



# Measuring EFL learners' environment; English contact and use outside the classroom at a Japanese international university

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## Abstract

The primary purpose of this exploratory study was to identify the amount of language contact English as a foreign language (EFL) learners have outside the classroom at a Japanese international university. This study also aimed to examine the Japanese international university setting to discern to what extent, if at all, the surroundings play a role in facilitating language use and interaction outside of the classroom. Finally, the researchers were interested in determining if there is a difference in the amount of English interaction that students living on campus have as opposed to students living off campus. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected using a language contact profile. Analyses revealed that students do find opportunities to use English outside of the classroom on campus. Not surprisingly, students living on campus seemed to benefit from the environment more than their off-campus counterparts in terms of reported language contact and use.

**Key terms:** Domestic immersion programs; language contact profile; Japanese international universities

## 1. Background

Foreign language students studying in their home countries are often faced with the simple truth that once they leave the classroom there is no guarantee that they will be given opportunities to use the target language (TL). For second language (L2) learners studying in a traditional Japanese university context (e.g., a student population comprised of Japanese speaking, domestic students), a majority of their speaking practice had to happen in the classroom or it would not happen at all. While the above may remain largely true for most university EFL students in Japan, the advent of international universities, at which as much as half of the student body is comprised of international students, is changing this reality. A new context is emerging - one in which English usage outside of the classroom might be expected. Understanding this new paradigm of language contact will aid students in their language studies and teachers in their lesson and curriculum planning.

### 1.2 Context of Learning

Several studies have focused on the effects of the environment on language acquisition and development in the study abroad and at-home (AH) contexts (Brecht & Robinson, 1995; Collentine, 2004; Dewey, 2004; Diaz-Campos, 2004; Freed, 1995; Freed, Segalowitz & Dewey, 2004; Lafford, 2004; Magnan & Back, 2007; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004; Siegal, 1995; Spada, 1986). In a study comparing study abroad, at home and domestic immersion students, Segalowitz & Freed (2004) found that domestic immersion students reported more out-of-class language contact than their counterparts in study abroad and traditional at-home environments. Somewhat surprisingly, the study abroad participants reported more first language (L1) than target language (TL) use outside of the classroom. However, finding reasons for why some students interact and others do not is a difficult task. Dewey (2004) found that students in a study abroad environment reported a greater degree of interaction in the TL of Japanese than the domestic immersion students. Dewey attributed the less frequent interaction by the domestic immersion students to the linguistic and cultural gap that exists between Japanese and English. Segalowitz

and Freed (2004), commenting on an apparent lack of interaction with the target population, lament that the SA students had many opportunities to engage in a diverse array of extra-curricular Spanish language activities, but not all students took advantage of them. In a similar vein, Magnan and Back (2007) showed that students' attitudes toward interaction were in some ways connected to their self-perceptions or confidence.

### **1.3 Measuring Language Contact**

The Language Contact Profile (LCP) is a self-report questionnaire containing items relating to one's language use. The LCP was first used by Seliger and Gingras (1976) and later adapted by Seliger (1977) for use in obtaining data from students relating to their out-of-class "potential practice activities" resulting from interaction in the target language (p.269). Despite Seliger's (1977) goal of using the data he collected to quantify the motivation and second language contact of his learners, the rating scale format of the LCP only allowed for "approximate measures" (p.269). Since 1977, the LCP has been used by several researchers for investigations into input (Day, 1985), and most prominently to gather data relating to language use in study abroad contexts (Freed, 1990; Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz & Halter, 2004; Segalowitz & Freed, 2004). Day (1985) increased the detail which could be recorded by changing the format to an interval scale, measuring the amount of time (in 30 minute intervals) students reported interacting in English in a variety of situations. Despite these changes, Day (1985) concluded that there were still weaknesses in the LCP. One of the weaknesses to which he may have been referring was the lack of specificity of the questions. Many of the questions inquired about living situations (e.g. do you live with native speakers?), but daily interaction questions were limited to the number of minutes students "spend" with native speakers, not necessarily communicating with them (p.267). More recently, Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz and Halter (2004) further developed the LCP, including a number of additions which resulted in a combined total of 64 questions aimed at eliciting a detailed report of "how many days per week and how many hours per day [students] engaged in each of the four basic language skill activities—speaking, reading, writing, listening — outside class" (p.4).

The focus of this study is on the effects of the context of study for students studying at an international university in Japan. The Japanese international university is a setting that has received very little attention, to date.

