

L2 Learners' Awareness through a Joint Student Exchange Program

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Abstract

L2 learners generally expect that participating in an exchange program will help to develop their target language through various social interactions with local people. Collaborative activities in a program can enhance learners' opportunities for examining their target language, and for understanding culture, history, life style and environment. In this study, 15 Japanese college students participated in an exchange program in Singapore. They engaged in a joint project with 16 Singaporean students, forming where they were divided into small groups. Giving a presentation to all the groups partaking in the study was set as the goal of the joint project. The students from both countries discussed a project topic on-line over the course of one month, and finalized the presentation with face-to-face communication at the campus in Singapore.

This paper aimed to investigate L2 learners' awareness of language ability in the target language and intercultural understanding through the experience of a short-term student exchange program in Singapore. A survey was conducted to evaluate the project-based activity among the group of Japanese students. Interviews for retrospective verbal reports were conducted in order to study the small group of the participants in depth, and were analyzed qualitatively. The students reported the improvement of their language ability as 4.07 on a 5-point Likert scale. The valuable social activities with the local students resulted in positive changes in awareness of cultural differences.

Keywords: short-term exchange program, project-based learning, L2 learners' awareness

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Introduction

Traditionally, student exchange programs provide foreign language learners with a valuable opportunity for cultivating language ability and improving intercultural understanding through the experience of socializing with new friends in the target language country. According to Centinavci (2012), the purpose of foreign language learning and teaching programs is to help learners develop their competences in communicating in the target language. Centinavci (2012) illustrated the historical overview of the three major competences. Linguistics competence (Chomsky, 1965, 1980) is implicit knowledge of language processed by native speakers. Communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) is native speakers' knowledge of how the language is used. Intercultural communicative competence (Wiseman, 2002) is knowledge, motivation and skills required for appropriate and effective interaction with people in different cultures. When students participate in exchange programs, it is expected that interactive activities with local new friends would help them to enhance their linguistic knowledge, increase willingness to communicate in the target language, and motivate them towards understanding the target culture.

One important aspect of study abroad programs is that of students' preparation of intercultural learning (Deardorff, 2011). It is beneficial for students to engage in language activities as a means of increasing their knowledge of the target culture because those activities would enable them not only to develop language skills but also to foster a positive attitude toward the target culture. Uso-Juan and Martínez-Flor (2008) proposed a cultural project for building learners' communicative competence in the target language. The project consists of three phases: explanation, collection and implementation. In the first phase, teachers explain the concept of cross-cultural competence to their learners. In the second phase, learners work on the task of collecting materials of the target culture by themselves. In the final phase, learners work on various activities using the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This type of activity can be incorporated into a student exchange program as an advance preparation task so as to help to increase learners' prerequisite knowledge of the target culture.

Some empirical studies have explored learners' cultural awareness in an overseas program. Berwick & Whalley (2000) examined Canadian high schoolers' culture learning in a Japanese immersion program, using the culture learning journal. The journal entries were analyzed with regard to three major categories of reflection in learning: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. The finding of Berwick & Whalley's study (2000) suggested that the journal experience may be beneficial to cultivating learners' self-knowledge and to supporting their better understanding of culture and its social structure. Yashima (2010) examined how an international volunteer work project affects the intercultural competence of Japanese university students, and found that the experience of the volunteer work enhanced the participants' further intercultural competence. Focusing on a short-term project-based overseas program, Goulah (2007) studied the impact of content-based digital video project abroad on the quality of learners' foreign language learning. Students enrolled in a one-month program credited abroad and were involved in the digital video project collaboratively and individually. Although it was a challenge to use the target language, students conducted the video project over the discussion for content, grammar and vocabulary. Making videos assisted students in authentic target language reading, writing, and speaking when interfacing to navigate commands of a

computer and shooting a video. Learners' retrospective reflections based on the experiences in the target language country provide teachers and researchers with valuable information on cognitive aspects of language awareness and their awareness of intercultural understanding.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to investigate L2 learners' awareness of language ability in the target language and intercultural understanding through the experience of a joint project-based exchange program in Singapore. The study attempts to answer the following research questions.

1. How does the project-based exchange program affect L2 learners' awareness of the quality of their target language learning?
2. To what extent does the project-based exchange program facilitate L2 learners' intercultural understanding?

