Online Study Abroad – A Case Study of Japanese University Students' Experiences of Studying English Online

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Abstract

This paper examines the experiences of two groups of Japanese university undergraduate students who took part in a twenty-week English online study abroad program. This was an intensive program with the two groups being required to take either 120 hours or 90 hours of online English classes during the study period.

TOEIC Listening and Reading (LR) score data was collected before and after the course in order to measure improvement in the students' English level. This was complemented by student questionnaires to gain further insight into the students' experiences, and course completion statistics held by the university.

Overall, students' average TOEIC LR scores increased by around 100 points in total, with both the Listening and the Reading section seeing similar-sized increases. Student feedback about the course was generally very positive with a strong sense of improvement being felt by those who completed it. At the same time, there was some concern from

students about scheduling and, on an institutional level, about the drop-out rates for the course.

Introduction

The 2020 Coronavirus pandemic had a profound impact on the study abroad opportunities for university students in Japan. In 2020, there was a huge fall in the number of students studying overseas（ICEF Monitor 2021）as borders were closed, programs were cancelled and students returned to Japan en masse.

This COVID effect could still be seen in 2021 with large number of students still being unable or unwilling to study abroad（ICEF Monitor 2022）. This has led to Japanese students turning to online classes in order to improve their English skills. In fact, according to a survey by the Japanese Association of Overseas Studies（JAOS）in 2021, only around 6,100（40%）of the 15,083 students who JAOS agent-members reported as studying abroad actually went overseas（ibid）. The other 60% remained in Japan and 'studied abroad' online, with half doing so through education providers in the Philippines（ibid）.

The move towards online English learning is one that may well continue among Japanese students, even as the world emerges from the pandemic. One of the principal drivers of this is the state of the economy in Japan, in particular the value of its currency, the yen. Since the beginning of the pandemic in January 2020 and the time of writing（May 2023）, the Japanese yen has fallen in value by approximately 20% against the US dollar, 19% against the euro and 16% against the British pound.

At the same time, there have been rising prices in these countries.

In the USA, the consumer price index (CPI) rose 7.0% in 2021 (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022) while in the Eurozone the figure was 5.0% (Eurostat 2021). In the UK, CPI rose by 5.4% in 2021 (Office for National Statistics 2021). Salaries in Japan have not risen enough to compensate for the price rises that students would face when studying abroad (OECD 2023). Finally, sharp increases in the cost of international flights (Holzhauer 2023), partly due to high fuel surcharges (Kotoky 2022), are further evidence of the increasing financial burden faced by many Japanese students thinking of studying abroad.

In response to these challenges, universities in Japan, such as the one at which I work, have been keen to establish new programs offering online English learning to students. Some of these programs are large-scale, highly involved, follow established curricula and incorporate cultural and student exchange elements. These are ostensibly designed to closely mimic their more traditional overseas study abroad counterparts (and many are marketed as *online study abroad*). Others are simpler, amounting to little more than online English lessons either in small groups or (commonly) on a one-to-one basis.

Our university sought to establish a new program to give students an opportunity to improve their English and interact with others from different countries, while remaining in Japan. The students in the program were all undergraduate students, most of whom had previously expressed an interest in studying overseas. It was hoped that this program would be beneficial not only to students who were then unable or unwilling to go overseas but also to those who were planning to do so in the future. For reasons that will be discussed later in this paper, a deci-

sion was made to use *English Online*, the online teaching platform of the British Council.

　　This research covers the first two intakes of the study program. It draws upon a mix of qualitative and quantitative data, as well as the observations and experiences of the author and university administrators, to evaluate the relative success of this new program. It discusses some potential improvements and changes for future iterations of the program.

Literature Review

Online Study

　　Much has been written about the move from physical classrooms to online learning, in particular in response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Papers such as those by Liu and Shirley (2021), Aihara et al. (2021), and Yoshikubo et al. (2023) have outlined some of the benefits and challenges that moving study abroad programs online has brought for both educators and students. Equally, there is also a body of research related to online study abroad that existed before the world-changing events of 2019. For example, studies such as those by Howard and Gunter (2017) and Jane Jackson (2018) have explored the concepts of internationalization and intercultural exchange and how they are able to exist in the online space.

