

Difficulties in Using English during an Internship Abroad
– An Analysis Based on Speech Data –

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Abstract

While many Japanese small and medium sized companies advance into overseas markets, the issue is to develop human resources with a competent English ability. Companies with limited human and economic resources need to rely mainly on universities to adequately train future employees in English education. This study aims to analyze recorded utterances based on CEFR-J data to see how a Japanese college student used English during an internship abroad and how English skills changed before and after the program. It was proven that this program is effective to increase the number of words a college student speaks. However, the program had little effect on building the student's vocabulary in order to understand various topics. It is necessary to refine the pre-internship learning program and also consider post internship learning opportunities to keep his or her motivation for studying English.

1. Introduction

Small and medium sized Japanese companies are expanding their business overseas as global trade increases and the yen rises. These companies are faced with the problem of securing human resources that are dispatched abroad. In order to foster students' ability to work in a global economy before going out into the world, we have embarked on a basic research program to study the effects of overseas internships on the English ability of college students.

2. Past Research and Findings

In the first year of the project, the author and the head of the research group, the JACET ESP-Hokkaido special interest group (SIG), visited several Japanese companies in Singapore, and interviewed Japanese employees who were stationed there in 2010. They were questioned regarding their daily English usage. On-site investigations were also conducted. Real life work experience by the author and the head of the research group was carried out on site at a Japanese restaurant in order to investigate first-hand how English was used in this context. In addition the researchers attended business meetings and food fairs in which Hokkaido companies participated to promote their products abroad and find prospective overseas customers. How businesspersons from Hokkaido communicated with other people in English was observed. One of the main findings from this preliminary research was that it was necessary for students to

have experience working abroad before leaving college and going out into the world if they would like to do a job that is related to overseas business development.

Based on these findings, in the next year, three students were placed at various companies in Singapore for a short-term overseas internship for one week. This internship proved too short to improve the student's English skills, however, their attitude and motivation toward English learning was positively changed after reviewing interview data.

3. The Second Internship Abroad

The following year saw four students taking part in this experimental overseas internship. There were two male students, one was a senior and the other was a sophomore; and two female students who were both sophomores. All students spent a total of two weeks in Singapore. This time, students were asked beforehand what kind of business or industry they were interested in, and companies were selected following their requests.

To gain prior knowledge of their working environment, students were given assignments to research Singapore, the companies and also the same trade or industry in Japan as the company assigned in Singapore. Also students were told to write about what they had researched and prepare for a self-introduction in English. Another prior assignment was to listen to English every day such as news, music, movies, dramas, and such like. They then had to report what they listened to or watched in English. In addition to all the assignments we had them complete self-rating CEFR-J list before and after the program so as to find out how their English ability changed.

The senior male student was placed in a catering company while the other male student was assigned to a cosmetic importing company. Two female students were accepted to an online cosmetic importing company. In addition to this placement, all students had a chance to visit and work at a Japanese ramen noodle restaurant for two days. All students were given an IC recorder to wear while in the workplace, and all utterances were recorded. After collecting all of the audio data, one out of the four students, given the pseudonym, 'Student M,' was selected as a research object.

4. "Student M"

Student M was the senior male student who was placed at a catering company. He worked both in the office and in the kitchen. Table 1 shows Student M's schedule while in Singapore. In the office, he learned about basic marketing strategies and tasks, and then researched local advertisements and media to propose better platforms for the company. In the kitchen, he assisted chefs in preparation, and had a hand in making items such as tapas. He also attended a party as a waiter.

In the ramen restaurant, Student M took orders, served customers, cleared tables and washed dishes.

Table 1

Student M – Schedule

Day 1	Arrival Lecture on Singapore by Mr. Lim who has an experience working both in Japan and Singapore
Day 2	Free time
Day 3 – 5	Work Experience at the Catering Company • Day 3 : Marketing Department • Day 4 – 5 : Kitchen
Day 6 – 7	Work Experience at the Ramen Restaurant
Day 8	Lecture on “Working Abroad” by Mr. Sago who owns a consulting company in Singapore
Day 9	Free time
Day 10 – 12	Work Experience at the Catering Company • Day 10 – 12 : Kitchen
Day 13	Free time
Day 14	Departure

5. Data Collection Method

All data of Student M was aggregated, and transcribed. In order to transcribe the recording, a Japanese student was hired as a transcriber. This student majored in English at a junior college in Sapporo, and studied business management in the U.S. for one year. He had no difficulties in understanding the daily English conversation. It took him over 80 hours to transcribe all the verbatim contents. One problem he mentioned was that it was his first time to hear Singlish, so he admitted to being a little slow at first until he became accustomed to the unfamiliar accent.

