

EFL Students' Acquisition of Written English Skills after Studying Abroad

Yoshimasa Ogawa, David Cozy and Misato Usukura

Abstract

The present study investigates the degree to which the new *Advanced Skills* courses at the English department of a private university in the Tokyo area improve students' reading ability in English after their study-abroad experience, and the way the students perceive the courses and activities. The quantitative study showed that the students' reading comprehension scores did not improve significantly over the first semester that the pertinent courses were taught, but that their scores did not decline, either. The qualitative study suggested that students tend to prefer spoken English or audio-visual materials to reading comprehension practice whereas some high-proficiency students acknowledge the importance of the latter. Further studies on the same issue might help the English department integrate the EFL program at the main campus in Tokyo and ESL programs at the overseas satellite more efficiently.

Introduction

The present study is the first stage of an action research project that evaluates the effectiveness of the EFL program at the English department of a private university in the Tokyo area (hereafter referred to as PUT). This particular study focuses on the process by which the third-year students learn advanced EFL skills, including written English skills, in the upper-division skill courses (*Advanced Skills*) after studying ESL at the university's overseas satellite. In this research context, *written English* primarily refers to reading comprehension skills, which the past TOEIC data have shown to be a major weakness of the target student group. The ultimate goal of our endeavor is to explore ways to integrate the English language curricula at the main campus in Tokyo and the overseas satellite in the United States more systematically, so that the two programs would be better synchronized and thus facilitate students' second language acquisition.

The present study consists of quantitative and qualitative sections. In the quantitative section, the participants' improvement in reading comprehension performance is statistically analyzed in the form of a pretest and a posttest. In the qualitative section, their performance in, and reaction to, various EFL activities is observed and analyzed through classroom observations, and students' perceptions of which activities are enjoyable or useful are probed through unstructured interviews.

All English majors at PUT, majoring in English language, literature, and communication, enroll in an ESL program at the US satellite for five months, one year, or one and a half years, depending on their preference and readiness for intensive ESL training abroad. Beginning in 2011, English majors have been required to take two *Advanced Skills* courses after their return to Japan at the end of their sophomore year. These new courses, *Advanced Skill 1* and *Advanced Skill 2*, are believed to enhance the English skills they acquired through studying abroad in addition to imparting substantial intellectual content. As the students' TOEIC scores (see Table 1) suggest, the ESL programs at the US satellite have greatly contributed to the English majors' overall language acquisition, but, thus far, no systematic evaluation has been made to determine how studying abroad influences their learning of specific types of English skills. Knowing more about students' perceptions of, and abilities to deal with, specific language activities is likely to help the teachers improve their teaching and the materials they prepare. One particular aspect of PUT English majors' language acquisition that we have found worrisome is that their reading comprehension scores in TOEIC are notably lower than their listening comprehension scores. Further, perhaps because reading is difficult for these students, they tend not to like reading in English (and in some cases also in Japanese) and to avoid it whenever possible.

Table 1. Participants' TOEIC Mean Scores (SD)

		2011	2010	2009
4th Year	Listening	331.85 (69.38)	322.37 (61.54)	244.42 (67.22)
	Reading	221.57 (70.00)	211.62 (57.95)	160.78 (52.56)
	Total	553.43 (131.39)	534.46 (110.89)	405.19 (110.69)
3rd Year	Listening	348.08 (58.60)	249.94 (65.00)	
	Reading	252.62 (62.07)	173.22 (48.85)	
	Total	600.70 (111.59)	423.16 (104.78)	
2nd Year	Listening	237.99 (59.55)		
	Reading	159.04 (56.29)		
	Total	397.04 (105.83)		

Note. 4th-year students, N (2011, 2010, 2009)=177, 194, 207; 3rd-year, N (2011, 2010)=172, 171; 2nd-year students, N =167. The tests in 2009, 2010, and 2011 were all administered in February.

As mentioned above, the PUT's English department inaugurated the two third-year skill courses (*Advanced Skills*) in 2011, mandating that students continue learning practical English skills after studying abroad. In the past, students had been left to their own devices to plan their EFL study during the third and fourth years; taking several elective, content-based English courses was one option that the students who wanted to continue working to improve their English most often chose. Unfortunately, some students seemed to believe that, having studied abroad, they no longer needed to work to keep their English sharp, and, in fact, such students' English ability often declined over time.

Whereas content-based electives are still available to the upper-division students and are

regarded as an important part of the English department's curriculum, the new *Advanced Skills* courses are designed to engage all third-year students in constant EFL study, which the past students, for various reasons, tended to neglect. The *Advanced Skills* courses are also expected to play a major role in bridging the ESL and EFL curricula for PUT students. This is the major reason that these courses have been chosen as the site of the present research study.

The 177 third-year students in the English department are divided into six proficiency groups, and the four higher-level groups enroll in two *Advanced Skills* courses (i.e., *Advanced Skill 1* and *Advanced Skill 2*) in which they practice all four English skills by watching videos, reading articles, discussing challenging issues, and writing essays in English. The instructors are all native speakers of English. The two lowest-level groups enroll in two remedial courses where they study basic-level English skills with Japanese EFL teachers. For logistical reasons, the groups taking remedial courses have been excluded from the present research study.

Again, the immediate goal of this study is to explore ways to improve the quality of the *Advanced Skills* courses based on students' in-class performance, expectations, needs, and weaknesses. The quantitative section evaluates the students' gains and losses in reading comprehension tests and investigates the possible effects of English proficiency or length of study abroad on their EFL learning. The qualitative section was more emergent and exploratory, probing the participants' behavior in class and their perceptions of various language activities.

Review of the Literature

Students' Attitude toward Reading Tasks

One major characteristic feature of Japanese EFL learners is that they tend to prefer auditory materials and oral language activities to the use of written English. PUT students are by no means an exception regarding this point: their lack of interest in reading comprehension practice has been observed and informally reported by many teachers, and there is a strong possibility that their failure to invest enough time and effort in the learning of written English has resulted in the low reading comprehension scores in TOEIC.

Ogawa (2011) interviewed 14 third- and fourth-year English majors in a private Japanese university as part of a review of his movie-based communicative EFL course and found that all participants had a strong interest in learning spoken English. They tended to enjoy speaking or collaborative activities either in English or in their first language, whereas reading and writing activities, in general, held much less interest for them. Highly proficient students, who had a solid knowledge of English grammar, acknowledged the importance of grammatical knowledge for their overall language learning, but even such competent students perceived

the learning of written English as difficult, painful, or boring, reflecting on their EFL study experiences in junior high school and high school, which was based on the Grammar-Translation Method. They had chosen to enter their university, hoping that its study-abroad programs would provide them with sufficient opportunities for speaking practice.