　　Arguably, one of the biggest benefits of the rise in online learning has been the ability of more students to mix with those living and studying in other countries. According to Dalgleish (2002), multicultural classrooms "[provide] an opportunity for students from different cultures to bring their enormous range of experiences, knowledge, perspectives

and insights to the learning" (p. 1). The opportunities afforded by an international, multicultural online classroom are perhaps most applicable to those students with little or no experience of travelling abroad. Indeed, in research carried out by Hofhuis et al. (2023), it was found that local students in an international university program who had no prior international experience developed more in terms of open-mindedness and social initiative than their peers.

At the same time, there is conflicting evidence as to how effectively students are able to learn online. Some studies, such as the research undertaken by Clark et al. (2021), extol the benefits of online learning, providing evidence that it can be superior, in some respects, to traditional face-to-face classes. Others, such as the paper by Griffiths and Palau (2022), indicate the opposite, with online students performing considerably worse than their face-to-face studying counterparts.

Measuring achievement for students studying online can also be challenging (Kearns 2012; Gillett-Swan 2017), even for an educator who is very familiar with his/her students. These challenges can stem from physical distance, use of technology, communication, time management, and others (ibid). In our research context, achievement was measured by a separate party - while the British Council provided the classes, students' achievement was assessed through independently conducted TOEIC tests.

TOEIC

Students in the program were required by the university to take a pre- and post-course TOEIC Listening and Reading (LR) test to meas-

ure their English ability（although scores had no influence on their credit or grades）. While the TOEIC Speaking and Writing（SW）test is available in Japan, the LR test is far more common（Kanzaki 2019）and is often used by Japanese universities to measure the effectiveness of English courses, even where the main components of the course are speaking and listening（ibid）. Nevertheless, Kanzaki's research shows that the correlation coefficient between the LR and SW tests is strong enough to suggest that LR scores would be quite indicative of likely scores in the SW test（ibid）. Kanzaki states that:

> "This is important because the TOEIC LR test is the one that most Japanese students take, and this could potentially allow teachers to feel more confident in using the scores for this test as a broad measure of students' overall English proficiency"（p. 565）

Whether or not an increase in TOEIC score can be seen as an indicator of English improvement amongst learners is perhaps another matter. Cunningham（2002）suggested that it may bear little relation to communicative competence, although it should be pointed out that this study did not explore spoken communication in detail. However, it would seem from the aforementioned course evaluation use case described by Kanzaki（2019）, that Japanese universities at least do often consider changes in TOEIC scores to equate to changes in English ability.

　　　Even if we accept the premise that TOEIC score improvement and English improvement are indeed related, determining the score increase required to show improvement is more difficult to ascertain.

Variation in not only test questions but also in student performance is an undeniable reality, and it would be remiss to suggest that a student who increases his/her score from, say, 480 points to 485 points has necessarily improved. In fact, there is precious little literature that deals with the issue of score variation in the TOEIC test. Much of the research that does exist, such as the studies by Childs (1995) and Andrade (2014), leans relatively heavily on reports and materials produced by ETS, the TOEIC test provider.

One of the most recent publications by ETS that refers to the issue of score variation is the TOEIC Listening and Reading Test Examinee Handbook (ETS 2022). This handbook refers to something called the *Standard Error of Measurement* (*SEM*):

"The Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) is an estimate of average difference between true scores and obtained test scores, and is about 25 scaled score points for each of the TOEIC® Listening and Reading sections. A test taker's true score could be estimated by ± 25 scaled score points around the test score obtained from one administration. For example, if you obtain a scaled score of 300 on the TOEIC Listening section, 68% of the time your true score will fluctuate between approximately 275 and 325." (p. 30)

This would seem to suggest that, at least on an individual student basis, a score of 275 points and 325 points on one section of the TOEIC test should be considered broadly the same. Therefore, a student whose score increases from 275 points to 325 points could not be said to have

improved his/her English level.

At the same time, this study seeks to examine improvement（or otherwise）on a whole-group basis. It is likely therefore that individual score fluctuation will be mitigated by the averaging of the data. The effects of test variation on scores will also be mitigated by the fact that study participants all took different tests. As a result, while the SEM may remain relevant on an individual-student level, it is less likely to be so when considering students as a group.

The Program

Initially, several administrative meetings were held within the university to lay out plans for the online study project. During these meetings, a number of different elements were discussed including project aims and duration, student recruitment and eligibility, credit transfer, deadlines, funding and student support, administrative responsibilities, and internal deadlines. Once the project had been approved internally, the first task was to choose a provider.

