

To what extent does long-term foreign language education improve spoken second language vocabulary proficiency?

What this research was about and why it is important

- In many parts of the world, second and additional languages are learned within foreign language classrooms, where learners' access to the target language is restricted to several hours of language-focused instruction in classroom settings. One such example is the Japanese English-as-a-Foreign Language (EFL) context.
- While there has been much discussion on educational reform and syllabus improvement (e.g., integration of more communicatively-oriented activities), it is surprising to know that few researchers have addressed the fundamental question: To what degree can students learn and improve their oral proficiency based on EFL education without any experience overseas?
- The project revealed the potential and limits of EFL (high-level attainment in sophistication, but not in appropriateness). The findings shed light on more meaningful discussion regarding how to improve and make the most of the current EFL system.

What the researcher did

- I recruited 72 university-level Japanese EFL students (sophomore year) who had spent seven years learning English without any study abroad experience.
- Spontaneous speech was elicited via a picture narrative task, and transcribed.
- Vocabulary usage was analyzed using Crossley's computational model of second language lexical proficiency.
- Experience was surveyed via interviews in terms of how much and in what way they had been studying English inside and outside classrooms at different times of their formal education—i.e., university, senior and junior high school settings.
- Performance was compared to experienced Japanese residents in Canada who were using English as a second language on a daily basis (i.e., a baseline group) rather than against native speakers of English.

What the researcher found

- In terms of word sophistication (e.g., using more varied, abstract words), approximately 90% of the Japanese EFL students demonstrated comparable proficiency to the baseline group.
- In terms of word appropriateness, only 30% achieved satisfactory performance (relative to the baseline group).
- Overall, the degree of success in EFL learning (especially as to appropriateness rather than sophistication) seems to be related to their most recent EFL experience (measured through a questionnaire).
- The source of the individual variability is linked to how much learners have recently practiced the target language, especially since they entered the university.

Things to consider

- Long-term foreign language education is generally facilitative of vocabulary aspects of second language speech learning when we compare students' performance to experienced, functional and comprehensible second language users (instead of against native speaker models).
- While many researchers, practitioners and politicians still debate on whether "earlier is better" or/and "longer is better", what matters for successful foreign language learning is their most immediate experience (what type of practice in which students have *recently* engaged).
- In Japanese EFL contexts, for example, the current research has indicated that for the betterment of English education, we should think more about what we can do especially in the later stages of foreign language learning (e.g., senior high school, university) rather than how early and how long students should study English.

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