Gilmore (2011) has proposed that providing authentic materials, including samples of genuine interactions in English or contextualized spoken or written discourses between native speakers, is more effective for Japanese students' acquisition of communicative competence than using artificial textbooks contrived by textbook writers. He also explained how different subcomponents of communicative competence could be developed through different activities. His findings provide a great insight into the way Japanese students might acquire practical English skills. However, a student's comment which he used as his article's title, "I Prefer Not Text," can also be interpreted as a sign that contemporary Japanese students, surrounded by other means of obtaining information, prefer to dispense with the reading of texts per se, whether they are artificial or authentic, because reading generally requires a different kind of knowledge of English than watching or listening to English; students believe that reading is less enjoyable. The experimental group in his study generally performed well in the tests that measured communicative competences, but the materials used in his project were predominantly spoken English, and the demand on reading skills was minimal. Whereas Gilmore theorized that the experimental group benefitted from exposure to authentic materials as opposed to artificial materials, it is possible that they were more highly motivated to participate in the given speaking tasks than the control group that was guided to read more texts. The results of his study also showed that the experimental group did not attain significantly greater gains in the reading and grammar tests; i.e., the skills learned in his course did not translate into higher ability in written English. The implication is that the more motivating materials or activities were not necessarily the more effective for overall language acquisition.

Learners' individual characteristics and preferences must also be considered for the preparation of appropriate EFL materials. Pecorari et al. (2011) investigated Swedish students' perceptions of the use of Swedish and English textbooks in university courses where instruction was conducted in Swedish. English textbooks were used as auxiliary materials so that students might incidentally learn technical terminology in English. Students generally preferred the use of L1 (i.e., Swedish) textbooks because they found it difficult and time-consuming to read technical materials in English. However, one interesting point was that some students identified benefits in the learning of English technical terms and indicated their preference for English textbooks even if it entailed an investment of extra time.

Vidal (2011) compared the effects of reading and listening activities on Spanish-speaking EFL students' acquisition of academic, technical, or low-frequency vocabulary items. Vidal's study revealed that the participants learned more words through reading than through

listening, although the highest-proficiency students learned more words during listening than the lower-proficiency groups. The lower-proficiency students could not perceive and acquire phonological patterns online. The implication is that, in EFL courses that are intended to teach overall English skills, instead of simple, spoken expressions alone, learners might learn vocabulary items more efficiently through reading, although repeated auditory input may contribute to the long-term memorization of partially familiarized vocabulary items. Vidal's study is additional evidence that the teaching of written English is important and should be incorporated into EFL courses.

Effectiveness of Study-Abroad Programs

The present study evaluates the EFL skill courses that follow the participants' stay abroad. This section reviews a few study-abroad studies in order to understand their positive and negative features. Some of the reports also provide additional evidence that Japanese students tend to have a stronger interest in spoken English than in written English.

Many studies in the past have reported on short-term study-abroad programs, and the general tendency is that the participants learn simple expressions or sentence structures to deal with daily tasks but do not necessarily learn to carry out complex linguistic tasks. Participants tend to express their appreciation for substantial exposure to spoken English and frequent opportunities to converse in English during their stay abroad.

Geis and Fukushima (1997), for example, reported the results of a Niigata junior college's six-week study-abroad program. A group of 24 English majors, mostly first-year students, participated in the ESL program at a language institute affiliated with an American university in Illinois. Geis and Fukushima encountered difficulties in measuring the students' improvement in language proficiency because the length of their stay in the United States was short and the standardized English proficiency test administered before and after the program (i.e., TOEFL) was not sensitive to changes in Japanese junior college students' language abilities. However, they revealed that the students' attitude in class after their return to Japan was more positive: those who used to be silent and inactive had learned to participate actively in group discussions and other in-class activities in English.

Ishino, Masaki, Visgatis, and Kimura (1999) investigated the degree to which 99 Japanese students gained confidence in their English abilities through a four-week ESL study program. As in Geis and Fukushima's study (1997), Ishino et al. came to realize that global language tests, such as TOEFL, did not accurately measure students' subtle improvement in language proficiency after four weeks of training and thus chose to evaluate the participants' perceptions of what they had achieved through a questionnaire survey conducted before and after the program and the host families' comments. The results showed that the participants' confidence in performing easy real-life tasks (e.g., ordering meals at a restaurant or asking directions in English) improved, but their ability to deal with complex linguistic tasks (e.g.,

describing Japanese customs or making a farewell speech in English) did not improve noticeably.

Drake (1997) attended to the fact that Japanese students normally do not fully benefit from study-abroad programs because, being reclusive, they do not interact with native speakers frequently enough. He reported on a six-week study-abroad program designed to integrate 19 Japanese university students into the host linguistic and cultural community in Alabama, the United States. In addition to engaging the participants in task-based activities that induced active oral interactions in the classroom, the program administrators guided them to plan and hold parties for non-Japanese students, accommodated them in the same housing facility as native speakers, and arranged for them to stay with local families on weekends. The G-STEP, a standardized test administered at the end of the program, was not sensitive enough to measure the participants' linguistic improvement over a period of six weeks, but the students' perceptions of the ESL classes and extracurricular activities were very positive.

Regarding skill areas, most participants in ESL programs abroad tended to be interested in speaking activities and endeavored to improve their oral English skills. However, Asai (1997) reported that some Japanese learners perceived grammar courses as important because they felt that solid grammar knowledge facilitated their communication in English. Unlike Geis and Fukushima (1997) and Ishino et al. (1999) who analyzed the effects of short-term study-abroad programs, Asai investigated a one-year program's effect on second language acquisition. She conducted a questionnaire survey with 49 students who had spent one year in the United States or Australia and also compared their TOEFL scores before and after study abroad. The purpose of her study was to assess the combined effects of exposure to English in naturalistic situations and formal ESL training at language institutes in English-speaking countries. The results showed that the TOEFL scores for 48 out of the 49 students improved, and 41 students believed that they benefited from their studies abroad. When asked about the most useful part of the study-abroad programs, 23 students referred to listening and speaking courses. However, to the researcher's surprise, as many as 10 students answered that they had appreciated the grammar courses as an instrument for more accurate and fluent communication in English.

Another important issue for study-abroad research concerns learners' psychological changes after their overseas experiences. Jones (1997) investigated how returnees' attitudes toward the surrounding people or the host and home cultures changed. Jones interviewed 10 students who had studied for four years at a Canadian college and drew up reentry maps based on their perceptions of comfortable or uncomfortable adjustment to the families, work places, and circles of friends after their return to Japan. The results indicated that all students suffered psychological depression of varying degrees, particularly between four and six months after their return. Such readjustment difficulties might affect their L2 language

learning processes.

In another qualitative study probing into participants' perspectives, Wilkinson (1998) investigated four American students' experiences in, and perceptions of, a one-month study abroad program in France. She conducted an eight-month longitudinal study, interviewing each of the four students twice before the departure, twice during their stay in France, and twice after their return. The results of the interviews, supported by the data from written surveys, observations, and documents related to the summer abroad program, suggested that the teacher-initiated interactional norm in the French classroom influenced the participants' oral interactions outside of class and that the host culture, which was believed to facilitate L2 learners' language acquisition, frustrated the participants to the extent that they perceived the peer group support and home culture enclave as essential for their lives abroad.

A review of the studies in this section suggests that study-abroad programs are likely to expedite EFL learners' language acquisition through intensive exposure to the target language and communicative activities in and outside of class. However, different programs influence the participants' language learning and their psychology differently, and each individual program has its positive and negative features. With regard to the studies reviewed here, Japanese students' reaction to study-abroad experiences is generally positive because their desire to speak English, rather than engaging in grammar analysis or reading tasks, is satisfied. However, if their future studies or professional jobs require an ability to accomplish complex linguistic tasks in English, the learning of more solid syntactic or lexical knowledge through both spoken and written English might be indispensable. Furthermore, study-abroad experiences can influence EFL learners' motivation after their return home either positively or negatively, and it is necessary to analyze their needs and expectations precisely and explore effective ways to accommodate them back in Japanese classrooms.

