

Does Instruction in Integrated English Lead to Gains in English Proficiency?

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Most universities and colleges in Japan expend substantial resources to include at least one mandatory General English course in their curriculum, even in departments where the primary content focus is not English. This paper examines whether the General English courses, titled Integrated English A and B, at one private Japanese university, significantly improved participating students' English proficiency, as intended. Participants were divided into Group 1 (higher proficiency) and Group 2 (lower proficiency) using their scores from the Cambridge English: Key (KET) tests of Reading and Writing and a five-minute, one-to-one English conversation with a native English-speaking teacher. This KET test was also used as the pre-course measure and matched with the results of a different form of the KET Reading and Writing test at the end of the academic year. Paired, one-tailed Student's t-tests indicated a significant improvement in English proficiency for Group 1 ($t=3.3896$, $p=0.05$) and Combined Groups 1 and 2 ($t=1.8098$, $p=0.05$), but not for Group 2 alone. These results are explained and discussed with reference to Spolsky's (1989) conditions for second language learning and other literature relating to the influence of affect and cognition on language learning. Limitations are acknowledged.

Keywords: General English, Cambridge English Key (KET), Reading, Writing, Conditions for second language learning

Introduction

While English or International Liberal Arts departments within Japanese universities and colleges may offer elective English courses such as Extensive Reading, Free Composition, Listening and Conversation, aimed at improving students' specific language skills in English,

almost all departments include on their curriculum a compulsory General English course, usually in the freshman year. While this course's title may vary, it commonly integrates Speaking, Listening, Reading and Writing skills to some extent. Passing these General English courses is usually deemed a requirement for graduation, even in departments or faculties as diverse as Nutrition, Child Education, Human Life Sciences, Engineering, Law and Medicine, which are not primarily concerned with foreign language learning. This apparent mismatch in curricular content is a reasoned response to the stated goal

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of Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of "fostering a positive attitude towards communication in foreign languages" among Japanese people so that they have "practical communication abilities" in English (MEXT, 2003, p. 7), an objective which has been restated numerous times in various governmental policy documents (MEXT, 2002, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2018).

Since substantial resources are expended each year working towards this goal, the question should be asked whether such General English or 'Integrated English' courses attain their principal objective of raising students' general English proficiency. Therefore, using a pre-/post-course paired measures design, this paper examines whether a statistically significant improvement in English proficiency was evident among a group of undergraduate freshman at a Japanese university after one year of Integrated English studies.

Literature Review

Since this paper examines the participants' capacity to use English, it is useful first to distinguish between learning a language and acquiring it. According to Krashen (1977), the former is a deliberate effort by the student, often in a classroom environment, although in the case of first language learning or immersive learning it could also be subconscious attention by the learner, to understand the target language, usually by conscious or subconscious attention to its grammatical, lexical, and phonological features. Conversely, acquisition is the capacity to apply or utilise that knowledge in real world settings to achieve an intended communicative outcome. Learning may result in knowledge, but acquisition results in proficiency.

Next, in his seminal work on the conditions needed for second language learning to occur, Spolsky (1989, pp. 16-25) sets out a list of 74 "conditions" or criteria needed for successful learning of a foreign language. His model of second language learning accounts for how a learner's social context, various kinds of attitudes and motivations, personal traits such as age, personality, capabilities and prior knowledge, the creation of formal and informal

learning opportunities and the interplay between the learner and their situation all interact to determine the extent and quality of language learning and other outcomes.

Many of the conditions specified by Spolsky (1989) relate to a range of affective factors including overt effort, types of motivation, intent and engagement as well as cognitive factors such as intelligence, memory and the capacity to analyse and generalise. Arnold (1999) and Dornyei (2001, 2003, 2005) set out in detail why these factors are so influential, but suffice to say here that where one or more of these factors are diminished or absent, the anticipated language learning outcomes will be inhibited.

Method

The research period spanned the full 2019-2020 academic year and was conducted within the Department of International Liberal Arts at a small private university in western Japan. It used two pairs of materials, the first a standardized test as a pre-course measure which, when used in tandem with students' scores on a short speaking activity, doubled as a placement test. The second pair served as post-course measures at the end of the academic year.