Context

The study context was that Japanese college students experienced a 10-day joint project exchange program in Singapore. The participants planned to visit two polytechnics in Singapore in March, 2016. The preparation period began in January and two tasks were assigned. The first task was to give an oral presentation about Japanese culture at two polytechnics. The second task was for individual participants to conduct a joint project with one of the polytechnic students. The goal of the joint project was to give a group presentation on a provided topic (i.e. social issues). In Japan, the students formed eight groups with Singaporean students and discussed the topic online. When the students were in Singapore on the first and second day, each group worked on their PowerPoint presentation. On the third day, all groups gave a presentation. Teachers in charge of the exchange program evaluated performances of the group presentation. An awards ceremony was held for the presentation contest. The unique aspect of the joint student exchange program is that the students discussed the provided topic online as a pre-task, and gave a group presentation with Singaporean students after face-to-face discussion in Singapore. In addition to the two required tasks, the Japanese culture presentation and the joint project, Japanese students had opportunities to engage in social activities with Singaporean students on campus and in the town.

Method

Participants

The participants in the 10-day exchange program in Singapore were 15 Japanese college students (M=10, F=5). The age of participants ranged from 18 to 20 years old. All students completed the two required tasks in the exchange program: a group presentation on their own culture, and a joint project via online and face-to-face communication with Singaporean students. Four students (M=1, F=3) in the group were recruited to a retrospective interview in L1.

Data collection

Data collection aimed to be triangulation that consists of a questionnaire and a retrospective interview. The two types of data were collected after the students

completed the exchange program. First, a questionnaire survey in L1 was given to 15 students. Two major themes of the questionnaire were formulated: (1) awareness of language ability and (2) awareness of culture. Fourteen questions were designed, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all aware: 5 = extremely aware). Second, semi-structured interviews were carried out in order to study the learners' awareness in depth with four volunteers individually for approximately 40 minutes each. All interview data were recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were read through several times and coded by categories of the two main themes: awareness of language ability and awareness of the target culture.

Results

The students showed their awareness of language ability and awareness of cultures in a positive manner. Table 1 represents the results of students' questionnaire responses on awareness of language ability and culture. In terms of the first main theme, 'language', the highest awareness the students showed was gains in motivation for learning English. The mean score was 4.80 on a 5-Lickert scale. The second highest mean score was 4.53, which was learners' awareness of gain in willingness to communicate in English. The third highest mean score, 4.07, was awareness of improvement of English language ability over time. Regarding the four skills, the results revealed that the students were aware of changes in speaking the most, then listening, reading, and writing abilities.

Table 1. Students' questionnaire responses on awareness of language and culture

Main theme	Questionnaire item	Mean score	SD
1. Language	1. I feel I improved my English language ability over time.	4.07	0.80
	2. I noticed changes in my English speaking ability.	4.07	1.10
	3. I noticed changes in my English writing ability.	2.93	0.88
	4. I noticed changes in my English listening ability.	3.87	1.03
	5. I noticed changes in my English reading ability.	3.33	1.36
	6. My motivation for learning English increased.	4.80	0.90
	7. My willingness to communicate in English increased.	4.53	0.41
2. Culture	1. Due to the experience of Japanese culture presentation, I understood our culture better.	3.93	0.83
	2. Since I gave a Japanese culture presentation, I want to understand our culture more.	4.33	0.46
	3. Due to the experience of the joint project, I understood Singaporean culture better.	4.53	0.72
	4. Due to the experience of Singaporean students' culture presentations, I understood their culture better.	4.67	0.52
	5. Due to the experience of the social activities with Singaporean students, I understood their culture better.	4.53	0.49
	6. Due to the experience of the student exchange program, I want to understand culture in Singapore better.	4.53	0.64
	7. Due to the experience of the student exchange program, I want to understand cultures in English speaking countries.	4.60	0.74

Regarding the second main theme, ‘culture’, the highest awareness was understanding the target culture through Singaporean students’ culture presentations. The mean score was 4.67. The second highest mean score of 4.60 was their awareness of desire to understand cultures in English speaking countries. The third highest mean score was 4.53, showing awareness of better understanding the target culture through the experience of the joint project and through the experience of the social activities, and their awareness of a desire to understand culture in Singapore.

The results of the secondary data analysis were learners’ awareness of language ability and culture. Table 2 shows a list of the main categories and subcategories that emerged from the interview data analysis. In the first main category – language- four subcategories emerged: noticing changes in the target language ability, motivation to learn English, motivation to communicate in English and needs for a specific language skill. In the second main category - culture - four subcategories emerged: life style, environment, knowledge of own culture, and national character.