The following research questions guided the present study. The first three were quantitative research questions.

Research Question 1: Do the third-year EFL skill courses facilitate the participants' reading comprehension as measured by an in-class reading comprehension test?

Research Question 2: Is there a relationship between the length of study abroad and participants' learning of reading comprehension skills in English?

Research Question 3: Is there a relationship between participants' language proficiency and their learning of reading comprehension skills in English?

The qualitative research questions were as follows.

Research Question 4: How do the participants react to the activities in the third-year EFL

skill courses including reading comprehension tasks?

Research Question 5: How can the participants' study-abroad programs influence their attitude toward the learning of written English after their return to Japan?

Research Question 6: What are the differences between the participants' perceptions of useful and enjoyable reading activities and the teacher's ideas of useful activities?

Method

Action Research

This study is action research focusing on the two *Advanced Skills* courses, *Advanced Skill 1* and *Advanced Skill 2*, offered to the third-year students at PUT's English department. Each course had 15 class sessions, and each class session lasted 90 minutes. The aim of action research is for teachers to reflect on, and analyze, their own daily practice in classrooms systematically so that proper decisions can be made for their future teaching (Wallace, 1998). The search for solutions to a problem in a local situation is emphasized (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005), and researchers strive to describe a particular teaching context or a specific individual learner or group of learners (Nunan, 1992). Other important elements of action research are collaboration among researchers, teachers, or graduate students (Cohen & Manion, 1985 as cited in Nunan, 1992) and the efforts to reform curricula (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, also cited in Nunan, 1992).

Another major rationale behind action research, applicable to the present study, is to bridge the gap between academic research and teaching in the classroom (Burns, 2005). We followed the established procedures for statistical and qualitative analyses. At the same time, however, it is our belief that classroom research must be closely connected to teachers' practices in class. Teachers can conduct action research studies without being restricted by the traditional criteria such as random selection, generalizability, and replicability and still acquire knowledge that is valuable to them as both researcher and teacher. Thus, labeling the present study as action research would by no means minimize the value or authenticity of its results. This approach makes it possible to tap a variety of data sources to understand the positive and negative features of the activities administered in class and the students' perceptions of those activities.

Participants

Participants included a native English-speaking teacher—one of the three authors of this article—and 103 third-year English majors at PUT. Sixteen students were eliminated in the process of data collection because they missed either the pretest or posttest or did not mark their student-ID numbers correctly on the computer-scannable answer sheets. Thus, the final

N-size for quantitative analyses was 87.

The teacher and researcher has been teaching at PUT for seven years and has served as a coordinator for various skill courses since he started teaching at this university. He has been appointed as coordinator of the new *Advanced Skills* courses as well. The students, all female, major in English language and literature, and were mostly 21 or 22 years old. As mentioned above, the entire group of third-year students was divided into six subgroups according to English proficiency. The four higher proficiency groups ($N=103$) were recruited for the study; the two lower proficiency groups, who enrolled in remedial courses, were excluded from the study.

One notable factor that might affect the students' learning of advanced EFL skills after study abroad is their language proficiency. The average TOEIC scores for the third-year English majors in 2011 were 348.08 in listening, 252.62 in reading, and 600.70 total (see Table 1). The number of third-year students who took the 2011 test, conducted in February at the US satellite, was 172; four third-year students who had not participated in an overseas ESL program were excluded. Another factor that might affect their learning of advanced EFL skills is the length of their stay overseas. A longer overseas stay might positively or negatively influence the students' motivation for continuing L2 studying back at the main campus, including reading comprehension practice. As Wilkinson's study (1998) suggests, study-abroad experiences can sometimes weaken learners' motivation. For statistical analyses, the students were classified as five-month, one-year, and one-and-a-half-year ESL groups, although the grouping by the length of stay abroad did not necessarily match the grouping for third-year skill classes based on their proficiencies.

PUT opened its satellite campus in the United States in 1988 as an overseas language training facility for its students, and the ESL program prepared for four-year-university English majors (as opposed to two-year junior college students) came to be known as *Five-month ESL Program (5-Month)*. Whereas the length of the *Five-month ESL Program* has changed over time, depending on the department's pedagogical policies and the university's administrative constraints, this compulsory program—a requirement for all English majors—is presently five months long. In 2000, PUT started a new long-term program, hereafter referred to as *18-month ESL Program* or *18-Month*, which enrolls a group of about 30 chosen students (out of approximately 200) at the US satellite for one and a half years. Eighteen-month applicants must demonstrate comparatively high TOEIC scores and high motivation for overseas studies in the screening tests and interviews. In 2009, the same department launched a one-year program labeled *12-month ESL Program (12-Month)* as yet another alternative for students who prefer a mid-length stay abroad or who are not proficient enough to enter the 18-month program. As stated above, the length of students' stay abroad might influence their learning, or perceptions of, reading comprehension activities in the *Advanced Skills* courses.

Five of the participants were asked to participate in qualitative interviews; four of them represented different *Advanced Skills* classes. The fifth student was enrolled in a remedial course, but she was known as a diligent student who performed well in other courses and was thus requested to offer her views of the EFL courses in Tokyo and the ESL courses in the United States. These five students were recruited because: (a) they were believed to pay attention in class and could express their opinions clearly and (b) one of the three researchers could easily establish rapport with them.

Instrumentation and Procedure

In order to answer Research Questions 1 to 3, which were concerned with the possible influence of the *Advanced Skills* courses on the participants' EFL learning after study abroad, a pretest and an immediate posttest were conducted to assess their improvement in reading comprehension. The pretest—a short reading comprehension test with 21 question items based on a TOEIC practice test—was administered at the beginning of the spring semester in 2011 to identify the students' base reading abilities. The immediate posttest—comprising 22 similar questions—was administered at the end of the spring semester to measure their possible improvement in reading comprehension after a semester of EFL training. The original research plan included a delayed posttest in the following semester to measure the carryover effect, but it was not implemented due to technical constraints.

The participants' scores on the reading comprehension pretest and posttest were converted into Rasch measures, and a paired *t*-test was conducted to examine whether there was any statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two reading tests (i.e., Research Question 1).

Second, the difference between each ESL, or proficiency, group's pretest and posttest scores was calculated as an indicator of their improvement over the semester. Two one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed to compare the different groups' progress scores (i.e., the participants' improvement in reading ability), assessing the influence of the length of students' ESL experience abroad, or their proficiency, on their reading comprehension test scores. The first one-way ANOVA was conducted with the progress scores as a dependent variable and the length of study abroad with three levels (five months, 12 months, and 18 months) as an independent variable. This was believed to answer Research Question 2. The second one-way ANOVA was conducted with the participants' progress scores as a dependent variable and their English proficiency with four levels (the four skill-group levels in which they were placed at the beginning of the semester) as an independent variable. This was intended to answer Research Question 3.

As regards Research Questions 4, 5, and 6, which were related to the participants' reaction to the activities in the *Advanced Skills* courses, the teacher and researcher carefully observed the students' behavior in class, kept teacher notes, and analyzed their positive or

negative reactions to each activity in class.