Choosing a Provider

Based on discussions in the various meetings undertaken to establish this project, a list of criteria, some desirable and some essential, was drawn up for the online study program. The list was, broadly, as follows:

1. Our students should be able to study entirely, or at least mostly, in interactive group-classes（i.e. not only private lessons）.
2. Other students should come from a number of different coun-

tries (i.e. not just Japan).

3. The program should enable our students to study independently and take charge of their own learning journey.

4. The program should have some kind of explicit academic direction, either in the form of a clear curriculum or clearly stated lesson plans and aims for non-linear courses.

5. The program should ideally have some form of flexibility for students to organize lessons around their own schedules. Alternatively, classes should predominantly be held at a time convenient to most Japanese university students.

6. The course provider should have a good reputation.

7. Teachers on the program should be professional and well-qualified.

8. The provider should be able to cater to learners who are between A1 and B2 on the CEFR scale.

9. The provider should be able to provide accurate records of hours studied and attendance in order for the university to offer credit transfer.

10. The program should be reasonable value for money.

It was hoped that satisfying these criteria would enable the university to achieve its aim of closely replicating the educational (and, if possible, cultural exchange) aspects of a traditional study abroad experience in the online space. A high quality of education coupled with enough flexibility and support to enable students to finish the course was also valued. Finally, various administrative requirements were introduced in order for

students to ultimately receive credit for their hard work.

Around a dozen providers were considered for the study program. Some were providers that we were aware of, or had used for other projects in the past. Others were completely new to us and were evaluated based on their online presence or physical marketing materials. Ultimately, one provider was deemed to satisfy most of our criteria and was duly chosen.

About the Provider

A decision was taken to use the *English Online* program offered by the British Council. Established in 2020, the service is aligned to the British Council Curriculum Framework. All of its teachers are qualified with internationally-recognized qualifications such as the Cambridge CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults), DELTA (Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) and Master's Degrees in education/teaching/linguistics.

English Online is primarily made up of 55-minute communicative language-centered group classes[1]. The service is available in 144 countries worldwide and, as a result, the student population is very diverse and comprises a large number of different nationalities. Students are split into CEFR levels from A1 to C1 with each level containing between 54 and 84 classes. Classes are based around themes such as *Living Spaces*, *Food and Health*, *Travel and Culture*, and *Holidays and Seasons*. These are further categorized as Social, Business or Premium, the last of which have a smaller number of students. A brief description of each class and its aims is visible to students before booking.

Rather than paying for access to the service for a predetermined period of time, students (or, in our case, institutions) buy a package of credits, valid for up to one year depending on the number purchased, which can be redeemed against classes at a rate of one credit per group class. Since all classes are independent of each other, students can use their credits to take classes based on their availability and interests rather than following a regular schedule. Available classes can be seen up to around six weeks in advance, allowing students to plan their studies and choose classes accordingly. If a student is absent or fails to cancel more than 24 hours prior to the start of a class, the credit is forfeited. English Online students can also attend up to four free Live25 25-minute webinars per month in addition to their regular classes.

In the case of Business to Business (B2B) contracts such as those between our university and the British Council, access is provided to a dashboard enabling the institution to monitor its students[2]. This dashboard enables institutions to see which classes students have taken, which have been booked for future, attendance and absences, and a number of other pieces of information. It also acts as a record of each student's learning, facilitating the provision of university credit or other recognition by the institution.

Program Logistics

Each iteration of the program was to be about 20 weeks in length, comprising the final 12 weeks of the university semester and about another eight weeks of the university holidays. Student recruitment commenced at the beginning of each semester and participants were

selected shortly afterwards. An orientation and onboarding session was held and students were required to take a pre-course TOEIC test online. Since these TOEIC tests were organized independently by the students, students did not all take the same test.

During the course, semi-regular checkups were carried out with participants, in particular with those who had fallen behind and were deemed to be at risk of dropping out. Students were also invited to contact the International Center if they were in need of any advice or assistance and several elected to do so.

At the end of the course, students were required to take a second TOEIC test. Once again, students booked these tests themselves and therefore took different tests. Students were also required to complete a questionnaire, the data from which has been used in this research.

