

Longitudinal Study of Japanese Language Learning
by High School Exchange Students

Ryoko Murano
(International Christian University)

I The purpose of the study

High School Exchange Students, the subjects of this study, are participants in a year-long host family cross-cultural exchange program and learn the language not in a formal classroom setting, but in a more natural environment. It is yet to be examined how they learn the language and how much they attain in nearly 11 months.

It has often been observed that students' language proficiency greatly increases at the beginning of the autumn term, that is, after the summer holidays. This is an empirical study of how they learn the language during their stay in Japan.

Research questions are 1. what level of language proficiency do students reach in one year of their stay, 2. what are the characteristics of their language progress, 3. is there any difference between background students with previous Japanese language studies and non-background students without them.

II Method

Japanese language tests are administered three times during the year; at the time of the arrival, in the fifth month during the summer holidays, and in the 10th month, right before their departure. Written test are composed of listening, reading & writing of kanji, grammar & reading, and composition. Each test has overlapped parts so that students gains can be measured. Questions are taken from Standardized Japanese Language Proficiency Test of the past years; levels 4 and 5 (created by the author for measuring below level 4) for Test 1, levels 4 and 3 for Test 2, and levels, 3, 2, 1 for Test 3.

Composition is graded according to the grading system developed by ACTFL and others and modified by the author. Oral tests are also given to a small number of people and graded based on ACTFL guidelines.

III Subjects

Subjects are high school exchange students: 92 students took part in the project. 38 of them are non-background and 54 are background. The breakdown of subjects with regional background is as follows: USA 12; AUS/NZ 48; South America 10; Asia 11; and Europe 11.

IV Results

1. When they arrived, even the background students could only recognize numbers and greetings and a few simple sentences and found it difficult to follow natural speed in which the language is spoken. Non-background could recognize only a few words.

The written part of the test showed variety depending on students previous study, and most non-background students could answer none of the questions. As for oral proficiency ,except for a few, even the background students could utter only a few memorized phrases and communication was not possible.

2. In 5 months, most students could answer level 4 questions with high accuracy rate(85-90%), for oral proficiency, majority could handle daily routine conversation with almost natural speed. They could write a short paragraph reporting on their life in Japan with some comments.

3. In 10 months, students scored high on level 3,2,1 listening portion of the test and level 3 kanji and grammar and reading tests. For the oral part, most students place in mid-intermediate level (according to ACTFL scale), 1/3 of background students were in the advanced level.

IV Discussion

As for research questions set above, the level students attained is described as in the above. Some characteristics of their progress are that they show more striking progress in listening, which is understandable considering the environment students are in; they show more dramatic progress during the first 5months of their stay, which may suggest a possible relationship between language learning and culture learning; and in 10th month differences between the background and non-background becomes much smaller than previously observed, which seems to suggest the impact of language learning within the culture of the target language.

In this study the author did not find any clear regional differences due to the lack of population of each group.

V Shortcomings of this study and for further study suggestions

The number of Japanese language tests used in this study is insufficient to test the many aspects of students' language ability that need to be tested in order to grasp the whole picture of their language learning. This crucial shortcoming reduces the validity of this study. However it does not lessen the significance of the study. This will be useful for further study on a larger and more elaborate scale.