

A Rationale for Hypothesizing the Benefits of Unstructured Learner Interaction

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Given the lack of direct studies of unstructured learner interaction (ULI), it is necessary to examine research in related areas in order to provide a rationale for hypothesizing that extended use of the target language among learners will aid the acquisition process. This paper examines theoretical models of language acquisition along with evidence from research on the role of input in second language acquisition, studies of the effectiveness of general English programmes at universities, research on the use of English by learners outside the classroom, stories of successful learners, research on study-abroad and immersion programmes, studies of learner beliefs, and discussions of the role of individual differences in language learning.

Evidence from Theories of Language Acquisition

The Output Hypothesis

The Output Hypothesis was developed by Swain and others as a response to what they saw as the shortcomings of Krashen's theory (see, for example, Krashen, 1982) that comprehensible input is all that is needed to develop proficiency in a foreign or second language. Swain (1985), whilst acknowledging the importance of input, proposed that comprehensible output may play an equally, if not more, significant role in second language acquisition. According to Swain (2005), "put most simply, the Output Hypothesis claims that the act of producing language (speaking or writing) constitutes, under certain circumstances, part of the process of second language learning" (p. 471). The Output Hypothesis was originally put forward as a way to account for the fact that children learning in so-called "immersion programs," where all content classes are taught in the target language, remain "clearly identifiable as non-native speakers and writers" even when they have started learning from kindergarten (Swain & Lapkin, 1995, p. 372). Researchers investigating this phenomenon noted a lack of opportunities for sustained output in these classes, and thus began to consider whether output might have a role to play in language learning beyond simply helping to develop fluency.

The Output Hypothesis proposes that output will play its strongest role when learners are pushed beyond the limits of their current linguistic system. The question that needs to be addressed in relation to the discussion of ULI is how far learners using English together outside the classroom will be able to "push" each other. In a study of 46 lower-intermediate level learners' perceptions of interactions, Mackey (2002) reported that the subjects felt that they were pushed in 81.5% of their interactions with native speakers and 64.5% of their interactions with peers. Although the figure was significantly lower for peer-

peer interactions, it appears that even in these dyads, students were being pushed to modify their output a significant amount of the time.

The Interaction Hypothesis

The Interaction Hypothesis (IH) was based primarily on the work of Long (e.g. 1985) and Hatch (e.g. 1978a). Long's original version (Long, 1983) proposed that interaction provides learners with increased amounts of comprehensible input as they negotiate meaning with a more competent interlocutor. Several studies including Pica et al. (1987a) and Ellis et al. (1994) provided supporting evidence for this idea by demonstrating that learners understood directions better when those directions were modified through interaction than when they were unmodified or premodified, but as Ellis (2008) and others have pointed out, the improved comprehension may simply have been a result of the increased amount of time-on-task brought about by the negotiation routines.

Perhaps the strongest criticism of the original version of the IH, however, was the fact that it did not directly explain any connection between interaction and language acquisition, a shortcoming that was addressed by Long (1996) in an updated version. In the revised version, Long proposed that in addition to increasing the amount of comprehensible input received by learners, interaction facilitates acquisition by creating opportunities for learners both to focus their attention on difficult structures and to produce modified output.

The basic idea of the Interaction Hypothesis –that interaction facilitates acquisition– provides support for the idea that ULI will be beneficial for learners because of the increased opportunities for interaction that it provides. However, the majority of interaction research to date has focussed on interactions between learners and competent speakers, and the question of how far the findings of those studies can be extended to interactions between learners has still not been resolved.

Sociocultural Theory

According to Ellis (2008), sociocultural SLA “views language acquisition as an inherently social practice that takes place within interaction as learners are assisted to produce linguistic forms and functions that they are unable to perform by themselves” (p. 206). A key element of Sociocultural Theory is Vygotsky's (1987) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what someone is able to do by themselves and what they can achieve with help. Although early interpretations of Sociocultural Theory assumed a situation where a more-able person guided a less-able one, this aspect of Vygotsky's theory has been modified by many SLA theorists. For example, in the introduction to a volume of papers exploring Sociocultural theory and SLA, Lantolf (2000) argued for a more “robust and useful way of thinking about the ZPD” and claimed that “it seems clear that people working jointly are able to co-construct contexts in which expertise emerges as a feature of the group” (p. 17). This echoed Donato's claim that “collaborative work among language learners provides the same opportunity for scaffolded help as in expert-novice relationships in the everyday setting” (Donato, 1994, p. 41).