## **2. Research Questions**

1. How much time are students spending outside the language classroom using or in contact with English?
2. Is the Japanese international university environment facilitating English language use outside the classroom?
3. Is there a difference in the amount of English interaction that students living on campus have as opposed to students living off campus?

## **3. Method**

### **3.1 Participants**

Initial data was collected from 91 students. Of these, data from 11 participants was removed due to inconsistent responses, failing to complete all sections of the questionnaire, or providing conflicting or unreliable responses. The final sample, therefore, consisted of 80 students. All participants were admitted to the university as Japanese-based (proficient language) students and were enrolled in English classes at the time of data collection. A majority were domestic students (N=71, 89%). For a majority of participants, spring semester 2010 was their first semester studying at the university (See Table 1).

Table 1 *Current semester at university*

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	1st semester	34	42.5
	2nd semester	14	17.5
	3rd semester	10	12.5
	4th semester	14	17.5
	5th semester or higher	8	10.0
	Total	80	100.0

### 3.2 Setting

This study was conducted at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, a private, international university in Oita prefecture, Japan. Nearly half of the approximately 5,800 students are not Japanese and come from more than 90 countries and regions around the world. What makes the Japanese international university different from typical Japanese universities is that the student body is divided in two by language proficiency: Japanese-based students and English-based students. This division is based on either students' first language or the language of proficiency that they were tested on. Japanese-base students study English as a foreign language, and take most of their major courses in Japanese. English-base students study Japanese as a foreign language, and take most of their major courses in English. It is this separation that makes the Japanese international university an interesting setting to research, as the environment seems rich in linguistic exchange potential.

### 3.3 Adapted Language Contact Profile

Background information relating to the participants' English interaction in everyday contexts was obtained through the use of a language contact profile (LCP). The LCP used in this study was a significantly shortened version of the model provided by Freed, Dewey, Segalowitz and Halter (2004). The reduction of items was designed to be time-efficient, following the suggestion of Wolf (1988) that, "a questionnaire should require certainly less than 30 minutes to complete, and preferably, less than 15 or 20" (p.481). Participants in this study took an average of twenty minutes to complete the online LCP. It was determined that questions unrelated to L2 use and interactions would burden the participants unnecessarily and therefore were removed. Subsequently, any questions not directly relating to participants' production or reception of English were deleted. The questionnaire consisted of three sections with a combined total of 29 items. Section A was designed to capture the participants' background information including number of semesters they had attended at the time the present study was conducted, living situation, TOEFL score, and experience of study abroad. Section B was designed to capture the frequency of language contact outside the English classroom. In this section participants were asked to indicate the number of days and hours they spent using English in various outside-of-classroom activities with an 8-point Likert scale (0 = never ~ 7 = 7 days) for 6 items and a 5-point scale (1 = 0-1 hour ~ 5 = more than 5 hours) for 6 items. Section C consisted of open-ended questions aimed at obtaining information related to the students' perceptions toward their university surroundings and staff and their perception of opportunities to use English. The addition of these items was directed toward collecting qualitative data in order to gain further insights into the part the environment plays on TL interaction and use, as well as gain perspective on participants' attitudes about the environment. Participants were not asked to provide their names. However, when they agreed to participate in further studies, they were asked to provide their e-mail addresses. The LCP was made available via an online survey to students enrolled in English during the 2010 spring semester.

**4. Analyses**

Quantitative data was analyzed to determine to what extent the setting facilitated communication outside of the classroom in English. The amount of out-of-class contact was calculated on the basis of the number of days per week participants reported using English for 6 extra-curricular situations and multiplying those by the number of hours reported for each of those days. Extra-curricular activities included time reported speaking on campus (classmates and non-classmates), off-campus (part time jobs, etc), brief exchanges, listening in on (not participating in) English conversations and reading. Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitative analyses in the form of frequencies and comparisons of means were performed using a statistical analyses package (SPSS version 18). Qualitative analysis of data was aimed at EFL learners’ perceptions toward opportunities for language contact and their learning opportunities. Qualitative data was translated from Japanese to English when necessary, analyzed for common themes, coded accordingly and topics were calculated for frequencies.