Students who successfully completed the course were awarded university credits and a scholarship covering the vast majority of the course fee. Those who did not do so were ineligible for the university credits and the scholarship but were still able to access their remaining English Online credits and take lessons for the remainder of the 12-month credit eligibility period.
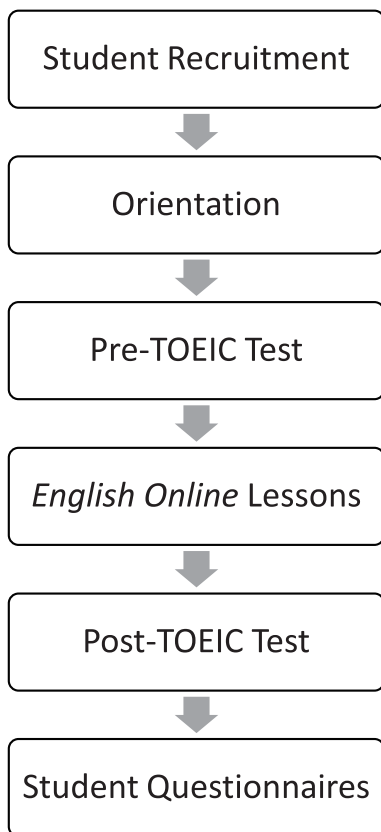
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Figure 1: Program Structure

The Two Cohorts

The First Cohort – Spring 2022

The first English Online cohort comprised 12 undergraduate students belonging to a number of different university faculties and grades. These students were expected to take 132 classes (totaling around 120 hours) and had around 20 weeks in which to do so. This required stu-

dents to take, on average, almost seven classes per week in addition to their regular university studies. Based on the level check test carried out in English Online, these students ranged in ability from A1 to B2 on the CEFR scale.

The Second Cohort – Fall 2022

This cohort was smaller, with seven students deciding to join the program. Once again, a range of faculties and university grades were represented. Students in this group were all determined to be either A2 or B1 on the CEFR scale in the initial level check test.

Following feedback from students and our own observations (each of which will be discussed later in this paper), a decision was made to reduce the number of classes in the second cohort from 132 to 100 classes. University credit was also reduced accordingly. As the duration of the course was again around twenty weeks, this reduced the required frequency of study for participants from around seven classes a week on average to around five.

Research Questions

This research aimed to answer four research questions:
1) What effect did taking part in English Online have on students' English ability, as measured by TOEIC scores?
2) What changes in English ability did students perceive as a result of their participation in the study?
3) What did students consider to be the positive and negative aspects of the program?

4）　How could the program be changed or improved?

Research Method

Data was collected in two forms: TOEIC scores and students' questionnaires. TOEIC scores were sent directly from the test provider to the university, as students reserved their tests through the university testing infrastructure. Students took a TOEIC test in the week before the course was due to start and within a week of completion of the course.

Student questionnaires were administered at the end of the course using Google Forms. Questions were written firstly in English and then translated into Japanese. There were two reasons for administering the questionnaire in Japanese. Firstly it was decided that doing so would reduce the burden on already-busy students and make it more likely that they would complete the questionnaire in a timely manner. Secondly, it was felt that allowing students to respond in their native language would elicit more detailed, nuanced, or insightful responses[3].

The survey comprised a mix of Likert Scale questions and open questions requiring students to give a written response. Designing the questions in this way allowed for both quantitative and qualitative analysis to be carried out, the former allowing for quicker comparison across students responses and the latter allowing for more detail and context to be understood. Unfortunately, it was not possible to carry out additional interviews with students.

During the orientation meeting, information about the research project was given to students and permission to use their anonymized

questionnaire and TOEIC score data was sought. Students were informed that they were able to withdraw from the research at any time.

Findings

The research findings are mainly comprised of quantitative and qualitative data taken from the student questionnaires administered at the end of each course. This is complemented by other data collected and collated by the International Center, namely the program completion rates and students' pre- and post-program TOEIC scores. The score and questionnaire data from one student who completed the course was excluded.

The findings are categorized into five sections: course completion rates, students' perceptions of English ability change, students' perceptions of confidence and motivation, TOEIC scores, and students' feedback on the program.

Course Completion Rates

Table 1: Course Completion Rates

Cohort	Started	Completed	Completion Rate
1st (132 classes)	12	9	75%
2nd (100 classes)	7	6	86%
Combined	19	15	79%

Three in four students in the first cohort were able complete the course while six out of seven students in the second did so. While this represents a slight increase in the completion rate, the number of students involved is low enough that this small percentage change is unlike-

ly to be statistically significant.