Sociocultural Theory as applied by SLA researchers asserts that working with others leads to learning regardless of the relative levels of expertise of the participants, which appears to provide support for the potential role of ULI in the learning of a foreign language, although more research is needed to establish how far these benefits will be affected by the proficiency of the participants.

Theories of Cognitive Processing and Automaticity

Speaking requires a complex and simultaneous combination of a number of cognitive processes. McLaughlin (1990) defined these in a “hierarchical task structure of speaking.” McLaughlin also stressed the importance of “overlearning,” saying that “a skill must be practiced again and again and again, until no attention is required for its performance” (1990, p. 125).

Levelt (1989) presented a detailed model for analyzing speaking as an act of information processing. Referring to speech in an L1, Levelt pointed out that most of these components are largely automatic, require little or no executive control, and can therefore be accomplished at very high speed. Of course, the situation will be very different when we consider the processing involved in speaking in a foreign language. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to speculate that practice leading to increased automatization of the processes will enable language learners to benefit from the same advantages as native speakers.

More recently, Segalowitz (2003) also noted that the most commonly cited benefit for automaticity in language learning is the effect of freeing up resources. Segalowitz further proposed that automatized processes will lead to processing that is both quicker and more accurate because it is not affected by interference from external information, and that increased automaticity would, by definition, lead to increased fluency.

Research into cognitive processing appears to provide a strong argument for hypothesizing that extended use of the target language will have benefits for language learners regardless of whether their interlocutor is a native speaker or another learner because of the effect it will have on automatizing (and therefore speeding up) the processing of language.

The Role of Input in SLA

A great deal has been written about the role of input in second language acquisition. For the purposes of the current investigation, two key questions need to be considered:

- 1) Is there any difference between input generated from ULI and input generated from pair activities and group work in the classroom?
- 2) How would any such differences be likely to affect acquisition?

In a discussion of the merits of peer interaction, a person's opinion will depend on their beliefs about the role that input plays in second language acquisition. Whilst all theories of second language acquisition acknowledge that input plays a major role in the process of learning a foreign or second language, they vary widely in their claims regarding both the exact nature of that role and its importance. For example, whilst behaviourist theories

claim that input directly affects output, mentalist theories consider input only as a trigger that starts mental processing (Ellis, 2008). As VanPatten and Williams put it, “although everyone agrees that input is necessary for SLA, not everyone agrees that it is sufficient” (p. 10).

Types of Input Received by Learners

Several studies have noted that, as would be expected, input provided by native speakers tends to be more grammatical than that generated by language learners (e.g. Pica & Doughty, 1985b). However, on the question of whether input from native speakers is always grammatical, studies of teacher talk have produced mixed findings. For example, studies by Henzl (1973, 1979) and others did not find examples of ungrammatical modifications from the teacher, whereas studies by Hatch et al. (1978b) did find some instances. Other more general studies of the language used by native speakers to address learners, or “foreigner talk,” have found that ungrammatical modifications are common (e.g. Ferguson, 1975). However, it seems safe to assume that input from teachers will generally be more grammatical than input from other learners. This is supported by Porter's (1986) finding that while only 6% of foreigner talk in her study was composed of utterances that were grammatically incorrect, 20% of the language produced by learners talking to each other proved to be so.

What Effect does Faulty Input Have on SLA?