**5. Findings**

In order to describe the various kinds of contact and interactions in English the participants reported, the six question pairs of the LCP were calculated to reveal total weekly hours for each activity. Each participant’s total hours from the six question pairs were calculated to reveal a consolidated total number of contact hours with English (Total N=91 M= 26.46 hours per week; SD= 23.33). A high degree of variability was observed among participants’ reports on the LCP (as indicated by SD= 23.33). The researchers concluded that these results were most likely linked to the fact that some participants reported very high levels of language contact (more than three times the mean), while other participants’ reports were extremely low (2 cases reported no contact). To reduce the effects of outliers, participants reporting a total of 0 or over 60 hours were deleted and analyses were conducted on the remaining 80 participant cases. Calculations were performed for total hours speaking with non-classmates (M= 4.09 hours per week; SD= 4.23); total hours speaking with classmates (M= 2.39 hours per week; SD= 3.32); total hours making brief exchanges in English (M= 3.16 hours per week; SD= 2.76); total hours listening-in on other people’s English conversations (M= 4.85 hours per week; SD= 4.36); total hours speaking English off campus (M= 1.50 hours per week; SD= 2.36); and total hours reading English (M= 5.68 hours per week; SD= 5.25). Additionally, the sum of each participant’s total hours for the six question pairs was calculated to reveal a consolidated total number of contact hours with English (M= 21.63 hours per week; SD= 12.72).

Participants were asked to self-evaluate their ability in English for listening, speaking, reading and writing. Responses were varied, but a majority of respondents chose “poor” for every skill except listening (See Table 2).

Table 2

How would you rate your listening ability in English?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Poor	32	40.0
	Good	33	41.3
	Very good	10	12.5
	Fluent	1	1.3
	Total	76	95.0
	Missing	4	5.0
Total		80	100.0

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How would you rate your speaking ability in English?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Poor	46	57.5
	Good	23	28.7
	Very good	7	8.8
	Total	76	95.0
	Missing	4	5.0
Total		80	100.0

How would you rate your reading ability in English?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Poor	40	50.0
	Good	30	37.5
	Very good	5	6.3
	Fluent	1	1.3
	Total	76	95.0
	Missing	4	5.0
Total		80	100.0

How would you rate your writing ability in English?

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Poor	39	48.7
	Good	30	37.5
	Very good	6	7.5
	Fluent	1	1.3
	Total	76	95.0
	Missing	4	5.0
Total		80	100.0

Qualitative data was collected to examine participants' attitudes toward the program in order to better determine how the on-campus environment of the Japanese international university in question is functioning as a facilitator of target language use. A majority of participants (N=70; 87.5%) responded positively when asked if they thought their university provided an environment that promoted language use outside of the classroom (See Table 3). When asked to explain their answers, a majority of respondents who answered, "yes", cited an abundance of international students as the reason for their answer. Responses were more varied for respondents who answered, "yes, a little"; the most common response being "international students" followed by on-campus facilities (e.g., language lounge and dormitories). Respondents who answered, "no", cited not living in the dormitories and lack of opportunities to meet international students as their primary reasons.

Table 3

Overall, do you think your university provides you with an environment that promotes using English outside of class?			
		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Yes	31	38.8
	Yes, a little	39	48.8
	No	10	12.5
	Total	80	100.0

Participants were asked to suggest ideas of how the university can provide opportunities to use English on campus. The data was first coded to reveal any repetitive suggestions. Ten recurring ideas were suggested from the 73 respondents that provided answers. The most frequently suggested ideas were related to organizing social events where domestic students would be able to meet international students (See Table 4). Students were also asked about their satisfaction with their own effort to communicate outside the classroom, a majority of participants (N=69, 86.3%) responded that they were not satisfied. A follow-up question asked participants to comment on their efforts. Responses for the students who were not satisfied with their own efforts were coded to reveal two answer types: personal (N= 51; 64%), attributing their dissatisfaction to personal expectations; and environmental (N=8; 10%), indicating that their surroundings hindered their ability to communicate outside the classroom (See Table 5).

Table 4 *Ideas for increasing opportunities to use English*

<i>Response</i>	Frequency
Organize events and parties	30
Make “English Only on Campus” policy	15
Hire more English native faculties and staffs and have them speak to students	9
Provide more levels of English course	4
Offer new courses	4
Assign English homework and projects	4
Make “English Only Day”	2
Invite more non-Asian students	2

Table 5 *Response examples for dissatisfaction with own effort*

	Frequency
Personal	51
Environmental	8

Note: (\*) indicates responses translated from Japanese to English. All other responses are reported verbatim.

