

What do JFL learners want to do in Japanese in Japan?: A case study of learners in college level study abroad programs¹

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Introduction

The purpose of this work is to investigate what kinds of language needs JFL learners find as they start participating in a study abroad program in Japan for college students. Among a wide range of communicative interactions that take place in Japanese, what kinds of activities do they find important for their life in Japan, yet difficult to accomplish?

In this work, I present the results of surveys from three different groups of people. The first group, "Program A students", consists of American college students who arrived at Japan three to four weeks prior to the survey to attend a study abroad program.² The members of the second group, "Program B students", are American college students who, at the time of the survey, had almost finished an eight month (one academic year) program in Japan. The third group is made up of host families who hosted American college students during the academic year of 2005-2006. All surveys were conducted during the same academic year.

The result of the survey from Program A students

The survey was conducted with Program A students three to four weeks after they arrived in Japan. At the time of the survey, all of them had lived with their host families for at least two weeks.

Learner background

Although it is true that in recent years an increasing number of students have had a chance to learn Japanese before they enter college, the vast majority of the students who take a Japanese language course in American colleges and universities still start from zero. In American colleges and universities, students typically attend a study abroad program in their junior year. This means that most of the study abroad program participants will go to Japan after no more than two academic years of classroom instruction. Therefore, we are particularly interested in how to address those students' needs in the first two years of instruction.

For this study, I divided the twenty-five Program A students into three sub-groups.³ Group I consists of eleven students who had 100 to 150 hours of instruction at college prior to their

arrival in Japan. Group II is made up of eight students who had 200 to 250 hours of instruction at college prior to their arrival in Japan. Importantly, none of the students in Group I or Group II had taken any Japanese language courses before they entered college. Therefore, we can say that Group I and II are typical first-year and second-year Japanese students. Finally, the six students who had more than 250 hours of instruction at college make up Group III. The range of instructional hours that the students in Group III had before going to Japan is wide, from a student who had had 250 hours of instruction at college in addition to three years of pre-college instruction to a student who had had 400 hours of instruction at college in addition to six years of pre-college instruction.

The learners' self-evaluation of their language skills

While living in Japan, learners encounter a wide range of situations where they have to interact with people in Japanese outside of the classroom. We will first investigate what kinds of language activities Program A students have found difficult.

Table 1 presents the students' estimation of how much they understand when members of their host family talk to them in Japanese; all twenty-five Program A students lived with host families.⁴

Table 1. How much of a host family's talk the learners understand (Program A students)

	~ 50%	50~70%	70~80%	80~90%	90~100%	Total
Group I	3	4	3	1	0	11
Group II	1	3	2	2	0	8
Group III	0	1	1	3	1	6

Approximately one month after their arrival in Japan, the majority of the students in Group I and II estimate that they do not understand at least one-third of talk that is addressed to them. It is useful to know what kind of language environment they live in while in Japan.

Let us now examine how the students evaluate their own language skills in different activities. They were asked to rate the difficulty of a number of activities listed in the questionnaires, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=very comfortable, 3= possible, and 5=very difficult.⁵ If they had not experienced a certain activity, they were asked to use 0, however, the responses of the Program A students indicate that they had all experienced all activities prior to the survey. It is important to note that this evaluation is solely based upon the learners' own "feelings".

Table 2 shows how difficult the students think it is to go shopping, ask directions, and order food in Japanese. A common characteristic of the activities in Table 2 is their transactional nature. In other words, each activity has a clear purpose and goal, namely purchasing items, getting directions, and ordering food.

Table 2. Difficulty of short transactional activities (Program A students)

	Group I	Group II	Group III
Shopping	2.64	2.25	1.33
Direction	2.91	2.75	1.50
Ordering food	2.55	2.25	1.50

Table 3 demonstrates how difficult the students think it is to introduce their own country/culture and to seek help in Japanese. One of the differences between the activities in Table 2 and the activities in Table 3 is that the latter requires extended telling, while the former can be pursued in short utterances.

