

# **Japanese Students' Sojourn in Korea: For Linguistic and Cultural Exchange**

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## **Introduction**

“English has been perceived by Koreans as the single most important tool that they need to have in order to get ahead at school and in society in general” (Kang, 2012, p. 29). Even though English education is important in Japan, it certainly cannot be considered to have equivalent status as in Korea. One indication of this is the relative time schools devote to English in each country. Korea introduced English into the third year of the primary curriculum in 1997 (Kang, 2012, Kim, 2010), but Japan only introduced it into the fifth year of primary education in 2011 (Tahira, 2012).

## **Literature Review**

### ***English as an International Language for Japanese students***

Historically, English has been considered to be a vehicle for accessing the ideas of native English speakers. In 1873, Japan's ambassador to Washington and later Minister of Education, claimed: “The commercial power of the English speaking race which now rules the world drives our people into some knowledge of their commercial ways and habits. The absolute necessity of mastering the English language is thus forced upon us” (Okubo, 1972, pp. 265-266, cited in Heinrich, 2012, p. 29).

There has been a dramatic change in the perceived ownership of English over the last 140 years. Recently there has been a shift in awareness from English as a Foreign Language, to English as an International Language, and English as a Lingua Franca. Fifer Seilhamer (2013) reminds us that we can no longer assume that students learn English in order to communicate

with speakers from the 'BANA' countries (Britain, Australasia and North America). Traditionally L2 students have preferred to study English, or other subjects in English, in countries where it is spoken as an L1. However, the students featured in this study do not conform to this trend: rather, this study concerns students from a country in which English is a foreign language going to study in another such country.

Many Japanese students do however still believe English is most effectively learnt in countries where English is spoken as a first language. Abe's (2013) survey of 48 Japanese university students revealed that 64% considered that the most important thing for English conversation is "native-like speech and expression" (p. 49), and 81% of them revealed that they would like to study abroad in native-English speaking countries. Abe warns that this is because students are unaware of the notion of World Englishes: "Students need to be aware of the fundamental purpose of learning English, which is not to mimic native speakers' English but to use their own English to communicate with other English speakers, be they natives or non-natives" (p. 50).

Given that many students prefer BANA destinations, it may come as a surprise that for some Japanese students Korea is their first choice for studying abroad. In this paper we will explore the reasons for their choice and the linguistic outcomes of their sojourn.

### ***English as an international language in Korea***

Korea has led the way in East Asia in the push to increase the number of English-medium lectures, with the aim of attracting more international students and making their universities more globally competitive (*Newsweek*, February 26, 2007, cited in Cho, 2012). Cho also identified a steep rise in the number of international professors and students at Korean universities, but at the same time criticised the universities' introduction of English-medium lectures. Firstly, she argued the decision to hold lectures in English is undemocratic because universities have prioritised globalization over the local students' academic needs, pointing out that some students have had to seek support from private English classes in order to follow the English-medium lectures. A further criticism is the inequity between the level of participation by the minority of proficient English speaking local students. Korean students are not the only ones to be disadvantaged though. Cho found that in one university where 80% of the international students were Chinese, most of them desired to have lectures in Korean rather than English.

Nevertheless, the Japanese students in this study who chose to study English in Korea, are all proficient in English. Cho (2012) criticised the introduction of English-medium lectures in Korean universities from the points of view of local students and international students who prefer to study in Korean. But, the universities also have a number of international students such as those in this study who want to use the Korean university system to improve their English skills.

### *Relative language distance*

Speakers from languages which are related to each other, usually find it easier to communicate in one of their own languages, rather than English, a distant lingua franca. Crystal (2005) explained the origins of language families throughout the world, pointing out that Korean has similarities with the Altaic family of languages, a group to which Japanese is considered to belong. Over half of the Korean vocabulary originates from Chinese, plus early records indicate that both Korean and Japanese originally used Chinese characters for writing (p. 392).

Neustupny (1978) argued that the concept of language distance should take account of more than simply genetic constraints (e.g. descending from a common ancestor language), and should include another grouping which he calls unions. Drawing on the work of Hyme's (1962, 1964, 1967, cited in Neustupny, 1978) he drew attention to factors other than grammar which contribute to communicative competence. Using the example of the ease with which a Czech speaker may learn L2 German, Neustupny outlined:

For instance German is easy for a native speaker of Czech not merely because of the large scale lexical (mostly areal) resemblances, but mainly because he knows *when*, *what*, and *how* his German interlocutor would communicate. ... The popular belief of widely distributed fluency in German within the Czech community seems to mean little more than a reflection of the experience of successful communication even in instances when the actual knowledge of German grammar is minimal (p. 103).

Neustupny proposed a notion of *linguistic union*, which implies commonalities of communicative style. He identified particular unions such as a European Union, West European Union, East Asian Union, and Japan-Korea Union (p. 108). Accordingly, Japanese and Korean exhibit commonalities in communicative style, which he considered to be separate from a genetic relationship.

Given the suggested associations with the Altaic family of languages (Crystal, 2005), and the Japan-Korea Union (Neustupny, 1978), and the large amount of vocabulary of Chinese origin in both languages, it should be relatively easy for Japanese students to acquire L2 Korean.