Participants

The participants consisted of 23 freshman undergraduates (17 female, six male) undertaking first year mandatory courses: Integrated English A (IE A) in the spring semester and Integrated English B (IE B) in the fall semester. Prior to the start of the IE A course, the results of the placement tests were used to divide the participants into a slightly higher English proficiency group (Group 1, n=12), taught by Teacher 1, and a slightly lower English proficiency group (Group 2, n=11), taught by Teacher 2.

Materials

The standardized test used as the pre-course measure was a previously used form of the Cambridge English: Key (KET) Reading and Writing test made publicly available in book form (Saxby, 2011), selected because it was at a suitably basic level for these students. It consisted of 56 reading

comprehension, grammar and vocabulary items worth one point each and was designated 'KET1'.

The post-course measure was a second KET Reading and Writing test from the same source (Saxby, 2011), designated 'KET2', consisting of 62 reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary items worth one point each.

While a more comprehensive battery of pre- and post-course measures would have been preferable to give a more rounded assessment of the participants' communicative abilities, the time constraints made it impracticable.

Procedure

The pre-course measure KET1 was administered during orientation week to all participants simultaneously in one large room with sufficient space between students to avoid one student being able to see another's answers. The test papers were marked by Teachers 1 and 2 the same day to assist with prompt placement into Groups 1 and 2.

The two groups then received instruction from Teachers 1 and 2 for IE A in the spring semester and IE B in the fall semester, after which the

post-treatment measure, a second form of the KET (KET2) was administered.

Analyses and Results

For direct comparability during analyses, the KET1 and KET2 scores (out of 56 and 62 points respectively) were converted into percentages and the following three hypotheses tested:

1. Group 1's KET2 scores would be higher than their KET1 scores.
2. Group 2's KET2 scores would be higher than their KET1 scores.
3. The combined Group 1 and 2's KET2 scores would be higher than their KET1 scores.

Since the data are paired for each participant and the hypotheses predict KET2 (post-course) scores will be higher than those for KET1 (pre-course), a paired, one-tailed Student's t-test was performed to establish the statistical significance of any differences in means. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Results of the paired, one-tailed Student's t-tests

Hypotheses	t value	Critical value	Significant at p=0.05
1. Group 1's KET2 scores would be higher than their KET1 scores.	3.3896	1.796	Yes
2. Group 2's KET2 scores would be higher than their KET1 scores.	-0.544	1.812	No
3. The combined Group 1 and 2's KET2 scores would be higher than their KET1 scores.	1.8098	1.717	Yes

Discussion

In discussing the above results, we will examine those for group 1, then group 2 and finally the combined groups in turn. However, it is important first to point out a limitation of this study's methodology.

The KET instrument is a measure of general English, albeit at a basic level, whereas the IE A and IE B courses targeted only a small subset of grammatical, lexical and phrasal target language. While ample opportunities were given during lessons for communicative practice of these target items within the wider framework of general English, this may not have adequately prepared the students for the linguistic demands of the

KET.

Furthermore, only the KET Reading and Writing test was used in this study, whereas the IE A and IE B courses not only incorporated all four language macro skills but focused primarily (though not exclusively) on speaking and listening activities during the lessons, to some extent at the expense of developing students' proficiency in reading and writing.

Ideally, the KET Speaking and Listening test would also have been administered at the start and end of the year, but the Speaking test requires the examiner to be trained both in the application of the standardized procedure and the scoring rubric. While Teacher 2 had such training,

Teacher 1 did not. It would therefore have proven logistically impractical to administer both the Reading and Writing test and the Speaking and Listening test to all 23 students, in addition to the course related assessment measures needed at the end of the IE B course to provide assessment grades for administrative purposes.

In other words, we acknowledge that the instrument used in this study, while useful, was not ideal. In retrospect, it would have been better to use pre- and post-test instruments that measure students' knowledge of, and ability to use the specific subset of language taught in the IE A and IE B courses. The unit tests relating directly to the course content would have served the latter function.

