

English Immersion: Student Motivation and Course Outcomes

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Abstract

The English Immersion Course began in 2016 with nine students, two of whom are continuing their studies abroad today. This paper investigates the students' perceptions of the program, namely their motivations for joining and their understanding of what they gained from their English Immersion experience.

Introduction

When you think of the word, “immersion”, what images come to mind? If you are familiar with the Bible, you might think of “baptism by immersion” as John did in the River Jordan (Matthew 3:6). If you like to get away for a little relaxation, you might imagine a nice hot spring where you can immerse yourself in some healing mineral waters. In both instances immersion has to do with something your body is fully encompassed in: *water*.

Regarding immersion classrooms in Japan, immersion has the idea of a program where students are immersed in the target language in a native-like environment. All courses and communication are given through the medium of the target language in order to provide the maximum benefit to the students. The Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines *immersion course* as “a course in which you learn by using nothing else but the language or skill

that you are learning.” It also defines *immersion* as “a process of learning a language or skill by using nothing else but that language or skill.” One language company advertises on their website, “Immersion: Japanese-only atmosphere in all classes. Develop Japanese communication skills quickly!” (NLS, 2019). A former student describes an immersion course, “The smaller classroom setup, coupled with the full immersion conversational style of teaching, creates a fun and comfortable environment to effectively foster language growth” (GenkiJACS, 2019).

Regardless of the language, the idea of an immersion classroom is the same: small, immersed in the language, and producing results!

Such will be said of the Immersion Course at Fukuoka Jo Gakuin Junior College that began in 2016 and has been offered to three cohorts of students. The first graduated in the spring of 2018. The second graduates in March 2019. Currently five members of the third cohort are experiencing “immersion” in all-English settings in study abroad. This paper will collectively report on the students who have completed the English Immersion course as well as those currently enrolled in order to answer the following

research questions: 1) What motivates students to join the program?

2) How has the program helped students?

Background

According to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), there were 339 junior colleges in Japan in 2017. This number also includes those who have already stopped accepting new students. A more reliable number than is found in the university and junior college code list provided by the Benesse Corporation. This list is provided for high school students who take practice tests for university entrance examinations, thus it is an accurate and up to date list of current universities

and junior colleges. According to Benesse (2018), there are 13 public or municipal junior colleges and 296 private junior colleges in Japan, a total of 309 colleges. Of these, a total of 57 are women's junior colleges, 11 of which are in the Kyushu area.

Table 1
Kyushu List of Women's Junior Colleges and Courses of Study

	Institution	Courses
1	Fukuoka Jo Gakuin	Academic intensive, Airline tourism, English immersion
2	Fukuoka Joshi	Child studies, Health&Nutrition, Cultural liberal arts, Music
3	Kagoshima Joshi	Child education, Life science, Liberal arts
4	Kagoshima Junshin	Child studies, Food & Nutrition, Business, English , Design
5	Koran Joshi	Childcare, Food & Nutrition, Life planning, Fashion
6	Kyushu Joshi	Childhood care and education
7	Nagasaki Joshi	Early childhood, Dietician, Business & Medical secretary
8	Saga Joshi	Child education, Food & Health, Social care, Hospitality
9	Seika Joshi	Early child care, Food & Nutrition
10	Seinan Jo Gakuin	Childcare
11	Shokei	Early childhood, Food & Nutrition, Life studies

Note. Taken from Guide to study in Japan, (2019).

The uniqueness of Fukuoka Jo Gakuin Junior College is unsurpassed. It is one of two junior colleges in Kyushu to have an English department. Secondly, it is the only junior college in Kyushu to offer an English Immersion course. Another junior college offers “*immersion*” by “living in” all-English “with two native faculty members on the junior college premises” in addition to the opportunity to study abroad, but at the student’s expense. (Kagoshima Immaculate Heart College, 2019).

The English Immersion course began in recent years and is a program aimed at language acquisition through immersion in English (Fukuoka Jo Gakuin, 2016). One of the main features of the program is that all of the English classes are taught in English, mainly by native speakers of English or by Japanese teachers with native-like English ability. In addition, all junior college students take TOEIC in their first semester. Students who reach 550

on the test are eligible for the English Immersion course that begins in second semester. Immersion classes are limited to the top 10 students who are willing to take the challenge. The English Immersion course’s main attraction is study abroad. After entering the course in second semester, students compete for study abroad scholarships, which are awarded based on the October TOEIC test scores. The top five students are presented with scholarships to study abroad in English speaking countries of their choosing and generally spend three to four weeks studying abroad during the spring break before entering their second year of the program. The overall goal of the course is for all English Immersion students to reach 750 on the TOEIC test by the time they graduate. In Table 2, the underlined post TOEIC scores belong to the students who studied abroad on scholarship. The TOEIC test is taken before entering the program in June or July of first semester, and between December and March of the graduation year. Currently 16 people have been through the program.