As an additional approach to answering Research Questions 5 and 6, unstructured interviews and narrative analyses were conducted to probe the students' perceptions of enjoyable or useful language-learning activities and find commonalities between individual students' ideas. Unstructured interviews are meaningful speech or conversation for particular research purposes (Mishler, 1986; Seidman, 2006). It is important for the interviewer and the interviewee(s) to engage in collaborative storytelling and interpretation, telling new stories and reflecting on the past recounting of experiences (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990).

Narrative analysis is the process of analyzing the narrative or story parts of interviewees' responses. As Polkinghorne (1988) explained, this analysis technique is instrumental in describing and reporting diverse human experiences and making connections between particular events in different contexts. Careful observations are likely to provide clearly defined genres into which particular, seemingly unrelated cases of learning experiences and strategies might fall (Bruner, 1996).

Only a set of general questions was prepared, and one of the researchers as interviewer guided the chosen five students to recount experiences in ESL activities at the US satellite or EFL activities at the main campus, which might reflect their ideas of enjoyable or useful activities. Each qualitative participant was interviewed twice: the first interview was at the beginning of the semester and the second toward the end of the semester. Interesting ideas and views that emerged in the process of early interviews were used to generate new questions for the following interviews, i.e., either with the same interviewee or different interviewees.

The data were tape-recorded and fully transcribed, and the narrative sections (or stories, instead of monosyllabic or sentence-level answers) were extracted and analyzed to determine the students' perceptions of enjoyable and useful reading comprehension activities or materials. The teachers' ideas (based on class observations) and the students' ideas (generated from interviews) were compared and contrasted to explore the ways the *Advanced Skills* program after study abroad can be changed or adjusted for improvement.

Results

Quantitative Results

As mentioned above, 16 of the 103 participants were excluded as invalid cases in the process of data collection, but the remaining 87 involved no outliers whose z -scores exceeded the ± 3.29 criterion. The Rasch person measures were transformed to response probability units (CHIPS). This linear transformation meant that the average item difficulty was set at 50 CHIPS. The pretest mean for the entire group of 87 students was 52.05 ($SD=3.50$), and the posttest mean was 52.36 ($SD=3.87$). Tables 2 and 3 display the descriptive statistics of

proficiency groups and ESL groups. To our disappointment, none of the proficiency or ESL groups showed a noticeable gain over the semester. For example, Group 1’s pretest mean (53.75) and posttest mean (53.78) were almost identical, and there was considerable overlapping between the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence intervals. Likewise, 18-month students’ posttest mean (54.46) was practically identical to—or slightly lower than—their pretest mean (54.51). The only noticeable gains over the semester were recognized between Group 2’s pretest mean (52.07) and posttest mean (53.52) and between 12-month’s pretest mean (50.8) and posttest (51.81), but they were still not very large.

Tables 4 and 5 display the participants’ mean progress scores, representing the extent to which their reading scores had improved, or declined, from pretest to posttest. None of the study-abroad or proficiency groups demonstrated a major gain.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for the Reading Comprehension Tests (ESL Groups)

ESL Group		Pretest	Posttest	
18-month	<i>N</i>	15	15	
	<i>M</i>	54.51	54.46	
	95% CI	Lower Bound	51.88	52.05
		Upper Bound	57.15	56.87
	<i>SD</i>	4.76	4.36	
	Skewness	0.29	−0.14	
	<i>SES</i>	0.58	0.58	
	Kurtosis	−1.24	−0.51	
	<i>SEK</i>	1.12	1.12	
	12-month	<i>N</i>	20	20
<i>M</i>		50.8	51.81	
95% CI		Lower Bound	49.31	50.36
		Upper Bound	52.29	53.26
<i>SD</i>		3.18	3.10	
Skewness		−0.82	0.02	
<i>SES</i>		0.51	0.51	
Kurtosis		1.90	−0.60	
<i>SEK</i>		0.99	0.99	
5-month		<i>N</i>	52	52
	<i>M</i>	51.82	51.97	
	95% CI	Lower Bound	51.02	50.90
		Upper Bound	52.62	53.05
	<i>SD</i>	2.87	3.85	
	Skewness	0.07	0.85	
	<i>SES</i>	0.33	0.33	
	Kurtosis	−0.22	1.52	
	<i>SEK</i>	0.65	0.65	

Note. *N* (total)=87. 18-month enrolled in the US satellite for one and a half years, 12-month enrolled for one year, and 5-month enrolled for five months.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Reading Comprehension Tests (Proficiency Groups)

Skill Group			Pretest	Posttest
Group 1	<i>N</i>		23	23
	<i>M</i>		53.75	53.78
	95% CI	Lower Bound	52.01	51.81
		Upper Bound	55.49	55.75
	<i>SD</i>		4.03	4.56
	Skewness		0.86	0.42
	<i>SES</i>		0.48	0.48
	Kurtosis		-0.17	0.05
	<i>SEK</i>		0.93	0.93
Group 2	<i>N</i>		20	20
	<i>M</i>		52.07	53.52
	95% CI	Lower Bound	50.58	51.68
		Upper Bound	53.55	55.35
	<i>SD</i>		3.18	3.92
	Skewness		-0.44	0.36
	<i>SES</i>		0.51	0.51
	Kurtosis		-0.58	-0.08
	<i>SEK</i>		0.99	0.99
Group 3	<i>N</i>		27	27
	<i>M</i>		51.8	51.46
	95% CI	Lower Bound	50.62	50.30
		Upper Bound	52.98	52.61
	<i>SD</i>		2.98	2.92
	Skewness		0.25	-0.18
	<i>SES</i>		0.45	0.45
	Kurtosis		-0.86	0.02
	<i>SEK</i>		0.87	0.87
Group 4	<i>N</i>		17	17
	<i>M</i>		50.12	50.53
	95% CI	Lower Bound	48.58	48.89
		Upper Bound	51.66	52.17
	<i>SD</i>		2.99	3.19
	Skewness		-0.85	0.85
	<i>SES</i>		0.55	0.55
	Kurtosis		3.18	2.41
	<i>SEK</i>		1.06	1.06

Note. *N* (total)=87. Group 1 is the highest proficiency group, and Group 4 the lowest.

Table 4. Mean Progress Scores in Reading Comprehension Test (ESL Groups)

ESL Group	<i>N</i>	Progress Mean	<i>SD</i>
18-month	15	-0.05	4.15
12-month	20	1.01	4.08
5-month	52	0.16	4.46

Note. Progress mean represents the mean difference between pretest and posttest scores.

Table 5. Mean Progress Scores in Reading Comprehension Test (Proficiency Groups)

Skill Group	<i>N</i>	Progress Mean	<i>SD</i>
Group 1	23	0.04	4.54
Group 2	20	1.45	5.92
Group 3	27	-0.34	3.17
Group 4	17	0.41	3.19

Note. Progress mean represents the mean difference between pretest and posttest scores.

In the first step of the statistical analyses, the means of the two reading tests (pretest and posttest) were compared by performing a paired-samples *t*-test. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the two means ($t(86) = -.69$, $p = .49$, $r = .07$); the test factor accounted for only 7% of the variance.

In the second stage, a one-way ANOVA was performed to determine whether or not there was any significant difference between the mean progress scores of the three ESL groups. The results indicated no significant difference among the three ESL groups ($F(2, 84) = .35$, $p = .71$, $\eta^2 = .01$), showing that the length of stay abroad accounted for only 1% of the variance.