In terms of those who did not complete the course, it was possible to gather feedback questionnaires from two of the four students. One intimated that they did not feel that the English Online class style was a good fit for their own style of learning（勉強の仕方が自分に合わなかったから）. The other said that there were too many business-focused lessons（ビジネスの授業が多かったから）which prompted them to give up.

Students' Perceptions of English Ability Change

This section is divided in two. First it looks at the data for students who completed the courses before examining the data for those who did not. Since there was little variation between the scores of the two different cohorts in this section, the data is presented in combined form only.

Scores were created by assigning a numerical score to Likert Scale responses, adding them together, and dividing by the number of respondents to create an average. The Likert Scale used was as follows:

Table 2: Likert Scale explanation

Scale Item（Japanese）	Scale Item（English[4]）	Score
悪くなった	Became worse	1
向上しなかった	Did not improve	2
少し向上した	Improved a little	3
やや向上した	Improved	4
かなり向上した	Improved considerably	5

Completed Course Student Surveys

Table 3: Perceptions of English ability change in students who completed the course（average scores）

Completed Course Students（n=14）	
Listening	4.00
Reading	3.07
Writing	3.29
Speaking	3.79
Grammar	3.64

The students who completed the course perceived their English ability as having improved in all five areas surveyed（the four main skills and grammar）. Of these, students indicated that they had improved most in terms of listening and speaking. This is perhaps unsurprising given the communication focus that the English Online lessons are supposed to have. At the same time, it is encouraging to discover that students felt that their reading, writing and grammar skills had also improved.

Did Not Complete Course Student Surveys

Table 4: Perceptions of English ability change in students who did not complete the course（average scores）

Did Not Complete Course Students（n=2）	
Listening	3.50
Reading	3.00
Writing	2.00
Speaking	2.50
Grammar	3.00

Only two of the four students who failed to complete the course answered the questionnaires so the data above is likely to be statistically

relatively weak. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that even the students who did not complete the course were potentially able to realize some benefits from the lessons that they did take (in the case of these two students, 38 classes and 30 classes were taken). In particular, these students seemed to feel that their listening skills had improved.

Students' Perceptions of Confidence and Motivation

Students' opinions were also sought as to whether their confidence and motivation had improved as a result of taking the course. Once again, no significant disparity was recorded between the different cohorts so the data is presented in combined form only.

Completed Course Students

Table 5: Perceptions of confidence and motivation change in students who completed the course (average scores)

Completed Course Students (n=14)	
Confidence	3.64
Motivation	3.93

The data suggests that students felt quite a strong sense of improvement in both their confidence and motivation by the end of the course. One student suggested that their confidence grew considerably as a result of the classes and that they went from feeling quite overwhelmed by the ability of (in particular) the Western students to seeing this as quite inspiring:

British council［ママ］のコースを受講し始めたての頃は、あまり授業の流れもつかめず、自分の意見を主張できなかった。しかし、講義を重ねるにつれて、欧米の方たちの自己主張の強さにも圧巻されながら、自分も積極的に主張しようという気持ちになり、よりアクティブになれるという面

This student went on to say that their fear of failure disappeared while taking the course（失敗を恐れなくなった）.

Did Not Complete Course Students

Table 6: Perceptions of confidence and motivation change in students who did not complete the course（average scores）

Did Not Complete Course Students（n=2）	
Confidence	3.50
Motivation	2.50

Interestingly, both students who did not complete the course suggested that their confidence increased, resulting in an average Likert score of 3.50 for this question. Motivation did not score as well as confidence, although it did not appear to decline as a result of the course. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind once again that the other two non-completing students did not answer the questionnaire and so the reliability of the above data is likely to be quite low.

TOEIC Scores

The university required students to take a first TOEIC Listening

and Reading test online around a week before the start of online classes and a second test shortly after the end of the course. It is not known whether any students took any additional TOEIC tests in the interim period but none of the students from whom we collected data were undertaking any kind of formal TOEIC study during this period.

The data below pertains only to those who completed the course. It is presented in separate cohorts and then subsequently in combination. Test scores were sent directly from the test provider to the university and shared with students.