Table 2
Pre and Post TOEIC scores of Immersion Course Students (n = 16)

	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
	2016 Pre	2018 Post	2017 Pre	2019 Post
1	695	<u>850</u>	565	<u>890</u>
2	675	<u>830</u>	745	<u>845</u>
3	555	<u>825</u>	575	<u>770</u>
4	640	<u>755</u>	605	<u>750</u>
5	640	750	570	755
6	630	<u>760</u>	560	<u>690</u>
7	505	685	550	665
8	580		580	550
9	555	440		

Note. In Cohort 1 and 2, Student 8 is the same person.

Table 3
Study Abroad Destinations of three cohorts of Immersion Course Students (N = 15)

USA	Canada	New Zealand	England
New York (2)	Toronto (3)	Auckland (3)	London (2)
San Francisco (2)	Vancouver (2)		
Minneapolis (1)			

The Japanese government recognizes the impact that sending students abroad has on helping them to become globally minded. In 2013 an initiative was launched to send up to 120,000 university students abroad by the year 2020 (OCED, 2014). Currently short-term programs are the fastest growing sector of study abroad. In the *Tobitate* Campaign, about 60% of the university students stayed overseas for less than a month (MEXT, 2014).

According to Japan Association of Overseas Studies (JAOS), 80% of all Japanese students choose North America, Europe and Oceania as study abroad destinations. The results of Table 3 support this finding. Recently however, the popularity of the Philippines has surpassed that of New Zealand for fifth place among Japanese young people. In addition, a recent graduate of the English Immersion course is currently enrolled in university in the Philippines.

Method and Participants

Textual data were gathered from students by means of narrative frames and open-ended essay questions during the second semester of 2018. Consent forms were provided to gain their permission to use the information they provided in the study.

Participants in the study included all students from the first, second and third cohorts ($N = 24$). The eight graduates of the program who are now working and studying in various parts of the world participated in the study via text message through social media.

Narrative Frames

A narrative frame is a research tool that uses scaffolding of sentence patterns to help writers produce a story. It has great potential for “generating relevant insights” especially when you are exploring a new setting (Barkhuizen, 2014 b, p.12). He further defines it as a “written story template consisting of a series of incomplete sentences and blank spaces of varying lengths”, p.13. The varying lengths can be as long or as short as the researcher decides and thereby she can control the amount of data that is generated. “Narrative frames provide guidance and support in terms of both the structure and content of what it to be written” (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008, p.376). A carefully crafted narrative frame can ensure that the information the researcher deems important to the study is provided because it is the researcher who designs the frame around the important ideas of her study (Barkhuizen, 2014 b). Barkhuizen (2011) explains, “narrative researchers are intimately implicated in their research activities [in that] they elicit, coconstruct, interpret, and, in their retelling, represent participants accounts of lived and imagined personal experience, p.3.” The use of narrative frames is widespread in the foreign language teaching world and most recently was used as an instrument to evaluate an English teaching course in a Japanese university (Hiratsuka, 2018). In addition, Barkhuizen (2014 a) provides an excellent survey of all the studies that have used narrative frames. Given the narrative research data, researchers then “examine particular themes of interest to them or their research participants” (Nelson, 2011, p. 467).

Findings

The findings of the study revealed that students who were given the opportunity to become fully immersed in English through the study abroad

scholarship generally reached the goal of 750 on the TOEIC at the end of the program. See Table 2. In addition, students reported that they decided to aim for the English Immersion course early on, either upon acceptance to Jo Gakuin or in the beginning of their first semester, by practicing hard for the TOEIC exam. This motivation led students to study hard for TOEIC at the onset of the program and again for the study abroad scholarship in their second semester. Similarly, Iida (2016) found that women in his university, “studied English very hard not only before study abroad but also during study abroad so that their general English skills improved to a great degree”, p.30. In addition, TOEIC gains were reported for students who participated in short-term study abroad in England (Cayton, 2005). Kimura (2009) also found that Japanese students’ listening proficiency improved whereas students who had not participated in a three-week study abroad to New Zealand did not. One English Immersion graduate shared:

I think one of the reasons why the students who went to study abroad got a high score is fighting spirit. In my experience, I was so interested in study abroad for free even though my score was not really high. So I started studying hard not as same as I used to or the other classmates do but more than that. I just really want the ticket. So I think a thing needed or wanted makes people work hard. And people who did it can get what they want. (personal communication, March 1, 2019)

Table 4. *Students’ reasons for joining the English Immersion Course (N = 24)*

Themes	Details of themes	Frequency
Environment	Immersion class has more chances to learn	8
	Learn in a small class size	5
	Learn English more	5
	Learn more advanced English (the highest class)	4
	Learn English with native teachers	4
	Learn practical English	2
	Classes are taught in English	1
Total		(29)

Desire to Study Abroad	Receive scholarship	9
	Study hard for TOEIC	8
	Fulfill childhood dream	4
	Total	(21)
Improve myself	Be able to speak English	6
	Improve English skills	5
	Get a higher TOEIC score	2
	Be more aggressive	1
	Improve listening	1
	Improve writing	1
	Total	(16)
Relationships	My friend joined	2
	My teacher recommended me go	1
	Total	(3)

Note. Any one response could contain more than one detail, so the total of frequencies do not add up to 24.

The results of thematic analysis reveal that the environment of the English Immersion course is the students’ most important resource and reason for joining the course. The image of the English Immersion course is that it is the highest class offered by the Junior College, and because of this it offers students the most opportunity for learning and growth. Comments included: It is the best place to study more English; It has a lot of native teachers, so I thought it has a lot of chance to speaking, writing and listening English; and, Joining the highest class helps me to improve my English. One graduate shared, “I’m working at Rakuten now. The employees working here have to take TOEIC score, 800 points. That’s why I wanted to learn as much as possible, and I joined the immersion class!” (personal communication, March 4, 2019). In addition, the second greatest motivation for joining the course was students’ desires to study abroad. This was mentioned 21 times including its relationship to TOEIC achievement. A current student offers this advice to future students, “Study TOEIC! Then,

you can get the chance to study abroad”.

Table 5. *Students’ perceived benefits of the English Immersion Course (n = 16)*

Themes	Details of themes	Frequency
Growth	Helped me to use English	3
	Thankful for teachers	3
	Worthwhile experience abroad	2
	Improved my listening and speaking	2
	Learned English with great pleasure	2
	Broadened my vision	2
	English is quite improved	2
	Improved my pronunciation	1
	Challenged the speech contest	1
	Can train my presentation skills	1
	Love English more	1
	Have great confidence about English	1
	Can convey opinions	1
	Total	(22)
Classes	Given freedom	2
	Use English more than any other course	1
	Talk in English habitually	1
	Classmates good at pronunciation and expressing feelings in English	1
	Wonderful time with classmates	1
	Met many new friends	1
	Total	(7)
Taught by Native speakers	Listening skill up	2
	Speaking skill up	2
	Learned more	1
	Total	(5)
Goals	Achieved TOEIC goal	2
	Achieved study abroad	2
	Total	(4)

Note. Any one response could contain more than one detail, so the total of frequencies do not add up to 16

The results displayed in Table 5 show that students perceived that the most beneficial aspects of the program came from their personal growth that occurred during the course. One graduate who is now studying abroad to become a nurse gave me permission to share her thoughts. She writes:

I just miss immersion class, my friends and teachers so much now. I am thankful for the opportunities they gave me. They let us decide what and how to study. We had to think well and take the responsibility but as a university student I was grateful because I felt like I was trusted and I could do more to answer to it, Haruna (personal communication, March 3, 2019).

She describes one of the virtues of the Immersion classes, particularly autonomy and its effect on her personal growth. Indeed, the English Immersion course provided students the challenge to be their best in English. As stated earlier TOEIC achievement was imperative to students' success in entering the program, as well as joining the study abroad system. One student shared that having taken the TOEIC test many times she got used to a long-duration test and the resulting high score gave her much confidence in her job hunting.

Conclusion

Fukuoka Jo Gakuin Junior College is unlike any other women's junior college in Kyushu. The English Immersion course is unparalleled. No other women's junior college in Kyushu provides such a wonderful opportunity for its students to study abroad, in words echoed by students, "for free"! If it were not for the generosity of study abroad scholarships, there is no doubt that some students would not have experienced English Immersion in a foreign country. Listening to their success stories told with such confidence in themselves and in what they each have achieved in acquiring communicative competence in the language is inspiring. Their experiences

are sure to never be forgotten.

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