## **Study**

### ***Method***

In this study questionnaires (see Appendix 1) were given to five Japanese university students who had completed or who were in the process of completing an exchange program at a Korean university. The questionnaires were in English and were followed up by interviews with two of the students who had recently returned from a one-year sojourn in Korea.

## **Results**

### ***Reasons for choice of Korea as an exchange destination***

The students had a variety of reasons for choosing to study in Korea:

- The opportunity to learn two languages at the same time (both Korean and English)
- Korea being a relatively inexpensive destination
- Liking Korea (a professor's recommendation)

### ***Improvement of English language skills in Korea***

Even though the students obviously liked Korea as a destination, their comments show that the program was not necessarily successful regarding English acquisition. The extent of English acquisition varied considerably:

- One student indicated her English language skills did not improve because she did not concentrate on improving her English in Korea
- One said there was no improvement
- One student indicated he considered his English to have improved, more for conversations than technical English
- One student claimed his spoken but not written skills had improved
- Another sensed his English improved

***Relative usage of Korean, Japanese and English***

All but one of the students said their most commonly used language was Korean, apart from when they had English lessons. Only one respondent said he used English all the time, with other students and teachers.

***Language used to communicate with classmates***

- English because he took classes in the English department
- Korean
- English in the English class and Korean in the Korean class. In casual conversation, Korean, to Korean speakers, Japanese to Japanese speakers and English to all others.

***Language used to communicate with teachers***

- English when the classes were taught by native English speakers
- Initially, divided between English and Korean, and finally, all in Korean
- English

***Language used to communicate outside the university***

- Korean, because there were few English speakers outside the university
- 80% Korean
- English

**Discussion**

In the interview (see Appendix 2 for the questions), students were asked about the relative ease of speaking English with native and non-native speakers. One said he found it easier to speak English with non-native speakers, particularly if they came from Korea or China. People from other countries though, with less familiar pronunciations, were more difficult for him to understand. He could understand native speakers if they simplified their speech, but he was lost if they spoke quickly. In contrast though, the other student stated that she preferred native speakers because they spoke more 'natural' English. She valued speaking with non-native speakers because of the extra opportunities for communication that this afforded, but in terms of *learning* English, she preferred speaking with native speakers.

The second interview question enquired about the students' perception of opportunities for speaking English in Japan and Korea. The first interviewee claimed there were more opportunities in Korea, because there were more classes in English and he considered the level of English of the students to be high. Furthermore, several students from America or Europe, who could not speak Korean, attended the classes which were held in English, and this afforded

him more opportunities to speak English. The other interviewee considered she had more opportunities to *communicate* in English with other students in Korea, but claimed there were more opportunities to *learn* English with her teacher in Japan.

When asked their opinion about whether or not Korea is a suitable destination for Japanese students who wish to learn English one of the students responded emphatically in the affirmative. He felt that in the US even though there would be many more proficient English speakers, they would speak too fast for him to understand. The advantage in Korea is that, being L2 speakers of English, they speak more slowly. Once again though, the second interviewee had a contrasting opinion. Although she had many opportunities to speak English with the Korean students who were fluent in English, she still considered that an English-speaking country would have been a better environment to learn English.

Both of the interviewees indicated cost was an important reason for choosing to study English in Korea. One confirmed that not only was the cost of the flight from Japan very reasonable, he was also able to return to Japan very easily during the vacations.

One of the students indicated that in addition to many English-speaking professors there were also proficient English speakers among the students. He felt that in Japan the teacher spent more class time engaging with less proficient speakers, whereas in Korea he had many opportunities to talk in English with both native and non-native speakers. Furthermore, he considered he had adequate opportunities to speak English in Korea. Before going there he had imagined there would be more opportunities in the US, but as mentioned previously he did not want to go to America because of the increased demands it would place on his English listening skills.

The other interviewee said that one of the reasons she had not been able to go to the US or Canada was the cost. She had been influenced in her decision to go to Korea by another student who had returned to Japan with greatly improved fluency. He had had an American room-mate but although this student had wanted to room with a student from an English speaking country, her room-mates were Japanese, Russian and German, and she had not been afforded the same opportunities to interact in English as her predecessor.

### ***Perceived language proficiency***

From the point of view of language typology, Korean should be easier to acquire than English for Japanese students. English and Japanese are known to be linguistically distant from one another, according to categorizations made by the Foreign Service Institute of the US

Department of State (Kirkpatrick, 1995; Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2008); Although it is not a cognate language of Japanese, Korean is linguistically closer to Japanese than English, making acquisition easier. Crystal (2005), as mentioned earlier, has explained that both languages are associated with the Altaic family of languages, and both have extensive vocabulary of Chinese origin.

In answer to the question of which of the two languages they felt more proficient in, one of the interviewees responded that he felt more proficient in Korean. He felt more able to use what he described as 'Practical Korean', that is, Korean for daily life such as asking someone to carry out repairs or go shopping. In contrast, he had learnt English from a textbook, so he felt less confident in using English for practical purposes.

