumiko, intermediate-low, less successful)

In a similar vein, Aiko, who was successful, did not prepare for the test.

I did not study for TOEFL ITP or IELTS at all ... Some of my friends who were interested in applying for the exchange program studied hard for IELTS because they had a score they needed to exceed in their mind. But I was not so interested in studying abroad, so I just took the test because this could be a good opportunity for me to see my improvement through the English program. (Aiko, intermediate-low, successful)

Therefore, although Aiko's prior experience might have helped her improve her test score, the existence of an unsuccessful student who prepared for the test did not allow us to find perfect patterns in this study.

Interestingly, there have not been many studies which investigated the effectiveness of test preparation courses on institutionalized tests. One of such studies was done in Hong Kong (Zhengdong, 2009), but this quantitative research could not see any statistically significant differences between the students who had participated in a 20-hour long IELTS test preparation course and those who had not taken the course. Thus, such a short test preparation course may not have an impact on the test score. Nevertheless, judging from our qualitative data, whether students had known the test format by taking the same test previously or by studying for the test by taking a course and/or by themselves may have some influence on the language attainment on the test scores.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, no significant differences were found in terms of learners' strategy use in and outside the English program in this research. This may have been due to a small number of participants from each English level and the uneven number of successful and less successful students. Additionally, the timing of the interview was not ideal. Some of the interviewees must have forgotten how they studied in the English program while they were first grade students, because the interview was conducted four to seven months after they completed the program. Furthermore, we defined "successful" and "less successful" students based on the improvement of two different standardized tests: TOEFL ITP which has reading, structure, and listening sections and IELTS which has listening, writing, reading, and speaking.

Hence, to answer our research questions, more robust designs in terms of the number of the participants, the timing to conduct interviews, and the use of placement and exit tests should be considered. However, this exploratory study suggests two possible factors: how clearly students

have “an English-speaking-self” and how familiar they are with the exit test. Therefore, as described in the introduction, one of the possible steps we can take next is to confirm these potential factors quantitatively.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to sincerely thank Kimberly Klassen, who has joined our research project since 2019. This research has been funded by *Eiken* Foundations. Also, we would like to thank Robert Macintyre (Sophia University) who gave us helpful comments.

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Successful and Less Successful Learners

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Appendix

Main Questions in the Semi-Structured Interview

- 1) Please tell me how you studied English when you were a freshman? (e.g., attendance rate, homework, studying together with your classmates, instructors, trying to participate in discussions in class)
- 2) How have your four skills changed by taking classes in the ELA?
- 3) Please tell me how you learned English outside the ELA?
- 4) Did you have a chance to use English outside the ELA?
- 5) Please tell me about your experience of taking the placement test (TOEFL ITP).
- 6) Please tell me about your experience of taking the exit test (IELTS) this March.
- 7) Did you have a chance to take a test preparation course at ICU?