The third step of statistical analysis investigated the effect of proficiency. First, we tried to perform a one-way ANOVA, but Levine's Test for Equality of Variance did not verify the equality of variances of the four groups' progress scores. Thus, a Kruskal Wallis test was conducted to measure the influence of proficiency on reading comprehension performance. The results showed no significant difference among the four groups' mean progress scores ($N = 87$, $\chi^2 = 2.18$, $p = .054$, $r = .23$). However, it is noteworthy that the value was very close to the targeted level of significance.

To sum up, the participants' reading ability did not improve over the semester to any significant degree, and neither length of overseas stay nor proficiency had a significant effect on their gains or losses in the posttest scores.

Reading: How and Why

The third-year skills classes are four-skills classes. This study focuses on one of those skills, reading, but of course, it is never entirely possible, even in classes that are ostensibly devoted to a single skill (as these classes are not), to teach one skill in isolation from others. This is even less the case in a class devoted to four skills. In the third-year skills classes, reading is taught in different ways, and students are assigned texts to read for different purposes.

No texts are used simply because they illustrate a grammatical form or a linguistic function or because they introduce particular vocabulary items. These are content-based classes, so all texts are primarily chosen for the information they impart. Of course, that

does not preclude their being used to teach grammar and vocabulary, and most teachers will take advantage of such opportunities when they present themselves.

Students are often asked to read texts—usually newspaper or magazine articles—at home in preparation for activities the following class. Teachers will sometimes give students a specific task or tasks to guide either the way they read the article or to help them focus on the aspects of the article the teachers feel are most relevant or important. This can either be a verbal instruction such as, “Be prepared to give a one-minute oral summary of the article next class,” or might be a printed worksheet which students work through as they read the article.

Other times, students will be told simply to read the article and (usually) to take notes on it. Then they might be given tasks in class to check their understanding and, having finished that, do other activities in which they employ the knowledge they have gleaned from the article. They might be asked to summarize the author’s claims and to develop arguments either in support of or in opposition to those claims. They will almost certainly use the knowledge they have gained from the article in a discussion or use it as the basis of a presentation.

Sometimes a teacher might assign, for example, four different articles, with a quarter of the class being asked to read each article. Then students will get together in groups of four with students who have read different articles and summarize the articles they have read for each other. Then they would combine the information they have shared to produce, for example, a presentation.

Teachers in the third-year skills classes are required to be creative and innovative. Thus the above are only a few of the ways they might use articles they have asked students to read outside of class.

Other times they might ask students to read texts in class. These texts are, of course, generally shorter than the ones they are assigned to read at home. Again, these texts are used primarily because of the information they impart, but using them in class allows teachers to focus on reading skills that even our third-year students still need to review, develop, and practice. Thus teachers are able to limit the time students have to read a text, forcing them to skim it quickly to get the gist, or to scan it for specific information rather than reading the whole article slowly and carefully. When reading at home, students tend to read extremely slowly and often stop every few lines to check the meaning of a word. Sometimes, of course, it is necessary and appropriate for them to read in this way, but activities that require students to scan and skim can help students to remember or learn that there are other ways of reading that are, in other situations, more appropriate.

Our students tend to be better at speaking than reading and, therefore, to like it better. As most of them are not fluent readers, reading is not fun for them; discussion of even challenging topics with their friends, on the other hand, often is. Thus one of the great

challenges facing teachers of the third-year skills classes is how to make students understand how necessary reading is (that much reading is now done on-line has not changed this), and also that reading can be enjoyable. Sometimes, with all the other often valuable, but always distracting, forms of media to which students today have access, convincing them to read (again, whether they read on-line or off is irrelevant), and that reading can be pleasurable, seems an impossible goal. It is nevertheless a goal toward which teachers in the third-year skills classes (and all of our skills classes) need to dedicate themselves.

Interview Results

The unstructured interviews investigated the participants' needs and expectations for language acquisition. Their general perceptions of enjoyable and/or useful language activities were probed, but the focal points were: (a) their perceptions of ESL instructional treatment at the university's US satellite, which the third-year skill training might be built upon or related to, and (b) their reactions to, and perceptions of, the *Advanced Skills*, including written English skills. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the participants for the protection of their privacy.

Students' Perceptions of Useful and Enjoyable Activities

The five interviewees unanimously referred to speaking as the most enjoyable and useful category of ESL/EFL activity. They all enjoyed English conversations or small-group discussions in the classroom and acknowledged that oral presentations, even though challenging, played an important role for their acquisition of communicative English skills. Particularly, the participants perceived the ESL courses at the US satellite as enjoyable and useful because they had frequent opportunities to practice speaking English and could learn useful colloquial or idiomatic expressions.

On the other hand, Akiko, a highly proficient student as evidenced by her scholastic achievement and TOEIC scores, stated that she had always regarded reading—as well as speaking—as an important skill area because it helped her: (a) improve her knowledge of English grammar and enlarge her vocabulary and (b) attain higher TOEIC scores.

Akiko: やっぱりリーディングの読み込みですね。さっと読むのではなく、自分で単語を調べながら、ゆっくり一文一文読んでいくというのが、今こちらに帰って来て一番役に立っているし、語彙も伸びたことだと思います。

Akiko: After all, [I believe] the most important is intensive reading. Instead of skimming over a passage for meaning, I read every sentence carefully, looking up unknown words. I've always felt it's useful since I came back to Japan, and my vocabulary has expanded, too. (Akiko Interview 1)

Akiko was in the habit of studying all provided reading materials very carefully,

looking up unknown words and analyzing complex sentence structures. As is the case of many Japanese students, the EFL training that she had received in junior high school and high school was mainly based on the Grammar-Translation Method, and it was likely that she had continued to utilize the analytical, bottom-up reading strategy to improve her knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary. In her case, her positive perception of slow but careful reading was strengthened after she completed her ESL studies in the United States and returned to Japan although, as will be described below, she appreciated communicative language practice as well.

Akiko's attachment to the bottom-up, analytical reading was partly accounted for by an instrumental motive: i.e., to improve her scores in English tests in school or TOEIC. Such instrumental motivation is not uncommon among Japanese students. Izumi similarly stated that reading was an important skill area because students' future professions would more likely require them to read or write emails and other documents in English than to converse with English-speaking customers or business associates. However, after receiving communicative ESL training, Akiko realized that different purposes require different learning strategies: e.g., an analytical, bottom-up reading strategy for explicit grammar-focused learning and spontaneous conversation and discussion for learning communicative English skills.

Akiko: 中学・高校の時も、TOEIC ではないんですが、テストのための英語ってことだったので、リーディングは重視してたんですけど、大学に入って [アメリカ] 留学で (...) のスキルクラスで、スピーキングの比重が大きくなってきた時に、リーディングは出来てもコミュニケーションを取ることが出来ないんだなってことを思ったので、コミュニケーションって意味ではリーディングじゃないんだなっていう事に気づきました。

Akiko: In junior high school and high school, we didn't take TOEIC, but we always studied English for tests, and I set store by reading practice. But I entered the university and took skill courses [at the US satellite], where a large portion of class time was spent on speaking training. Then, I realized that we wouldn't be able to make ourselves understood even if we could read English, and communication [with English-speaking people] requires something other than reading skills. (Akiko Interview 2)

Mayumi had experienced the same psychological change as Akiko described—understanding the necessity of oral English training—when she started receiving communicative L2 training. That is to say, some proficient students appreciated intensive reading tasks in addition to, not in place of, speaking practice.