After all the transcribing process was done, the research team went over the text to correct spelling errors. Also all Japanese words, fillers and interjections were deleted. A text file was made from the Word file for the analysis. The vocabulary used was analysed based on JACET8000.

6. Results from CEFR-J

As Table 2 shows, Student M didn't have confidence in speaking before the program.

A1.3 means that the speaker can ask and answer simple questions about familiar topics, express simple opinions, give simple descriptions. It also means that he can describe things when he prepares what he will say in advance. Comparing the results of before and after the program, Table 2 indicates that almost all skills were improved after the program, particularly spoken production sections, shifted from A1.3 to B1.1. B1.1 means that the speaker can express opinions about familiar topics in detail using a wide range of simple English, without causing confusion to the listeners.

Table 2
Student M's CEFR-J Results before and after the Internship

	Pre A1	A1.1	A1.2	A1.3	A2.1	A2.2	B1.1	B1.2
Listening							■ □	
						■	□	
Reading						■	□	
						■		□
Spoken Interaction				■		□	□	
				■			□	
Spoken Production				■			□	
				■			□	
Writing							■ □	
					■		□	

Before (■) the internship vs. After (□) the internship

7. Word Analysis

First, the number of words per utterance was counted each day as shown in Table 3. 1-2 words means that he just said “Yes” or “No”. 3-5 words means he said “Yes” or “No” with a few additional words, or a very simple sentence such as “Are you ready to order?”. The total number of words during the internship was 17,000 words. The quantity of utterances increased daily. Student M’s number of spoken words was about 400 on the first day, and 973 on the last day. This correlates to an increase in word production by 2.4 times. At first, only words were used to communicate, however, later whole sentences were used. The number of words per sentence was limited at the beginning of the program. However, the longer Student M stayed, the more he spoke per utterance. Also he became more loquacious later in the day when compared to the morning.

Table 3

Daily Variance of Number of Words per One Utterance at Workplace

Days \ Words	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1-2	178	242	165	89	282	241	239	328
3-5	110	207	161	79	392	256	261	428
6-	110	128	104	48	144	135	143	217

Table 3 also indicates that the number of spoken words dropped dramatically on the fourth day. A logical reason for this drop was that on this day Student M worked at the ramen restaurant where his main job was cleaning tables and washing dishes. This type of work only required a minimal amount of speaking. However, on the fifth day at the ramen restaurant, he was allowed to wait on customers; therefore, the number of his spoken words was increased. He had more opportunities to talk to customers.

Next all words spoken were analyzed using JACET 8000 and categorized by levels, from 1 to 8. Table 4 shows that Level 1 accounts for 90% while Level 2 is 6% and Level 3 is 2% respectively.

Table 4

Word Count Base on JACET 8000

	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8
Level 1	1324	1786	1329	631	2881	1902	1977	3166
Level 2	78	123	109	55	204	111	94	96
Level 3	35	36	37	10	60	53	58	66
Level 4	9	9	9	3	17	10	12	17
Level 5	3	9	8	0	5	5	5	10
Level 6	8	10	8	1	3	10	10	10
Level 7	7	4	9	1	1	9	8	11
Level 8	4	6	3	3	6	11	9	15

There is no clear evidence of an increase of vocabulary, and also some misunderstandings could be found. However, an increase of words use could be recognized.

8. Discussion

The English level of Student M appears to rise to one higher than that of the basic user level based on his CEFR-J data. The following can be noticed from the data:

- Student M increased the amount of English utterances day by day, and gradually acquired a command of English little by little. Even in such a short period internship, the number of words per utterance increased.

- Student M became more familiar with speaking English as utterances changed from a word level to a phrase level.
- Some infrequent words were learned. At the end of the program, Student M started using some infrequent words. (Level 7 -8 in JACET 8000)
- Speaking improvement can be recognized based on CEFR-J results.
- While working, Student M tended to avoid talking about private matters.
- Questions and confirming words were repeatedly used in the case of speaking with collocutors who spoke Singlish.
- Tendencies to have longer conversations with the younger generation or female collocutors, who don't have strong Singlish accent, were found.

Although the students were working for one week, it was proven that the internship had some positive effects on English skill.

9. Conclusion

While on one hand, results showed that a short-term overseas internship was effective to increase the quantity of utterances; it was not enough to increase vocabulary, which will decrease the possibility of misunderstandings during conversation. Through this program, it is possible to increase a communication skill to B1.1, meaning that the subject can communicate with familiar topics at a slow speed. In order to understand and talk about familiar topics including related information in natural speed, English skills need to improve to the B1.2 or even B2.1 level. Thus, the pre-internship learning program needs to be refined for the improvement of language skills and knowledge in the business field. Also it is necessary to consider post learning as a way to not only increase motivation but also build more knowledge and vocabulary in the target field of interest.

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