Averages - 1ˢᵗ Cohort（132 Classes）(n=8)

Table 7: TOEIC scores for the first cohort（average scores）

TOEIC Section	Before	σ	After	σ	Change
Listening	281	*115*	344	*82*	+63
Reading	206	*100*	244	*128*	+38
L+R Total	488	*209*	588	*208*	+100

The TOEIC test scores for the first cohort saw a relatively sizeable increase in the score for the listening section of 63 points. An increase is also seen in the reading section of 38 points, resulting in an average total score increase of 100 points.

Averages - 2ⁿᵈ Cohort（100 Classes）(n=6)

Table 8: TOEIC scores for the second cohort（average scores）

TOEIC Section	Before	σ	After	σ	Change
Listening	320	*70*	345	*65*	+25
Reading	192	*53*	261	*76*	+69
L+R Total	512	*102*	606	*139*	+94

TOEIC scores for the second cohort also showed an overall increase of close to 100 points, although this was skewed towards reading as opposed to listening. This is somewhat surprising in a communication-based course where the focus is on developing speaking and listening skills.

One possible reason for this may be the relatively high starting score for listening and relatively low starting score for reading. It may be that it is easier for students at the lower end of the scoring range to increase their TOEIC scores. This is a view expressed by the TOEIC course provider, Prolingua, who state on their website that " ...it takes many more hours of study to raise one's TOEIC score at the upper end of the scale than at the lower end"（Prolingua Executive Language Services 2020）. However, it should be noted that it is not immediately clear on what evidence or experience this particular claim is based.

Averages - Combined Cohorts（n=14）

Table 9: TOEIC scores for the combined cohorts（average score）

TOEIC Section	Before	σ	After	σ	Change
Listening	298	*97*	345	*72*	+47
Reading	200	*81*	251	*106*	+51
L+R Total	498	*167*	596	*175*	+98

When combined, the TOEIC scores for the two cohorts indicate a more even distribution in score improvement across the two sections of the test. Students' average scores in listening and reading have both risen by around 50 points with the total overall increase for the LR test sitting at just under 100 points[5].

Students' Feedback on the Program

Students were asked in the questionnaires specifically to identify positive and negative aspects of the course. The questions asked were "What were the positive aspects of the course?"（このコースのプラス面は何ですか？）and "What were the negative aspects of the course?"（このコースのマイナス面は何ですか？）. Responses to these two specific questions in particular were coded and tabulated. Equally, responses to other questions deemed to be either overtly positive or negative were also collated and coded, such as in the "any further comment"（上記の他にコメントがあれば記入してください）section.

The feedback detailed below is from all 16 students who answered the questionnaire（14 who completed the course and two who did not）.

Positive Feedback

Table 10: Positive feedback

Positive Comment	Number（n=16）
Talk to students from different countries	9
Improve speaking/communication/pronunciation	9
Learn about different cultures or customs	5
Learn things different from regular English class	4
Improve my English overall	2
Motivation to study English increased	2
Vocabulary improved	2
Confidence increased	2
Ability to take classes whenever convenient	2
Others	6

Two aspects of the course stand out as being particularly appreciated by the students. The first of these was the opportunity to talk to students from different countries, a feature that more than half of the students surveyed decided to mention. In fact, students were asked in a later question in the survey to list some of the countries in which their classmates were based. Whilst some students simply wrote "lots" （特に多かった）, more than 30 different specific countries were mentioned, spread across six continents.

Table 11: Countries mentioned

Continent	Country
Europe	France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, United Kingdom
North America	Mexico, Panama
South America	Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Venezuela,
Africa	Egypt, Zambia
Asia	China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam
Oceana	Australia

More than half of the survey respondents also wrote that the course gave them an opportunity to improve their speaking（スピーキング）, communication（会話）, or pronunciation（発音）. Some referred to one of these while others referred to two or more. Since improvement in these areas was one of the main goals of the program, this feedback is encouraging.

About a third of the students also made reference to being able to learn about different cultures or customs as part of the course（色んな国の文化を知れた）. While this is another promising revelation, little information was given about how precisely this cultural transfer took place. It is not clear whether this was at the behest of the teacher or whether it came about through interactions with students from other countries. Equally, it is not clear whether this knowledge came about through shared discovery and understanding or whether it emerged from the students' own reflections. One specific comment that a student did make was that they were surprised to learn that many foreigners liked Japan and that they were able to see the *charm* of Japan for themselves as a result（意外にも日本が好きだという人が多くいて、日本の魅力をしれたこと）. Another made reference to being able to make foreign friends（海外の友達が作れる）as a positive aspect of the course.