To sum up, the participants seemed to prefer learning spoken English, but serious students acknowledged the importance of careful analysis of lexical and syntactic structures through intensive reading practice. Their belief that the learning of written English is important persisted after their ESL experiences abroad.

Students' Perceptions of the ESL Programs at the Overseas Satellite

As mentioned above, the participants enjoyed ESL speaking activities at the US satellite, which included person-to-person conversations, small group discussions, and oral presentations in front of a small audience. They also reported that teachers at the US satellite had encouraged them to spend more time and energy learning oral communication skills in America where they had greater environmental support. All interviewees expressed their satisfaction with person-to-person conversation practice, which normally focused on their daily activities (e.g., what they had experienced on the previous day or what they were planning to do later in the day or the next weekend), because it provided them with frequent opportunities to express their own ideas in English without requiring high-level cognitive processing. The participants also felt that such speaking practice, not only in speaking courses but also in reading/writing courses, would enable them to converse with foreigners or, possibly, cope with service encounter situations at their future jobs.

The types of speaking and listening practice at the US satellite varied. In Mayumi's speaking and listening class, students first had a person-to-person conversation on informal topics as a warm-up activity. Subsequently, the teacher used the assigned textbook and taught them, for example, words and expressions to describe one's relationships and likely interactions with her neighbors. Oral presentations after reading were also regularly conducted. In addition to classroom activities, students also enjoyed conversations with Americans during off-campus activities, as exemplified by Sachiko's visit with pupils at a local elementary school or Izumi's field trip during which she and her classmates visited a local museum and listened to a tour conductor's explanations in English, which contained novel expressions and phonological characteristics of a local dialect.

Akiko stated that she perceived the speaking courses at the US satellite as not only enjoyable but also effective. Her teacher(s) had deftly solicited students' own opinions on a given topic by asking, "What do *you* think about it?" The teacher-student interactions, consistently aimed to generate novel and original ideas, motivated students to think deeply about ethical or social issues and actively participate in follow-up group discussions. The group discussions required students, first, to gather factual information for discussion and, then, to look up the vocabulary items to present their ideas expressly. Akiko perceived these tasks as useful and appreciated the teachers' efforts to solicit students' individual opinions and engage them in critical thinking.

Another factor that had motivated Akiko to participate in all course work at the US satellite was that reading activities were integrated into in-class discussions. The assigned reading comprehension tasks facilitated the acquisition not only of syntactic and lexical knowledge that helped them understand the meanings in local contexts but trained them to infer meanings at the discourse level. Then, in the discussions that followed, students had opportunities to retrieve and use the words and expressions they had learned through

reading. The reading and discussion topics that she had found interesting included: international marriage, ghosts connected to Halloween, an Afro-American immigrant who had arrived in the United States with no knowledge of English at all and entered an American university three months later, and the life story of the author of *Harry Potter*. Sachiko cited history, religion, marriage, and health as some of the interesting reading topics, and she perceived them to be useful for both reading and follow-up speaking activities.

However, it would be optimistic to assume that the reading activities at the US satellite helped all students improve their reading skills significantly. After her return from the United States, Sachiko tried to read an English newspaper article as part of her individual reading practice but gave it up soon because she could not handle a large number of unfamiliar vocabulary items. Mayumi reported that, during the ESL program where the emphasis was placed on meaning-focused reading, she did not always understand the assigned reading materials clearly. The reading activities did not enlarge her repertoire of English expressions, either, because the meaning-focused reading did not guide her to attend to linguistic forms. Furthermore, Izumi observed that the amount of reading required at the US satellite had been smaller than what the first-year courses at the main campus required. (Izumi's statement must be interpreted cautiously because a former 18-month ESL student, who was not involved in this study project, has reported otherwise.) Individually, students were more anxious to find opportunities to *speak* English and did not fully utilize their free time for reading English newspapers, magazines, or books.

Interview data regarding writing activities and grammar tasks at the US satellite are scarce, and the interviewees' views of the effectiveness or efficiency of instruction in these areas differed from person to person. Sachiko reported that her teacher in the Grammar and Writing course provided adequate feedback on all of her essays and journals in the form of grammar checks or content-based comments. On the other hand, Mayumi stated that she had received corrective feedback only on journals and that the essays she and her classmates had submitted were not normally returned. Izumi indicated that her knowledge of English grammar had not improved noticeably during her one year in the United States because explicit explanations of grammatical rules were rarely provided. Interestingly, some American teachers who could speak Japanese occasionally explained grammatical items explicitly in Japanese, and Izumi found it very helpful.

We acknowledge that these results simply reflect the interviewed students' perceptions and that the authenticity of their observations, and of our interpretations, would have to be verified through our first-hand observations at the US satellite and interviews with teachers there when the chances might arise in the future.

Positive and Negative Perceptions of the *Advanced Skills* Courses

Four out of the five interviewees appreciated the compulsory, *Advanced Skills* courses as great opportunities for brushing up their communicative English skills. Immediately after their return from the United States, ESL students started their two-month spring vacation, and Mayumi reported that she had been exposed to very little spoken English during the spring break and thus appreciated the third-year skills classes as opportunities for practicing English again. She felt motivated to start studying English hard in a fresh state of mind.

Mayumi: (少し笑いながら) 楽しいです。何か、帰って来てから春休みにすぐ入ってやっぱり英語を聞くってのが、すごい一気に減ってたので、3年生になってスキル科目があって、やっぱり久しぶりに英語を聞けて、なんかもっと頑張ろうって思いました。

Mayumi: (Slightly laughingly) I enjoy it very much. Soon after we came back [from the United States], we were on our spring break, and, suddenly, we had very little chance to listen to English. Then, [when the new semester began] I found out there were skill courses set up for the third year, too. I enjoyed listening to spoken English again after a long break and thought I'd try hard again to learn English. (Mayumi Interview 1)

Akiko described her *Advanced Skill 1* class as a balanced combination of reading, small-group discussion, oral presentation, and essay writing. First, her teacher gave a common topic, distributed copies of an article, and asked the class to read it before coming back to class next week. At the next session, students answered a set of comprehension questions, debated important issues, and subsequently had a chance to present their individual opinions by submitting a written report. In the final stage, one student from each small group orally presented a summary of their ideas in front of the entire class.

Akiko explained that the class had about 30 students and that it was divided into six small groups for discussion. In other words, about six students spoke publically on each topic, and she did not particularly perceive the class size to be inconveniently large. The activities in which students engaged were similar to those at the US satellite, but the provided reading materials were somewhat more difficult, and Akiko struggled to read them with a dictionary at hand. Hiroko, who studied with the same teacher, concurred with this view. Each in-class activity took a considerable amount of time, and the class used about four class sessions on each prepared topic.

Two characteristic features of the *Advanced Skill 1* course in which Akiko enrolled deserve special attention. First, in this course, the members of each subgroup took turns in oral presentation, and, therefore, everyone was required to participate in public speaking. Second, the reading assignments were somewhat lengthier and more difficult than what students had read at the US satellite. Akiko appreciated both as positive features, but some students might have perceived the difficult reading tasks as a burden. For example, although Hiroko regarded the reading activities in the *Advanced Skills* courses as useful, she

had difficulties understanding the materials that concerned unfamiliar topics and felt that looking up unknown words in the dictionary was a laborious task.