The key questions regarding input in a discussion of NNS/NNS interaction are whether faulty input will have a negative impact on language acquisition and, if it does, whether the scale of that impact will be such as to negate the benefits of the increased *amounts* of input (and output) arising through those interactions. The findings from research, however, have been mixed. Some researchers have suggested that peer-peer interaction may have an adverse effect on language development. For example, Plann (1976) suggested that interaction between learners can lead to a “stabilized non-target variety” (cited in Pica & Doughty, 1985b, p. 246). In a similar vein, Swain (1985), in a discussion of linguistic weaknesses of students in an immersion programme hypothesized that “another way in which the immersion students' input may be limited is by virtue of peer input. The students hear their peers speaking as they do” (p. 246). In a discussion of this argument, Pica et al. (1996) claimed that “researchers have long suggested that linguistic features of learners' interlanguage might account for incomplete L2 development in immersion and bilingual classrooms, where learners have limited contact with NSs and work with each other most of the time” (Pica et al., 1996, p. 65).

In contrast, many researchers have claimed that faulty input does not appear to have a negative effect on language development, at least in the short term. For example, in the studies mentioned above (Porter, 1986b; Pica and Doughty, 1985a, 1985b) all of the researchers found that the learners did not generally repeat the incorrect input that they had heard.

Ohta (2001) addressed this issue specifically in a section entitled “Do learners pick up each other's errors?” Ohta examined data from her study and found that only around 7%

of learner errors were repeated by interlocutors. Roughly 6% of these were immediate repetitions, and only 1% were subsequent repetitions.

Overall, it seems that the available research cannot tell us conclusively whether faulty input from by other learners will have a detrimental effect on the linguistic development of the listener. However, as many researchers and writers have pointed out, it is clear that with the extensive use of pair activities and group work in modern language teaching, a great deal of the input that learners get in their classroom is from each other anyway, and the same benefits hypothesized for classroom pair activities and group work should also apply to ULI.

Summary of Findings

Having reviewed a sample of the available research, the following conclusions can be drawn with regard to the role of input in the study of ULI.

- * In a situation where regular interaction with native speakers is not possible, interaction with peers can greatly increase the amount of comprehensible input available to individual learners.
- * The input that learners receive from each other will contain more grammatically sub-standard language than input they receive from teachers, but also a great deal of non-deviant language.
- * It is unclear to what degree this will affect the linguistic development of the learners, but available evidence suggests that it will not be unduly harmful.

Studies of the Effectiveness of General English Programmes

In order to assess the strength of the argument for incorporating ULI into language programmes at Japanese universities, it is necessary to make some estimate of how much language use is required to bring about real changes in proficiency. If it can be shown that non-intensive English programmes do not provide sufficient opportunities for use to expect any real progress in the development of linguistic proficiency, this will provide a strong argument for promoting ULI in EFL environments.

The Japanese academic year runs from April to March and is broken into two semesters of 15 weeks each. An average of two classes per week would provide students with a total of three hours of English instruction every week. This would equate to a total of 45 hours over each of the semesters, with approximately two months' holiday in between. These figures will vary according to whether English is the students' major area of study or not, but even for EMs, the numbers are not likely to be much higher. Whatever the required number of hours may be, it is likely to be significantly higher than Japanese university students receive.

Mosback (1977) claimed that the feeling at his university in Ethiopia was that the 35-40 hours per term of instruction provided to their students was nowhere near enough to achieve its objectives. He referred to Mason's study (1971) of a group of foreign students at the University of Hawaii in which the researcher found no significant effect on students

who took 15 hours a week of English for the first semester (in classes of only 15 students) compared with 9 students who were exempted, but who should have taken the course. Having reviewed Mason's findings, Mosback concluded that "it was hardly surprising that the Ethiopian freshman programme, with 80 hours in two semesters for groups of 30-40 was apparently failing to do what Hawaii students were attempting in an active EL environment in up to 180 hours with a group of 15" (Mosback, 1977, p. 315). In his own study, however, Mosback found that the intensive EFL courses taught at the University of Addis Ababa "made no significant difference to the students' level of English on entry from the secondary school" (p. 316). He concluded that "if the secondary education system and the general linguistic environment in a country have not been such as to produce an adequate second-language ability in its students, the university is unlikely to have either the time or the money at its disposal to make the deficiency good within its academic schedule" (p. 318).

To summarize, the lack of research into the effectiveness of English courses at Japanese universities makes it difficult to draw conclusions, but the findings of studies in other environments suggest that the combination of a small number of classroom teaching hours, large class sizes, and limited duration means that it would actually be quite surprising if they were found to have any lasting impact on the students' language proficiency.