Table 2. Categories and subcategories for analyzing the interview data

Category	Subcategory	Definition of subcategory
1. Language	1. Noticing changes in the target language ability	Experience of the exchange program influence on noticing changes in the target language ability
	2. Motivation to learn English	Experience of the exchange program influence on changes in motivation to learn English
	3. Motivation to communicate in English	Experience of the exchange program influence on changes in motivation to communicate in English
	4. Needs for a specific language skill	Learners’ awareness of needs for improving a specific language skill
2. Culture	1. Life style	Understanding the target life style
	2. Environment	Understanding the target environment
	3. Knowledge of own culture	Rediscovering their own culture
	4. National character	Noticing differences in characteristics of each nation

The interviews revealed students’ awareness of a range of experiences relating to interaction with new friends in the exchange program. The first main category is learners’ awareness of language. All of the four students commented that they noticed ‘changes in the target language ability’. Two students reported their TOEIC test scores significantly increased after the experience of the exchange program. One student said that she noticed her listening comprehension of the test was better than last year. She also said, “After returning to my home country, (I think) it would be fun if I can understand English better. Thinking of connecting with (friends in) the world is also fun, so I have been studying English.” Hereafter, when original quotations include ellipsis in L1, the interpretation for the ellipsis is added in parentheses. The other student reported that his reading section score increased

significantly. He recalled the fact that it was not difficult to read texts at museums in Singapore. Regarding the process of speech production in the target language, one student commented that she noticed the fact that she was able to generate English sentences without thinking of English structures. She stated as follows:

“Before going (to Singapore), I thought of (speaking English in) a difficult way that (first) I should construct a structure of a sentence when I speak English sentences. ... I came to think (of speaking English sentences) flexibly, so that I can express myself (in English) without such a difficulty.”

In terms of overall listening comprehension, one student reported that she noticed her listening comprehension improved as follows: when she did not understand some words in a speech, she managed to make inferences to understand the content. Even though all of students noticed improvement of the target language ability, one student commented on a pronunciation issue that he had to overcome. He noted that he could not make himself understood verbally, so he had to write down what he was trying to say. Although students' responses on awareness of noticing changes in the target language varied due to individual differences in linguistic proficiency, all of the four students acknowledged positive changes that would lead them to improve their overall linguistic skills.

The second subcategory is 'motivation to learn English'. All of the students said they increased their motivation to study English. Two students said they would like to acquire a native-like speaking ability. They felt they wanted to employ a variety of English expressions in a speech naturally. One of them said, "I could not make myself understood. (I noticed the fact) I could not utter even easy words several times. So, I want to increase variations (of English expressions)." One student said he would like to gain knowledge of his specialized subjects in English since he was planning to go on to higher education. One student said learning English would be beneficial for her future research and career. In addition to a motivation gain in learning the target language, English, one student commented that she would like to learn their mother tongue of her new friends, Mandarin Chinese. Through the experience of the exchange program, all of the four students seemed to recognize their individual reasons for the purpose of learning English, which resulted in a motivation gain in learning foreign languages.

The third subcategory is 'motivation to communicate in English'. Three out of the four students stated that their motivation to communicate in English increased because they still kept touch with their new friends. One student reported she noticed her attitude to speaking to a foreigner had changed. Before visiting Singapore, she hesitated to help foreigners at a station who spoke English. However, she willingly assisted a foreign traveler at a station after the exchange program. One student did not explicitly comment on motivation gain. She pointed out there were not many opportunities to communicate in English in Japan. However, she said, "I learned that if I have a chance to communicate in English, I should willingly speak in English." Motivation gain in communicating in English reflected students' willingness to interact with their new friends online, and is arguably due to their positive experiences of socializing with Singaporean students during the exchange program

The fourth subcategory is 'needs for a specific language skill'. All of the students reported on their positive attitude to acquiring language skills. Two students wanted to improve their communication skill because they were keen on going abroad in future. One student commented on presentation skills. During the group presentation on the joint project, he felt he could not respond to questions from the audience appropriately. Since he would like to be able to give a presentation at an international conference in future, having good presentation skills in English is essential for him. One student stated she wanted to improve her writing skills so that she could develop overall English skills. She said, "I acquired the skill of responding immediately (in English) during my visit. However, I was not able to express myself. In this respect, I can improve this ability by writing (exercises)." Through the reflection on the experiences in the exchange program, the students noticed what aspect of the target language learning was precisely necessary to develop further language skills for individual specific purposes.