Hiroko: [アメリカ]にいる時は自分が興味のある映画をずっと選んでいたの、それは楽しんでやれたのですが、こっちに帰ってきて出される課題は宗教とか (...) とか、えっとそんな馴染みがないテーマについて読んだりするので、読んでいる時にすごい難しく感じてしまったり、苦痛に思ってしまったってことがありました。

O: はい。で役には立つと思いますか。

Hiroko: はい、役には立ったと思います。

O: 読むことによって、物を書く時に使える新しい単語とか表現とかを覚えますか。

Hiroko: そうですね、読むことによって発話する時にもすらすら出てきたりするの。

Hiroko: When we were in [America], we were allowed to choose movies we liked [and write comments on them], so we always enjoyed the activities. But back here, the teachers provide unfamiliar topics such as religion and (...), and, when I'm reading, I sometimes have a very hard time understanding the content and find the task painful.

O: I see. But do you think it's useful?

Hiroko: Yes, I think it's been useful.

O: Do you think you can learn useful expressions or words to use in composition by reading them?

Hiroko: I think so. I can also quickly retrieve [useful words or expressions] when speaking because of my reading. (Hiroko Interview 1)

In the United States, students were often instructed to discuss or write about film clips or debate on the information that the teacher orally provided. In Hiroko's case, students were even allowed to choose movies of their own interests. In contrast, the *Advanced Skills* courses at the main campus required them to read an assigned article first. Hiroko perceived it as a burden but, at the same time, acknowledged that she could use the expressions she learned when speaking English afterward.

In one *Advanced Skill 2* course, the teacher used multimedia devices to show film clips and engaged students in small-group, or whole-class, discussion on the depicted issues. Akiko felt that this type of instruction, with the aid of advanced audio-visual technologies, was very effective because it attracted students' attention strongly. Sachiko agreed that the use of multimedia instruments provided students with opportunities for intensive listening comprehension practice on a wide variety of topics and allowed them to concentrate on listening as they were not required to either look up unknown words in dictionaries. She also appreciated the content of a video clip more fully when she did not have to prepare for a follow-up presentation.

However, although more entertaining and effective in many ways than pen-and-pencil instruction, the frequent use of multimedia devices entailed a minor disadvantage as well. Akiko observed that a large portion of class time was spent on listening and that students were *not obligated* to make extra efforts to speak in class voluntarily. The teacher instructed them to discuss important issues with "one or two other classmates around," but

she did not feel as strongly pressured to offer her opinions as in the read-discuss-and-present class where everybody was required to perform an oral presentation afterward.

Some interviewees expressed their desire for more frequent opportunities for writing essays and receiving language-focused feedback. For example, Sachiko, the only person who expressed reservations about the *Advanced Skills* courses, stated that, although she appreciated contributing ideas by posting notes on the teacher's blog and receiving content-based comments, she personally preferred more substantial grammar-based comments on her writing.

Mayumi referred to another minor problem of an *Advanced Skills* course. In her *Advanced Skill 2* class, the teacher often guided students to improvise a short skit and act it out. The activity was unique and interesting and well accepted by many students. However, Mayumi observed that the teacher was extremely enthusiastic with his coaching for dramatic performance on the one hand but did not teach as many useful expressions as she wanted on the other hand. She preferred to learn useful expressions that she could use in likely conversational situations abroad, instead of perfecting her acting skills. There remains a possibility that the teacher was providing useful expressions and Mayumi missed them, but her impression suggests that students' expectations do not always match the teacher's teaching priority or rationale.

At a certain class session in the same *Advanced Skills* course, the teacher showed a video clip extracted from YouTube, but the speakers in the movie spoke with a British accent. Mayumi had difficulty understanding the dialog, but the class session was concluded before she had a chance to confirm the major points of the dialog. It appears to be a minor, isolated incident, but even such minor irregularities can confuse students and interrupt their language learning.

Discussion

Research Question 1 was whether or not the third-year EFL skill courses facilitate PUT students' reading comprehension skills, as measured by an in-class reading comprehension test. Unfortunately, the statistical results indicated that their scores did not improve significantly over the semester. The course materials and activities might be modified based upon the teacher's observation and the students' perceptions or preferences learned through qualitative analyses. At the same time, however, the statistical analysis procedure needs to be adjusted in several ways. First, the interval between the pretest and the posttest was very short, which might have resulted in the insignificant *t*-test values. One semester is very short in the first place, and we administered the pretest toward the end, instead of the beginning, of April because a major earthquake that had hit the Tohoku and Kanto regions in March affected the timing of pretesting. Some students were excused for being absent from classes in April. Another possible problem was that the numbers of question items

included in the pretest and posttest were small. We prepared comparatively short tests in order not to spend too much class time, but it is clear that a greater number of question items ought to be included.

On the other hand, although there was no statistically significant improvement in reading, neither was there a decline in students' reading ability. This is important because teachers and students in the years before the *Advanced Skills* courses were instituted had been painfully aware that students' ability in every skill area tended to decline once they were back in a Japanese environment. TOEIC scores bear this out. If the *Advanced Skills* help them maintain the skills they acquired in the United States, they must be counted a success.

Research Questions 2 and 3 were related to the possible influence of length of study aboard and proficiency on students' reading ability in English. The one-way ANOVAs and Kruskal Wallis results indicated that neither factor influenced students' posttest reading comprehension scores. For our reference, we further proceeded to perform a one-way ANOVA with the progress means as a dependent variable and proficiency as an independent variable despite the fact that the assumption of the equality of variances was not met. The results indicated that the students in Group 1 performed significantly better than those in Group 4 ($F(3, 83)=3.71$, $p=.02$, $\eta^2=.12$; Tukey HSD test, Group 1 ($M=53.78$, $SD=4.56$) > Group 4 ($M=50.53$, $SD=3.19$), $p=.04$). Thus, there still remains a possibility that the higher-proficiency students might benefit better than the lower-proficiency students. Replication studies must be conducted to probe this issue further.

Research Question 4 was related to the way the participants reacted to the activities in the third-year EFL skill courses including reading comprehension tasks. The qualitative interview results suggested that students generally appreciate the two new *Advanced Skills* courses as great opportunities to brush up the English skills they had learned during their studies abroad. A balanced combination of language activities and an appropriate time allotment are indispensable for heightening students' motivation for EFL learning, and interesting topics for reading and discussion seem to motivate them to participate in the reading and speaking activities. Regarding speaking activities, the students had enjoyed ESL studies at the US satellite very much and tended to perceive similar EFL activities as enjoyable and useful. On the other hand, they tended to regard the reading comprehension activities as challenging in terms of the target vocabulary items and discussion issues. One probable cause is that they have not had enough reading practice yet even after completing their studies abroad. We might be able to determine the level of their reading comprehension ability more precisely by experimenting with a greater variety of reading materials and activities.

It is also necessary to keep in mind that difficulty is not necessarily a negative factor. If students found the assigned readings easy, this would be a sure sign that they were not learning much, either linguistically or conceptually.