With the aim of examining the potential effects living on campus versus living off campus had on contact and interaction in English at the Japanese international university, the participants were divided into two groups according to

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their responses (living on campus: N= 26; living off campus: N= 54). The total weekly hours engaged in each type of English contact were calculated to reveal each group's mean number of hours and standard deviations (See Table 6).

Table 6 *Group Statistics*

	Living Situation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total time speaking with non-classmates	On Campus	26	5.8846	5.45767	1.07034
	Off Campus	54	3.2222	3.20181	.43571
Total time speaking with classmates	On Campus	26	2.7308	3.14398	.61659
	Off Campus	54	2.1667	3.41887	.46525
Total time for brief exchanges	On Campus	26	4.0769	2.69701	.52893
	Off Campus	54	2.7222	2.70859	.36859
Total time listening-in on other people's conversations	On Campus	26	5.4231	5.30790	1.04097
	Off Campus	54	4.5741	3.85884	.52512
Total time speaking English off campus	On Campus	26	2.0000	2.69815	.52915
	Off Campus	54	1.2593	2.17347	.29577
Total time reading English	On Campus	26	4.0769	4.65552	.91302
	Off Campus	54	6.4444	5.38925	.73338
Total Contact hours	On Campus	26	24.1923	13.52633	2.65273
	Off Campus	54	20.3889	12.24809	1.66675

Independent t-tests were used to determine possible significance between the two groups for each of the six types of English contact and interaction the participants reported (See Table 7). Comparisons between on-campus and off-campus participants were conducted for total number of hours spent interacting in English with non-classmates. This revealed a significant difference in the number of hours for on-campus (M=5.88, SD=5.46) and off-campus (M=3.22, SD=3.20); ( $t(78) = 2.75, p = .008$ ). Additionally, an analysis of time spent using English for brief exchanges revealed a significant difference between on-campus and off-campus participants ( $t(78) = 2.10, p = .039$ ) with the on-campus participants reporting significantly higher contact than the off-campus participants (on-campus, M=4.07, SD=2.69; off-campus, M=2.72, SD=2.70). Despite visible differences in means being observed for three of the remaining four categories (excepting total time speaking with classmates, which was nearly even), t-tests revealed these to be non-significant.

Table 7 *Independent Samples Test*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Total time speaking with non-classmates	Equal variances assumed	3.754	.056	2.745	78	.008	2.66239	.97000	.73128	4.59351
	Equal variances not assumed			2.304	33.538	.028	2.66239	1.15562	.31269	5.01210
Total time speaking with classmates	Equal variances assumed	.383	.538	.709	78	.480	.56410	.79566	-1.01993	2.14814
	Equal variances not assumed			.730	53.406	.468	.56410	.77242	-.98490	2.11311

Total time for brief exchanges	Equal variances assumed	.081	.777	2.098	78	.039	1.35470	.64567	.06927	2.64013
	Equal variances not assumed			2.101	49.654	.041	1.35470	.64469	.05958	2.64982
Total time listening-in on other people's conversations	Equal variances assumed	2.231	.139	.813	78	.419	.84900	1.04454	-1.23051	2.92852
	Equal variances not assumed			.728	38.177	.471	.84900	1.16592	-1.51091	3.20892
Total time speaking English off campus	Equal variances assumed	5.901	.017	1.318	78	.191	.74074	.56201	-.37813	1.85961
	Equal variances not assumed			1.222	41.166	.229	.74074	.60620	-.48336	1.96484
Total time reading English	Equal variances assumed	.048	.826	-1.920	78	.059	-2.36752	1.23302	-4.82227	.08723
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.022	56.561	.048	-2.36752	1.17109	-4.71299	-.02205
Total contact hours	Equal variances assumed	1.663	.201	1.257	78	.212	3.80342	3.02483	-2.21855	9.82539
	Equal variances not assumed			1.214	45.305	.231	3.80342	3.13290	-2.50539	10.11223

## 6. Discussion

Findings revealed variance in terms of how much time students spend using or in contact with English outside of the classroom. A mean of 21.63 hours per week ( $SD= 12.72$ ) suggests that students are spending a considerable amount of time outside of class using English. The highest means reported on the language contact profile were those for reading English and listening-in on other people's conversations, followed by the third ranking mean - speaking with non-classmates. These results indicate that participants favored receptive and non-interactive activities over more communicative language contact situations, a fact which the researchers (being also language teachers) could not help but find slightly disappointing. However undesirable these findings might be, the fact remains that students are spending time outside of class in contact with English. When considering the reason for such high reports of listening-in on other's conversations in English, one must take into account the high percentage of English-base students on campus – increasing their opportunities to overhear English conversations. As for speaking with non-classmates ranking higher than speaking with classmates, it can be expected that a highly homogenous group of students would revert to their native language once outside the classroom. The fact that speaking with non-classmates ranked third out of six is encouraging and suggests that students are finding substantial opportunities to use English outside the classroom.