The Use of English outside the Classroom

The idea of learning a foreign language by speaking it with other learners in the L1 environment is not new. In this section, I will examine discussions of learner strategies and studies of successful learners. I will also discuss examples of attempts to promote ULI in Japanese universities.

ULI as a Learning Strategy

Oxford's widely used "Strategy Inventory for Language Learning" (SILL) (Version 5.1 - Oxford, 1990) contained several items that might be construed as referring indirectly to ULI, but none mentioned the concept specifically. These are listed below with their item numbers.

- 26. I attend and participate in out-of-class events where the new language is spoken.
- 60. I take responsibility for finding opportunities to practice the new language.
- 61. I actively look for people with whom I can speak the new language.
- 75. I work with other language learners to practice, review, or share information.

Another version of the SILL (Version 7.0 - Oxford, 1990) included the item "I practice English with other students" under the general category of social strategies, but it is still far from clear that this refers to ULI as no mention is made of the type of "practice" that it denotes or the circumstances under which this might take place. Lai (2009) found that around 10% of 433 Taiwanese university students surveyed responded positively to this item, but it is difficult to know how those students were interpreting the meaning of

“practice.” It may have been the case that they were responding positively simply because practising with other students is something they do as part of their regular English lessons, in which case, it would not relate to ULI at all. In fact, Lai reported that overall, “the least-used [strategies] were those that involved speaking and writing to others in English” (Lai, 2009, p. 263), which suggests that ULI is not common in the environment of Taiwanese universities either.

In a paper that paved the way for research into learning strategies, Rubin (1975) claimed that “the good language learner uses the language when he is not required to do so and seeks opportunities to hear the language (attends foreign language movies, joins foreign language clubs, listens to T.V. or the radio, uses the foreign language with other students outside class” (p. 44). However, under the heading “Good learners practice,” Rubin had nothing to say about ULI beyond the following: “He initiates conversations with the teacher or his fellow students in the target language” (p. 47). Similarly, Stern (1983) claimed that good learners seek communicative contact with target language users and the target language community and become actively involved as participants in authentic language use, but he made no mention of what good learners might do when they do not have access to native speakers of the target language.

Other articles with promising titles also failed to make any mention of ULI. For example, in their three-year study of learner strategies, Chamot and Kupper (1989) collected data for reading, writing, and listening but had nothing to say about the ways in which successful learners develop their speaking skills. Other writers such as Cohen (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot (1990) focussed on specific strategies for improving facilitating communication without addressing the question of how learners can increase opportunities for language use in their home countries. In a book entitled *Learner Strategies for Learner Autonomy*, Wenden (1991) discussed a wide range of strategies, but made no specific reference to developing speaking skills by using the target language with other learners.

According to Manchon (2008) interest in learner strategies had its heyday during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which is why many of the key articles in this area are old. However, even more recent publications fail to make any mention of ULI as a learning strategy. For example, Cohen et al.'s “Language Strategy Use Survey” (Cohen, Oxford, & Chi, 2006) provided a taxonomy of strategies, including those for practising speaking. Although “regularly seek out opportunities to talk with native speakers” and “initiate conversations in the target language as often as possible” were listed, there was no mention of using the target language with other learners outside the classroom.

Stories of Successful Learners in Japan

Elwood (2006) pointed out that successful English learners have received little attention from researchers in Japan. In a bid to redress this situation, he interviewed nine students from a large public university in Japan who had shown themselves to be successful learners of English. In his interviews, however, using English with other Japanese people was not mentioned by any of the subjects. A more recent study by Cotterall (2008) investigated the independent learning methods of three highly motivated learners of English living in a small provincial city in northern Japan. Even though this is an environment

where ULI could possibly have the most benefit, it was not mentioned by either the learners or the author. As far as Japanese learners are concerned, then, there does not seem to be much evidence of ULI being used to develop linguistic proficiency, although I am aware of at least some Japanese learners who have formed groups for the purpose of using English together. These are discussed in the following section.