The second main category is learners' awareness of culture. The first subcategory that emerged is life style in Singapore. All of the four students said Singapore was a multi-ethnic country and religions differentiate people's customs. One student students were surprised at a different food culture in Singapore. Two students mentioned the strictness of law in Singapore. One student said she learned that the government of Singapore supported education in many ways. For example, water and electricity fees are paid by the government. Social activities that enabled the students to interact with Singaporean students, such as sightseeing and a campus tour, seemed to help the students to see and learn specific features in the target culture and appreciate details of its cultural constructions.

The second subcategory is 'knowledge of one's own culture'. All the students said they had better understanding of their own culture after giving a culture presentation. One student commented that she learned some new facts about her own culture because she saw other groups' culture presentations. Some students reported that they learned new facts about Japanese history. Some noticed a positive aspect of their own culture, for instance, Japanese hospitality and the recycling system. One student who gave a culture presentation on calligraphy said, "I learned something new while searching (the information on) calligraphy. I found (the fact that there is) calligraphy for street performance, such as (calligraphy) performance with music and dance." The project-based exchange program and its social activities provided the students with the opportunity to learn some new facts about their own culture and country.

The third subcategory is learners' awareness of 'environment' in the target culture. Two students commented that the nation was small, but there were different cultural areas. One student said, "Even walking along a street for a short period, I noticed the townscape of each area changed so quickly." One student learned that buildings in Singapore were built in various structures because they did not need to worry about earthquakes, unlike Japan. Although their stay in Singapore was only for a short period, they learned some apparently different features of environment.

The fourth subcategory is learners' awareness of differences in 'national characteristics' of each nation. Some students commented that Singaporean students were cheerful, bright and friendly. One student said there was no hierarchical

relationship in terms of age. Two students noted Singaporean students knew their family roots well. One of the students commented on family roots as follows:

“... I thought history was a subject to memorize, so it was meaningless. However, in order to interact with foreign people, we must know history. ... We need to understand our place in the world. ... I realized the importance of understanding our roots.”

Overall, the students' responses on language ability and the target culture were relatively positive rather than negative, as all of them showed their interest in international exchange in future.

Discussion and Conclusion

The short-term project-based exchange program facilitated students' communicative and social interaction extensively, so that the students used the project to evaluate their current ability in the target language and gain an understanding of the target culture and their own culture. Regarding the first research question, learners' awareness of the quality of their target language, the students showed their awareness of motivation gain in learning English. This is probably because the students engaged in a continuing communication with Singaporean students throughout the exchange program. As Dornyei and Ushioda (2013) note, cooperative learning enables learners to maximize their collaboration and to enhance their motivation system to activate learning. In the joint project, successful cooperative learning experience helped students enhance their motivation to continue learning English. Having made goals to develop their English language skills for individual reasons, they were keen to develop target language learning further.

The students acknowledged changes in their speaking ability the most. While engaging in the joint project and social activities, they interacted with Singaporean students in the target language extensively. Arguably the experience of the joint exchange program pushed the students to express themselves in the target language. Their speech output enabled them to evaluate the capability of what they actually managed to say in English, which in turn made them notice their speaking level (Izumi, 2003).

In terms of the second research question, learners' awareness of understanding the target cultures, the experiences in the joint exchange program helped the students increase their positive attitude toward the target cultures. Their awareness of intercultural understanding was based on their experiences during the short period of the program (i.e. what they saw, what they heard, and what they ate). Although the short-term exchange program seemed to result in a superficial understanding of the target cultures, the social interaction prompted the students to deepen their views of understanding different cultures, and reflect on their prior knowledge of the world.

The limitations of the current study are twofold. The first limitation is the small sample size. The findings are limited within the current study context. The second limitation is a potential confounding variable. Even though the questionnaire survey and interviews were given with the emphasis on the phrase, “reflecting on the experience of the joint student exchange program,” students' responses might be

based on their entire experiences in a 10-day exchange program, which can be a confounding variable.

The implication of the current study for language learning and teaching is that since a collaborative group project provides a common goal for students to work on, this type of a joint exchange program would encourage students to communicate with native speakers as new friends and facilitate language learners' willingness of their linguistic, social and cultural interaction. Most importantly, the outcome of learners' positive attitude to the target language and culture would motivate them to continue language learning.

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