In assessing the qualitative responses to questions relating to participants' perceived opportunity to use English, it is clear that the participants feel that the environment is one that encourages and facilitates interaction. It is also clear that students equate opportunity with an abundance of international students. However, what factors into their decision to communicate or not is not easily discerned. Responses to why participants were not satisfied with their own performance indicate that their reluctance to communicate in English may be more closely related to their perceived oral performance (or, confidence) as opposed to deficiencies in the environment. This claim is somewhat reinforced by high self-rating scores for listening. These results reflect the observations by Segalowitz and Freed (2004) that oral performance levels may also influence the inclinations that learners feel toward making use of communicative opportunities outside the classroom, and those of Magnan and Back (2007), who suggested that self-confidence is connected to a good self-perception. As reported earlier, responses to self-evaluation questions indicated that students had a very low opinion of their own ability



in English in all areas but listening. Perhaps the participants in this study were reluctant to interact because of low confidence. Additionally, responses to qualitative questions reveal that students might need more help in order for them to utilize their surrounding resources (namely, international students) than they are currently receiving. For example, among the student ideas for increasing the opportunities to use English on campus, the most common were organizing events, hiring more native English-speaking instructors and making the campus English only. These responses suggest that students may not be at a level of proficiency that would enable them to individually and proactively take advantage of their surroundings and therefore need more guidance and facilitation in order to interact with others in the target language.

Overall, participants living on-campus reported the highest amount of language contact ( $M=34.44$  hours per week;  $SD=31.27$ ). Those living off campus reported less total contact ( $M=22.14$  hours per week;  $SD=16.37$ ). Among the differences in reported contact found to have significance, speaking with non-classmates, differences between the on-campus and off-campus participant responses all favor the on-campus living situation. This suggests that there is an advantage in terms of language contact for students living on campus. These results also suggest that the dormitory plays a primary role. Whether students are interacting with non-classmates in their dorms, or they are interacting with non-classmates somewhere else on campus, or both, the experience of living in the dorms can be thought to be a contributing factor affecting the amount of time that students interact in English. Furthermore, the lack of significant differences in means between the two groups in the contexts of reading, speaking with classmates and speaking English off-campus support the argument that once the benefits of the dormitory are removed, responses become much more similar across the two groups of participants.

## **7. Conclusion**

The results of this study have illustrated that the issues of language contact and interaction outside-of-the-classroom are complex and no single experience can be thought of as representative of the whole. Although opportunities do appear to exist, as several participants in this study stated, "it depends on the student." Differences do exist in the amount of language contact observed between students living on and off campus, but simply surrounding language learners with international students does not guarantee interaction (Rivers, 1998; Tanaka, 2007) in that there is still a need to encourage, facilitate, and otherwise guide students to take advantage of their surroundings.

Some limitations emerged throughout the course of this project. We predicted limitations in the LCP because it lacked details in the TL contact, which is why we adapted it to include qualitative items, but later found the LCP to be also limited in its precision to accurately measure total contact hours and use in a TL. As it is based on reflection over a long period of time, reported hours can only be described as approximations. We suggest including additional data collection resources such as daily or weekly language diaries, blogs or journals if research requires definitive calculations of TL time; however, the adapted LCP administered here did reveal usable approximations of TL contact and interaction that we hoped to discover, so the researchers do not consider this limitation detrimental to the outcomes reported. Also considered is the matter that this study focused on only one Japanese international university. It is likely that programs and outcomes of language contact and use will differ in other Japanese international universities.

The results of this study have raised some important questions warranting further research at Japanese international universities. Future research is needed regarding the nature of the contact that students are encountering outside of the classroom and what kind of contact students would benefit from the most. Also needed is further investigation of the experiential differences between on-campus and off-campus students and the ways in which equality of experience, regardless of living situation, can be assured. Answers to these questions would be potentially beneficial to teachers, administrators and staff who aim to create events and programs to facilitate students' TL use outside the classroom and support them in their language study efforts.

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