Examples of ULI in L1 Environments

Gao (2007) described how, in order to overcome contextual constraints on learning English (namely a lack of contact with native speakers), “English learners on the Chinese mainland ingeniously create a unique sociocultural phenomenon called ‘English corners’, having as a defining characteristic non-native speakers’ strategic efforts to interact with each other in English” (p. 260). In an earlier study, Gao (2006) had reported on two Chinese learners of English who attended a weekly English discussion group with other non-native speakers. In both studies, he found that the social aspect of these groups was of paramount importance to the participants, noting in the 2006 study that “the social nature of the discussion quickly took over the language learning objective” (p. 140).

Gao's studies have important implications for the present investigation, not least his conclusion that “language learners should be encouraged to believe that English is a meaningful medium for them to share their experiences, reflections, emotions and so on with other non-native speakers” (2007, p. 268).

Attempts to Promote ULI in Japanese Universities

As discussed in the introduction to this study, I have had varying degrees of success in my own attempts to establish groups of students who were prepared to try to adopt English as a medium of communication outside the classroom, the most successful group being students at a university in Hokkaido. That group was started by two male students who had learned English by forcing themselves to use it for all their communicative needs. Others joined them, and my role was in the club was simply to organize events and take part in social activities as a participant rather than as a teacher. However, when I tried to set up the same kind of club at a women's university in Nagoya several years later, we were not able to achieve anything like the momentum of the Hokkaido group, and very few students were willing or able to use English outside our lunchtime group meetings. Nevertheless, the fact that many students were prepared to come to the meetings and speak English to each other was in itself a significant step in moving their English learning beyond the boundaries of the classroom environment. One of the main aims of the current study was to look for clues as to what I and other teachers can do to maximize the chances of success in future projects.

In my efforts to find examples of attempts to promote ULI in Japanese universities, I also contacted a colleague at a university where I knew that content classes were taught in English.

At my request, he conducted a small-scale informal survey of the students in his EAP class. The fact that they were taking the EAP course means that they had still not achieved the level of English required for them to enrol in classes where the medium of

instruction was English. The students were asked three questions:

- 1) Do you use English to talk to other Japanese students outside of the classroom?
- 2) Have your teachers ever suggested that, in order to improve your English, you use English to talk with other Japanese students outside the classroom?
- 3) If “yes”, how many teachers have suggested this strategy?

A total of 14 students were surveyed. In response to the first question, 5 students indicated that they occasionally used English with each other outside the classroom, 6 said “hardly ever,” and 3 responded that they never did this. In response to the second question, 11 students said that no teacher had ever recommended ULI as a way of developing their English proficiency, and only 3 said that it had been suggested by a teacher. Of those 3, one said that 4 teachers had recommended using English with other students outside the classroom, and the other two both said that only 1 teacher had recommended it.

Given the nature of the learning environment, it is quite surprising that such low emphasis is placed in this university on the possibility of developing linguistic proficiency by speaking with other learners outside the classroom. Particularly surprising is the finding that only 3 of the 14 students surveyed has ever had a teacher suggest that they do this. The findings from this small-scale survey appear to confirm my suspicion that ULI simply does not appear on the radar of most teachers and learners (even highly motivated and able ones) at Japanese universities. As mentioned previously, however, this lack of awareness also suggests that there is enormous potential for the promotion of ULI within higher-education establishments in Japan through a process of teacher and student education.

Evidence from Research on Study-Abroad and Immersion Programmes

Study-Abroad Programmes

I have often heard Japanese learners of English express their belief that the only real way to learn English is to study in an English-speaking country. My review of the research therefore aimed to establish (a) the kind of impact that study-abroad programmes have on linguistic ability, and (b) the extent to which ULI might be hypothesized to provide similar benefits for learners who do not have the resources to study in a foreign country.

Japanese students who make the decision to study in an English-speaking country seem to expect, perhaps not unreasonably, that they will be learning English through interaction with native speakers. In reality, however, many of them struggle to make friends in the host countries beyond the families that they stay with. In fact, studies by a number of researchers including Kaplan (1989), and Wilkinson (2000) have suggested that the number of opportunities to interact with native speakers on study-abroad programmes is very limited. Tanaka (1997) also noted in a study of Japanese students in Auckland that “one general problem for overseas students, not only Japanese, going to language schools is a limited social network, especially with local people” (p. 41).