Finally, a number of students emphasized the ability that the course gave them to learn things that were different from their regular university English classes. Once again, it is not clear exactly what this meant in practice for some students, although some said that the online classes enabled them to use more everyday English that they were not able to study at university（授業では学ばない英語の日常生活での言い回

しを学ぶこと（ママ）出来た）.

Negative Feedback

Table 12: Negative feedback

Negative Comment	Number （n=16）
Schedule-related difficulties	9
Too many classes	3
Difference in levels of students	3
Business classes were difficult	2
Content didn't match expectations	2
Others	3

It seems clear from the data that schedule-related difficulties represented a problem for many students, with more than half of respondents reporting trouble in this area. One student mentioned that the lack of lessons at convenient times made the program less flexible than they had hoped（スケジュールの融通がきくと思っていたけど、空いてる（ママ）時間に授業がないなどあまり融通がきかなかった）.

Another said that the number of lessons was unpredictable with there being plenty of lessons on one day and very few the next, and that this stopped them being able to take lessons spontaneously（日によってレッスンが沢山ある時間が違うので、今時間が空いているからしようという事が出来ないとこ）. Several students stated that there were not enough lessons in the evenings in Japan（日本時間で受講しやすいような夕方の時間に受講できる授業が少ないという面）.

A number of other pieces of negative feedback were given although these were much less universal. Finally it is worth mentioning

that all three students who suggested that the course had too many classes belonged to the first cohort who were required to take 132 classes. No students in the second cohort gave this feedback（despite still having to take 100 classes themselves）.

Discussion

Since this is a relatively new（and ongoing）project, the number of students from whom data has been gathered remains relatively small. Nevertheless, a picture of the English Online experience is beginning to emerge. Whilst it is likely too early to answer any of the four research questions definitively at this stage, it is through their framework that the findings detailed above will be discussed.

RQ1）What effect did taking part in English Online have on students' English ability, as measured by TOEIC scores?

When examined as a group, there is a clear increase in TOEIC scores from the pre-course test to the post-course test. Students' TOEIC scores increased by around 50 points for both the Listening section and the Reading section of the TOEIC LR test. Although there was some variation between the two cohorts in terms of which section increased, each cohort saw an average increase in their overall LR score of around 100 points. If it is accepted that TOEIC scores do indeed show English improvement, it can be said that the English ability of the group improved.

On an individual basis, it is much more difficult to say whether or not students improved. Since the Standard Error of Measurement（SEM）

equates to ±25 scaled score points（ETS 2022 p. 30）, it is possible even for an individual student achieving the group average increase of around 50 points per section not to have improved. For example, a student with a section score of 300 points in the pre-test and 350 points in the post-test may have in fact had a "real" score of 325 but performed below expectations in the first test and above in the second.

　　　Finally, it is important to indicate that students were likely all doing some other forms of English study while taking part in the course（many would have had additional university English classes, for example）and these will no doubt have had some bearing on their English ability and potentially their TOEIC scores. However, feedback from students and the sheer number of hours spent on the platform suggests that the majority of their English study throughout the course period was likely made up of English Online classes.

RQ2）What changes in English ability did students perceive as a result of their participation in the study?

　　　The students who completed the course perceived an increase in their ability across all four key language skills and grammar. In particular, students intimated that their Listening and Speaking skills had improved. Increases in confidence and motivation were also reported. Overall, these students gave a very positive impression of their learning experiences.

　　　Students who failed to complete the program were, unsurprisingly, less positive, although that was not to say that they saw no benefits whatsoever. It is worth noting that both of the survey respondents who

had not completed the course had taken between a quarter and a third of their lesson package – a student who had given up earlier may well have responded differently.

RQ3）What did students consider to be the positive and negative aspects of the program?

It is clear that students enjoyed the ability to mix with learners in different countries. Many made reference to the ability to learn about different cultures and to meet people with different backgrounds. At the same time, developing a greater understanding or appreciation of Japanese culture for themselves was also mentioned. One student in particular was pleased to discover the fond affection that his/her classmates had for Japan. These revelations would suggest that cultural exchange was indeed taking place.

Students also clearly found the classes to be worthwhile since most wrote about being able to improve their speaking, pronunciation or communication in some capacity. Additional improvements such as listening skills and overall confidence were also mentioned. Although not always explicitly stated, it can probably be inferred that students therefore considered the teaching quality to be, at the very least, satisfactory, since they spoke at length about the skills they developed through the program.