We also acknowledge that the IE A and IE B courses were not the only exposure to English that these students had, although their other English courses were generally taught by Japanese English teachers and included a far higher proportion of instruction in Japanese and with fewer activities for practising communicative English. Therefore, while the IE courses certainly appear to have improved the students' English proficiency, other courses may have contributed.

Group 1

Despite the limitation mentioned above, the result for Group 1 shows that there was a significant increase in their KET scores across the academic year.

Teacher 1 reported that the attendance rate was generally very high and that while the students were quiet and shy during teacher-centred portions of a lesson, most were using English much of the time during student-centred practice activities, thus satisfying Spolsky's (1989) conditions 62 and 63 for language learning. Furthermore, while there were two or three students who participated less actively than most, these were students who had been borderline Group 1 / Group 2 during placement at the start of the year, and so might be expected to find the course a little more demanding. Also, the majority of the group seemed keen, or at least willing to try to express themselves to their friends through English (condition 15). They also asked a lot of

questions, mainly relating to the meaning of a word, the translation of a word or the difference between two similar words, thus fulfilling additional conditions set out by Spolsky (1989) for language learning. This suggests a high level of interest in expanding their vocabulary base and in developing their capacity to express themselves and understand others, which if correct, would meet Spolsky's (1989) condition 15. It would also support the views expressed in Arnold (1999) and Dornyei (2001, 2003, 2005) that the presence of such affective and cognitive factors enhances language learning.

Group 2

Conversely, the result for Group 2 indicates that there was no significant improvement in KET scores over the year. It is important to note that this does not mean that no learning occurred or that significant learning may not have occurred among a select few individual students. Indeed Teacher 2 stated several times during the year that a few particular students were more motivated (condition 52) and had made visible improvements in their willingness to communicate (condition 15), communicative proficiency and study skills over the two semesters, primarily through very high attendance, active participation in English, conscientious study (condition 51), effort and a positive approach to English (condition 53).

Conversely, Teacher 2 noted that among the large majority of the group there was:

...a lack of effort in one way or another to truly improve. There were very few students who completed all the homework or did very well on the [International Phonemic Alphabet], or tried to do more beyond assigned work to improve.

That the majority of Group 2 did not study as actively or earnestly as Group 1 may go some way to explaining this result, which in turn would point to the important role of active participation and target language use in the language acquisition process, as highlighted by Spolsky (1989), and the influence of positive affect and active cognition in language learning, as posited by Arnold (1999)

and Dornyei (2001, 2003, 2005).

Combined groups

When the data for Group 1 (n=12) and Group 2 (n=11) are combined, the result indicates a significant improvement in English proficiency for the freshman year collectively, despite the negative result for Group 2 bringing the overall statistic down. Given that the two groups were of almost identical size, this in turn suggests that the level of improvement for Group 1 was not only statistically significant but substantial.

Conclusion

This paper examined whether two one-semester long mandatory Integrated English courses spanning the freshman year at a private Japanese university resulted in a significant improvement in the participating students' English proficiency, as measured by pre- and post-course KET Reading and Writing tests. The results show that students placed in the slightly higher-level Group 1 via a placement test at the start of the year did indeed improve significantly, while those in the slightly lower-level Group 2 did not. This was largely attributed to the extent to which the students had, through routine attendance and active study, participation, and practice, met some of Spolsky's (1989) conditions for foreign language learning. Those that by-and-large had, did improve significantly, while those that generally had not, did not.

In conclusion, this paper shows that the IE A and IE B courses can improve students' English proficiency. However, while a teacher should, through the selection of level-appropriate content and suitable sequencing, materials, and activities, do all they reasonably can to encourage students to engage with a course of study, the degree of an individual's improvement is still largely dependant upon the extent to which that individual consciously elects to engage with the course to benefit from it. The implication is that this decision, and its positive and negative consequences, should be explained clearly to students at the outset of any course of study so that each student can make a conscious decision as to how they wish to proceed.

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