Similarly, the other interviewee answered emphatically that she had learnt more Korean than English. She attributed this to having had more Korean peers. She said she was comfortable in Korean and she did not need to translate it from Japanese in her brain, plus she did not have to think about Korean grammar. She was amazed that although she had studied English for ten years and was in Korea for only ten months, she felt she had achieved greater proficiency in Korean. She was praised for her pronunciation by her Korean friends but she still considers English pronunciation to be difficult. However she knows her vocabulary is greater in English than Korean, and she attributed this to the longer length of study.

It is important to point out though that in the questionnaire, one student indicated his Korean had only improved to a limited extent, so we cannot necessarily assume that Japanese students will become proficient in Korean just because they live and study there.

### ***Is English a lingua franca in Korea?***

We anticipated that because the students had gone to Korea with the purpose of studying English, they would use English as a lingua franca while there. Also, they had all studied English, but not Korean, in Japan.

But, the responses to our survey do not support the hypothesis that English is used as a lingua franca between Japanese exchange students and Koreans in Korea. Some of the students reported using Korean with other students inside and outside the university. Despite the students' history of at least seven years of English study and none of Korean, they appeared to readily pick up Korean and used English less frequently as their stay progressed. One student commented, "Korean is much easier for me to speak because the grammar is quite similar to Japanese. There are many words that Japanese can guess the meaning from how they sound."

However two students said that English was still easier for them than Korean. One said he always used English with non-Japanese classmates, teachers, and people outside the university.

Gil (2010) argued that the importance of English as a lingua franca in Asia has been exaggerated, and this research supports his view. Gil distinguished between the number of English learners and those who achieve proficiency. The extensive and increasing use of Korean by Japanese students in Korea is in line with Gil's reasoning. Despite their extensive English language education in Japan, it appears that linguistic similarities between Japanese and Korean mean that for some students, Korean can be acquired more easily than English even after years of English study.

### **Conclusion**

Students' experiences of learning Korean and English varied considerably. Many variables influence their language acquisition, such as the country where their circle of friends or roommate came from. Some students reported returning to Japan with increased fluency in English, whereas others had less chance to hone their skills. The biggest factor appeared to be the kind of peers they surrounded themselves with. Some had L1 English speaking peers; others were content to speak English with other L2 users. Still others sought the company of Koreans. These factors exerted a considerable influence on the extent to which the two L2s were acquired. This study does not therefore present a consistent pattern of the extent to which Korean or English may be acquired in Korea by Japanese students, and cannot be used to predict the language outcomes of other students who visit Korea. It is not simply being in Korea that determines L2 language acquisition, but rather the kind of language spoken by the peers that the interlocutor has chosen.

This small study supports the notion that Korea is an attractive destination for students wishing to go abroad to study English. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, it is less expensive to study in Korea than in a BANA country. Secondly, some students prefer speaking English in a country where English is an L2, because they consider L2 English to be more comprehensible. Finally, students may consider that there are more opportunities to speak English in Korea than Japan, because of the larger number of international students in Korean universities.

An unanticipated result of their study abroad was that some students reported attaining proficiency in Korean during their short stay. On the one hand, this perhaps should have been

anticipated because of the many common vocabulary items in Korean and Japanese; the similar communicative styles, and the fact that students also enrolled in classes of Korean as a second language. On the other hand it was unanticipated because students had planned to include English medium lectures in their course selection, taking advantage of the globalization policy of the Korean university. Accordingly, the acquisition of Korean is an additional benefit of studying in Korea. Although not all students reported improved English proficiency, some did, and furthermore, some were also able to achieve proficiency in Korean.

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### Appendix 1

#### *Questionnaire about Japanese Students' Study Abroad in Korea*

1. Why did you decide to go to *Korea* (rather than another country) to study English?
2. How much did your English improve/has your English improved during your stay in Korea?  
Did your TOEIC score improve? Have you sensed that your English has improved?
3. What level of Korean did you achieve during your stay in Korea? Were/are you able to carry out a conversation in Korean? Could/can you read a Korean newspaper? Could/can you understand the television in Korean?
4. Did/do you converse with your classmates in Korean, English or Japanese? Explain.
5. Did/do you converse with your teachers in Korean, English or Japanese? Explain.
6. Did/do you communicate with people outside of the university in Korean, English or Japanese? Explain.
7. Would you recommend to other students to go to Korea to study English? Why or why not?
8. Which language is easier for you, English or Korean? Why?

Please add any extra comments that you would like to make.

### Appendix 2

#### *Interview questions*

1. Was it easier to learn English with non-native speakers than with native speakers? Why or why not?
2. Did you have more opportunities to learn English in Korea or Japan? Why or why not?
3. Do you think Korea is a suitable destination for Japanese students who wish to learn English? Why or why not?
4. Looking back on your stay in Korea, so you think this was a useful way to improve your English?
5. Did you learn more Korean or English in Korea? Why?
6. Was Korea your destination of choice because of cost?
7. Did you speak to Koreans in English, Japanese or Korean, or a combination? When did you use each language?