Of course, it is not the case that study-abroad programmes offer no opportunities for using English, but for most students, the majority of their opportunities to use English in a social context will come from interacting with other learners at language schools. For some reason, Japanese learners seem more prepared to accept this as “real” communication than interaction with other learners from their own country. Indeed, Tanaka (1997) found that interactions with peers at language schools were regarded as second only to interactions with native speakers in terms of their value as learning experiences. Many students reported that it was much easier speaking English with other learners at school because their English tended to be slower, simpler, and easier to understand. It seems strange that students do not recognize the possibilities of benefitting from these very same advantages by using English with people from their own country.

Further support for promoting ULI prior to studying abroad comes from studies of American university students by Miller and Ginsberg (1995) and Wilkinson (2002). Among other things, these studies found that participants expected their homestay families to behave as surrogate teachers, and relied on them almost entirely to suggest topics for conversation and initiate exchanges. It seems, therefore, that not only are learners not getting enough experience of using foreign languages in their home country, but the interactions they do have are not of the sort that will prepare them for the demands of real communication. Both of these problems could arguably be addressed through the promotion of ULI.

Immersion Programmes

An “immersion” programme is defined by Richards et al. (2010) as “a form of bilingual education in which children who speak only one language enter a school where a second language is the medium of instruction for all pupils” (p. 174). The immersion programmes that have been most thoroughly researched are those for English-speaking children in Canada who are sent to schools where French is the medium of instruction.

It is difficult to assess the relevance of immersion programmes to the role of ULI, but whenever I have described the theme of my study to colleagues, they have usually responded by saying, “Oh, you mean like immersion programmes?” However, I would argue that there are more differences than similarities between the two learning contexts. For one thing, as noted in the list above one of the features of immersion programmes is that exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom. There is nothing in the literature on immersion to suggest that students on these programmes actually adopt the L2 as their primary means of communication outside the classroom. In fact, there has been some suggestion that older learners in particular do not. For example, Caldas and Caron-Caldas (2002) noted that learners in an immersion programme were actually quite resistant to the idea of using the L2 outside the classroom with their peers.

It could also be argued that immersion programmes represent a situation where students have no need to engage in ULI since they already have an enormous amount of exposure to the language in their classrooms. The aim of the present study is to investigate the potential for ULI as a remedy for precisely the fact that learners of English in Japanese do not have sufficient input or opportunities to use the target language. For these reasons, a detailed review of research into immersion programmes will not be included in this study.

Learner Beliefs

A large-scale study of English learners in the U.S. by Reid (1987) found in a survey of 1,388 students from various countries that every language group expressed a limited or negative preference for group learning. However, of all the groups surveyed, Japanese students had the second lowest means for this factor, although the author noted that the Japanese students showed more variation in their preferences than other language groups. Interestingly, the only group who had a stronger negative preference for group learning in this study was native speakers of English.

Matsuura et al. (2001) found significant differences in Japanese students' and their teachers' beliefs about what constitutes an effective English lesson. The authors surveyed 301 students and 82 instructors in three universities. Roughly half of the participants were English majors, and the sample of instructors consisted of 41 native speakers of English and 41 native speakers of Japanese. From answers given to questions about preferences for various instructional styles and methods, the researchers found that both teachers and students agreed that pair activities and group work are "appropriate" activities for Japanese learners. However, the overall finding was that the students showed a preference for more traditional teacher-fronted lessons with a strong focus on accuracy and learning isolated skills.

Although Matsuura et al. found that students were not averse to paired activities, other researchers have questioned whether Japanese university students see the value of working with other learners. For example, in a short opinion paper entitled, "Oh, no! Do we really have to work in pairs?" Jones (2001) concluded from observations of his own students that "it just seems that some students still prefer their teacher to lead them and guide them and correct them – or is it that they don't want to talk to each other? Anyhow, pair and group work doesn't seem to be everyone's cup of tea" (p. 1). In spite of these objections, however, Jones claimed that "pair and group work does seem to be the most effective way (the only way?) to involve students in natural communication in English in the classroom – especially when the classroom is probably the only place they do speak English" (p. 1). It is interesting that the writer does not consider any alternative to passively accepting the fact that his students will never use English anywhere other than in the classroom.