Finally, it was clear from students' feedback that the experience of English Online was a novel and interesting one, particularly when juxtaposed against their previous English learning experiences at university. Given that one of the reasons that the course was being offered was as a

window or gateway into studying abroad, this perspective of the course being somehow different from regular university studies is encouraging.

While the positive feedback about the course was relatively varied, there was more convergence when it came to negative experiences. Overwhelmingly, the biggest issues that students had related to scheduling, with most pertaining to a lack of availability of suitable lessons at times convenient to Japanese learners.

Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for this issue arising is a logistical one. Students in this program were expected to take either 100 or 132 classes in around 20 weeks, a very intensive schedule. Given this atypically intense schedule, it should have perhaps been expected that students would struggle to find classes at convenient times, especially if they were keen to take lessons that they had not already previously taken[6].

Another contributory factor to the perceived lack of classes and associated scheduling difficulties may have been a reticence on the part of students to try moving to the next level. Since each level has between 54 and 84 classes, all students on our program who did not move up to the next level would have had to repeat lessons.

This highlights arguably one of the weaknesses of a flexible online offering such as English Online. Although students no doubt benefit from the flexibility of the system and through studying with different teachers and groups of students, invariably the relationship between teacher and students cannot develop in the same way as in a more linear class. The online aspect could be said to further weaken the bond between teacher and student.

As a result, where previously the teacher may have played a more active role in encouraging students to challenge themselves and to encourage them to try moving up to the next level, with programs such as English Online, it is really down to the student to be proactive in asking to do so. Less confident students may feel uncomfortable asking to try the next level or may simply not know how to. With each level comes a set of 54 to 84 brand new lessons to try, many of which will be scheduled at times convenient for Japanese students.

RQ4) How could the program be changed or improved?

Particularly with regard to the scheduling issues discussed above, one change would be for university staff to take a more active role in monitoring students taking part in the program. While it is important for students to develop skills of independent study (and accepting of course that university staff have limited time), more regular consultation would likely be beneficial. Consulting with students more regularly would allow for suggestions to be made about attempting the next level, especially in cases where students are less confident.

An additional benefit of more regular consultation with program participants might be a decrease in drop-out rates. At over 20%, current drop-out rates are too high, especially when considering that the financial costs of not completing the course are relatively severe and that students who do not complete the course do not get any academic credit.

Another way to reduce rates of non-completion would be to reduce the number of classes to make it easier for students. In my view, this would be doing a disservice to the four-fifths of students who do

currently complete the course and appear to getting benefit from it. Although the course is tough, students who complete it are clearly deriving great satisfaction from doing so. Instead, it may be prudent to consider the advice given to students and marketing materials utilized during the student recruitment phase to make absolutely sure that students are aware of the size of the task before applying.

Conclusion

This was a small-scale study with data from a small number of students. As such, the ability to extrapolate quantitative findings more widely, or to predict test score outcomes for future groups in the program, is necessarily limited. It is hoped that gathering more data from future iterations of the program will enable more accurate predictions to be made.

Nevertheless, it seems clear from the data that the program is useful. Students are generally satisfied with their experiences both in their own perception of their English improvement and also in terms of the availability of cross-cultural exchange.

From an institutional point of view, the program has so far been seen as a success. Test score evidence suggests a tangible increase in students' English ability and students are mostly satisfied with the course. At the same time, it is clear that more can be done to ensure that students are able to complete their lessons easily and to avoid students dropping out.

Notes

1）25-minute private classes are also available but students on this course were only allowed to take group classes.

2）Initially this information was provided in Excel spreadsheet form – the dashboard became available approximately halfway through the first cohort.

3）In the case of the one participant for whom Japanese was not their native language, a choice between the English questionnaire and the Japanese questionnaire was offered.

4）Translations are approximate and likely do not completely reflect the precise nuance of the original Japanese used in the survey.

5）Acknowledging the disparity in the students' original starting scores, if the aforementioned contention by Prolingua（2020）that it is easier to increase scores at lower levels is indeed correct, it would follow that there has been a larger increase in listening ability. However, the extent to which this is true is unknown or, at least, difficult to quantify.

6）Students can take a class they have already taken if they wish to. There is a button on the English Online platform that can toggle display of already-taken classes. Some students may opt to take the same class again with a different teacher/students, or for the purposes of review.

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