Research Question 5 was connected to the way PUT's study-abroad programs might influence the participants' attitude toward the learning of written English after their return to Japan. First of all, their motivation for learning communicative English was generally heightened by their ESL studies overseas, and their positive attitude had a lasting effect after their return to Japan. One student stated that she might feel like "try[ing] hard again to learn English" through the *Advanced Skills* courses; this was in accord with the results of some past studies that indicated the positive effects of study-abroad programs (Geis and Fukushima, 1997; Ishino et al., 1999; Drake, 1997; Asai, 1997). However, their attitude toward reading comprehension activities was not equally positive. The students had been so accustomed to meaning-focused reading activities during their ESL studies that they found it difficult to cope with reading activities that they perceived to be language-focused and struggled to deal with the reading materials that PUT teachers considered to be of optimal difficulty.

In fact, the *Advanced Skills* courses are theme-based, and it is unlikely that any *Advanced Skills* teacher was assigning readings with the primary goal of inculcating grammatical or other linguistic points. The articles provided by the *Advanced Skills* coordinator are chosen because they provide good, and often controversial, information about the topic under discussion. In the teachers' notes distributed to all *Advanced Skills* teachers, the coordinator writes:

The topics ... were chosen because they are (or should be) of interest to our students, because they are always important, and because they are usually, in some form or other, in the news. They were also chosen because they are topics about which people disagree. If the topic is something non-controversial there is very little to talk about, and with that in mind, I have not only tried to focus on controversial topics, but also sought out materials that take controversial positions about those topics.

Readings, that is, are chosen not because they contain examples of this or that linguistic point. They are chosen because they are stimulating tasks on the challenging topics discussed in these classes.

Again, whereas the students basically perceived the instructional treatment at the US satellite positively, a slightly worrisome aspect of the ESL courses might be the intensity—or lack thereof—of reading comprehension training. A highly proficient student stated that she consulted the dictionary more frequently in the *Advanced Skills* courses than in the ESL courses, and another student found it difficult to finish the reading assignments. The reading materials assigned in the *Advanced Skills* courses are challenging, but students need to learn that it is only by being challenged, and challenging themselves, that they learn. Some adjustments might be needed at both the main campus and the US satellite. More first-hand research on the ESL courses and consultation with the US faculty might enable us to propose specific ideas for the adjustment of the overall ESL and EFL curricula.

Research Question 6 was what the differences between students' perceptions of useful and enjoyable reading activities and the teacher's ideas of useful activities are. One important finding is that the most powerful instruments that teachers employ can occasionally run counter to what students hope to do in class. Particularly, low-proficiency learners may lose motivation for class participation when they feel: (a) a great amount of class time is spent on one particular activity alone, (b) the instruction of expressions and grammar rules is not sufficient, (c) opportunities for speaking or discussion in English are scarce, or (d) feedback on their oral or written reports is not sufficient.

Proficient students are generally satisfied with the *Advanced Skills* courses because they attend to positive aspects of every course or activity and make voluntary efforts to benefit from them, compensating for whatever weaknesses individual courses might have. This tendency resonates with Pecorari et al.'s report (2011) on proficient Swedish students who were willing to spare extra time and effort to learn English technical terms through the reading of English textbooks. However, the compulsory *Advanced Skills* courses are designed to improve all English majors' language acquisition, and it is necessary for the teacher, or syllabus designer, to design them to be beneficial to the majority of students, not the most proficient. Fortunately, as the most proficient students are generally concentrated in the higher levels, and the weaker students in the lower levels, teachers at each level are free to develop and use materials as they see fit. Thus, it should be possible, and relatively easy, to tailor classes to the needs of that particular proficiency level.

Furthermore, even minor irregularities or incidents can impair students' motivation for class participation. One participant's reaction to British English used in a video clip is a demonstrable example. Native speakers or fluent non-native speakers tend to take such auxiliary linguistic characteristics as dialectal differences for granted because they understand the meanings by relying on contextual cues or their schemata. However, EFL learners whose command of English is limited often have difficulties grasping the major semantic or pragmatic points, heavily dependent on the bottom-up strategy in their language use or learning. It is important for teachers to be aware that students' motivation for in-class language learning can be affected more seriously by minor irregularities than they might assume.

This is not to argue, of course, that anything that is difficult for students be avoided. Rather, teachers need to be aware that these linguistic features can pose a challenge and be sure students understand why it is worth making an effort to master them and provide the necessary support for them to overcome the obstacles. A short talk about the fact that most speakers of English do not speak with an American accent and an introduction to some of the pronunciations used by British English speakers that might be unfamiliar to students may have obviated the problem.

Finally, referring back to a point in the preceding part that concerned Research

Question 5, there is a possibility that students might have approached the reading activities in the *Advanced Skills* courses as though they were language-focused EFL courses. Students' experiences learning English often lead them to believe that explicit classroom instruction in grammar and vocabulary is the only way they can efficiently learn them. There is reason to doubt that this is true at any level, but it seems certain that the level of the students enrolled in the *Advanced Skills* courses makes it much more efficient, and also interesting, for them to pick up grammar and other linguistic knowledge in the course of making sense of the difficult material they process in the class. Because the students do not see the teacher taking time to explicitly teach grammar points, they may feel that they are not learning grammar. Teachers, who understand more about language teaching than do the students, know that this is not the case.

Conclusion

Teaching a balanced combination of four English skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing) is imperative because English majors must be guided not only to learn simple expressions for daily conversations in English but also to build up solid skills and knowledge of both spoken and written English and prepare for their future professional careers. From the perspective of motivation, greater emphasis might be placed on speaking because it is what most students enjoy the most. However, highly proficient participants have acknowledged that a solid knowledge of written English is indispensable for accurate communication and vocabulary learning. Thus, the teacher might strive to balance between the major skill areas and also administer different activities to teach various subcategories of language skills.

Teachers are encouraged to employ their unique teaching techniques based on the expertise acquired outside of class, but it seems necessary to reflect on the level of students and make sure that they are ready to fully benefit from them. Daily observation of students' reaction to the given activities might help them make such decisions. The teachers' burden concerning class preparation is heavy when they are asked to teach a new course, but a few minor adjustments may be made for each following semester, bridging the teacher's ideas and students' expectations.

It would be ideal to divide the entire third-year group into smaller skill classes (e.g., eight groups, instead of the present six) so that the teacher can provide more detailed feedback to each student. Due to administrative constraints, the number of teachers cannot easily be increased, but the faculty must continue to address this issue as a vital condition for the improvement of the EFL program at the main campus.

We must acknowledge several limitations concerning our method of evaluation. The first limitation is that we failed to administer a delayed posttest. Our original research plan

included it, but the classes were regrouped for the fall semester based on another placement test at the end of the spring, and it would have been extremely difficult and time-consuming, if not impossible, to match each student's scores on the pretest and immediate posttest in the spring and her scores on the delayed posttest in the fall. Nonetheless, the assessment of a possible carryover effect, based upon a delayed posttest, would be very useful and should be administered in future inquiries. It is worthwhile to explore more accurate types of reading comprehension as well.

The second major limitation is that the qualitative study reflected only five students' perceptions and ideas. Our original plan to conduct a written questionnaire survey on all participants was aborted at an early stage of this project for logistic reasons. Follow-up studies should include a survey that involves a greater number of participants and question items, and the number of interviewees should also be increased.

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(小川 喜正 英語コミュニケーション学科)
(デイヴィッド コージー 英語コミュニケーション学科)
(白倉 美里 英語コミュニケーション学科)