Burden (1999) surveyed 161 students at a national university in Japan to find out about their perceptions of pair work tasks. His main findings were that Japanese students did become accustomed to pair practice eventually, and that the students felt that pair work was the next best thing to talking to the teacher.

In another survey of Japanese university students, Brown (2005) asked 171 subjects to suggest ways in which a motivated student could improve his or her English whilst studying in the L1 environment. The students were told that they had to suggest things that would be both effective and practical. In the results, not a single one of the respondents mentioned the idea of using English outside the classroom with their peers. This supports my own observation that for most students, the thought of using English outside the classroom in Japan with other learners has simply never crossed their mind. Furthermore, the fact that the researcher made no comment about this in his conclusions suggests that

the idea was not any higher in his own consciousness.

The Role of Individual Differences in Language Learning

According to Dorynei and Skehan (2003), “individual differences in second language learning, principally foreign language aptitude and motivation, have generated the most consistent predictors of second language learning success” (p. 589). Gradman and Hanania (1991) identified 22 individual-difference variables that can affect success in learning a new language. These included variables such as total contact hours, access to native-speaking teachers, and whether or not the language of instruction in their classrooms was English. Oxford and Ehrman (1993) attempted to synthesize research into nine of these factors that are likely to vary among learners within a given environment. These were aptitude, motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, language learning styles, age, and gender. A full review of research into the role of individual differences in language learning is beyond the scope of this study, but it is not difficult to imagine that the potential benefits of ULI vary for different learners. For this reason, I will include here a short discussion of the variables that I believe are likely to have the greatest relevance to the current investigation.

Motivation

Most people have a general understanding of what we mean when we talk about “motivation,” yet as Dornyei (2001) pointed out, when it comes to actually defining it, “researchers disagree strongly on virtually everything concerning the concept, and there are also some serious doubts whether ‘motivation’ is more than a rather obsolete umbrella term for a wide range of variables that have little to do with each other” (p. 7). In the present study, I will need to consider motivation from the standpoints of (a) the participants’ general motivation to learn English, (b) their motivation to try using it outside the classroom as a way of developing their language skills, and (c) their motivation to persevere with their efforts. Dornyei and Otto’s process model of L2 motivation (1998) may prove to be useful as it attempts to describe how motivational processes change over time by considering a pre-actional phase, an actional phase, and a post-actional phase. For this study, one of the most important challenges will be identifying the motivational influences that operate on participants in these different phases.

Personality

The issue of how personality affects language learning is one that has received a great deal of attention from SLA researchers. Much of this has focused on the relationship between personality types as classified by measures such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Myers, 1962) and success in language learning. The Myers-Briggs test involves four dichotomies, and personalities are defined according to combinations of these pairings. The dichotomies defined in the test are extraversion/introversion, sensing/intuition, thinking/feeling, and judging/perceiving. The criterion most commonly associated with language-learning aptitude has been the extraversion/introversion dichotomy.

Although some educational research (e.g. Entwistle & Entwistle, 1970; Eysenck, 1957)

has suggested that extroverts tend to perform less well than introverts in learning generally, there seems to be a conventional wisdom in ELT that extroversion is likely to be the more appropriate personality trait for learning languages. In a review of studies on the role of personality in language learning, however, Skehan (1989) found that although some researchers had been able to show a slight positive relationship between extroversion and success in language learning, these results had been largely dependent on the design of the research project. He concluded, therefore, that there was insufficient evidence to say for sure whether such a relationship really exists. Carrell et al. (1996) noted that little research had been done in the context of homogenous groups of learners in an EFL (as opposed to ESL) context. In their study of Indonesian students, however, they too found only very low levels of correlation between type preferences and language learning outcomes.

In the present study, personality type may have a role to play in determining whether students are able to interact with other learners outside the classroom and also in determining the nature of those interactions.

Affect

Affect refers to the emotional side of learning, and the construct has a long history in the writings of people like Montessori, Dewey, Vygotsky, Maslow and Rogers. Many teachers and researchers have emphasized the importance of affect in the learning process, and language teaching methods such as Suggestopedia and the Silent Way were based firmly on considerations of affective factors. The idea of an “affective filter” was also an important part of Krashen’s model of language learning (see, for example, Krashen, 1982). Krashen suggested that acquisition would be most likely to take place when the learner was free from inhibition, anxiety, and embarrassment. Stevick (1999) further argued that the importance of affect goes beyond simple talk of “feelings,” and he described five ways in which affect plays a role in learning and memory. The first was that remembering how we felt about things that happened helps us to remember what happened. The second was the way that negative affect can interfere with learning. The third was the notion of affective feedback received from the use of language, which may be either positive or negative. The fourth was affect and playback from others’ use of language, and the final effect posited by Stevick was that a person’s emotional state can influence their ability to draw on resources that are that are firmly established in long-term memory.

One possible inference from Stevick’s arguments is that memory will function most efficiently in situations where there is a positive affective climate, and it may be that ULI can be shown to be more successful in providing learners with such a climate than classroom instruction, particularly for Japanese learners. For example, Tani-Fukuchi (2005) claimed that “Japanese learners generally have low self-esteem, mid-range tolerance of ambiguity, and relatively high social anxiety” (p. 3). If factors like anxiety and the ability to tolerate ambiguity play an important role in the language classroom in Japan, it would be interesting to know whether these are magnified or reduced when interaction in the target language takes place outside.

Identity

In a review of articles on the role of identity in language learning, Norton (1997) noted that “all the authors point out that identity constructs and is constructed by language” (p. 419). In a study of the potential role of ULI in the study of a foreign language, it would seem prudent to consider the effect that using a foreign language with peers in an exclusively L1 environment might have, both on the way the learner perceives herself and the way she perceives herself as being viewed by those around her.

Although it is not the case that the role of identity has not been considered in SLA, reviews of the field (e.g. Norton, 1997; Ricento, 2005) have focussed largely on discussions of how linguistic issues affect both the status and motivation of learners of a foreign or second language in a very general sense, and particularly the issue of identity among immigrants. Unfortunately, I was unable to find any specific references to considerations of identity as it would relate to the present investigation. This is not surprising, given that the topic itself is one that has not been clearly identified in the literature. Nevertheless, another aim of this study was to gather information on how participants perceived the notion of identity, and whether engaging in ULI had an effect on that perception.

Summary of Findings

The main findings of this examination of research in related fields are summarized below.

- * There are a number of highly credible theories whose core proposals would suggest real potential for ULI in developing language proficiency, particularly the Output Hypothesis and theories of automaticity.
- * The available body of research cannot provide conclusive answers about the role of input in SLA. Arguments can be made that input from peers will not promote learning, but the opposite point can also be made on the basis that input from ULI will be superior to input from language classrooms in terms of comprehensibility, salience, and, of course, volume.
- * Available research seems to support my own observations that general English courses in Japanese universities do not provide anywhere near enough instruction time to have a real impact on learners’ proficiency.
- * ULI has been used as a vehicle for developing linguistic proficiency by learners both in Japan and in other countries. However, it has received almost no attention in terms of its potential as a learning strategy, and it is not commonly mentioned in studies of successful learners. ULI is not common in Japanese universities, and it does not appear to feature highly in the consciousness of either teachers or learners.
- * From a review of study-abroad programmes, it is reasonable to conclude that (a) the main benefits associated with these programmes could equally be achieved through ULI, and (b) ULI may provide a solution to the many of the problems that Japanese learners face in their host countries. Studies of immersion programmes were considered, but deemed not to be relevant to the current investigation.

- * Learners in general, and possibly Japanese learners in particular, tend to be suspicious of the idea that using English with peers will help them to develop their proficiency.
- * Individual differences are likely to be an important factor in determining the potential role of ULI in the study of a foreign language.

Although there is a lack of direct evidence from studies of ULI, this paper has shown that there is a wealth of evidence from peripheral fields that provides strong support for the idea. Nevertheless, more research is required to assess whether the hypothesis can hold up in practice.

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