Table 3. Difficulty of longer transactional activities (Program A students)

	Group I	Group II	Group III
Introducing culture	2.55	2.38	2.00
Seeking help	2.73	2.86	1.83

It is noteworthy that the data in Table 2 and 3 suggest that the learners do not necessarily consider that an activity with extended telling is more difficult. Note also that the activities in Table 3 share a characteristic with the activities in Table 2 in that they all have a clear purpose and goal.

Let us next discuss the cases of non-transactional activities. Table 4 provides the students' ratings for "initiating a conversation", "making small talk", "participating in a conversation at the dinner table", and "entertaining people with storytelling". One of the important characteristics of these activities is that the purpose of communication is socialization. Note also that although they are divided into four separate categories in Table 4, there is not necessarily a clear boundary among them: for example, dinner conversation typically includes both small talk and storytelling, and someone has to initiate the conversation.

Table 4. Difficulty of non-transactional activities (Program A students)

	Group I	Group II	Group III
Initiating a conversation	2.91	2.75	1.83
Small talk	3.27	3.13	1.67
Dinner conversation	3.27	3.13	2.50
Entertaining, storytelling	4.27	4.00	3.33

Table 4 demonstrates that the students, in particular the ones in Group I and II, feel that these activities are more difficult than the transitional activities shown in Tables 2 and 3.

What kinds of language activities do learners think are the most important for their life in Japan?

The students were also asked to choose the activity from the same list that they think is the most important for their life in Japan. Some students chose multiple entries. Table 5 shows the six entries that were chosen by multiple students.

Table 5. Important language activities (Program A students)

	Dinner conversation	Initiating a conversation	Entertaining, storytelling	Small talk	Introducing culture	Seeking help
Group I	6	2	2	1	2	3
Group II	4	1	1	1	1	1
Group III	2	4	0	0	0	0
Total	12	7	3	2	3	4

Table 5 indicates that the learners find socializing activities are more important than transactional activities for their lives in Japan.

Why do they think that activities such as "participating in a dinner conversation" and "initiating a conversation" are very important? They wrote:

Dinner conversation:

- 1) Important for bonding with the host family and with Japanese students we meet. In other situations, gestures and pointing are more useful and the people you communicate with aren't people you have to interact with frequently so there is less pressure.
- 2) Conversation is critical not to look like an idiot.
- 3) Holding a conversation would greatly enhance the experience of living with a host family.
- 4) It's how you meet and actually get to know people. The other stuff is more easily done with simple phrases/hand gestures, etc.
- 5) Every single night, at least, and it also arises outside of the home as well.

Initiating a conversation:

- 6) It's hard to do this because you are nervous, but it is important because you need to communicate and make friends.
- 7) I want to meet and talk with people.
- 8) You can at least meet new people and have simple conversations.
- 9) Necessary for finding meaning, making friends, and staying happy.
- 10) Without it, it is hard to talk to people and express one's own personality.

The comments in 1) to 10) demonstrate how the learners are eagerly seeking opportunities to talk to people in Japan. Dinner conversation is very important for the students not only because it is likely to help them to establish good relationships with host family members but also because

they want to learn how to socialize in Japanese. Out of the twenty-five Program A students, seventeen answered homestay is "definitely" helping them to improve their Japanese. Moreover, ten out of the twenty-five students said that they "frequently" initiate a conversation in Japanese, while fifteen of them said they "sometimes" do. None of them answered they "rarely" or "do not" initiate a conversation in Japanese. Some students chose "small talk" and "storytelling" because:

Small talk and storytelling

- 11) I feel like I can talk, but I'm probably boring to talk to.
- 12) It is a large part of my interaction with Japanese people.

The result of the survey from Program B students

A question arises as to how learners who stayed in Japan longer feel about their language needs. Let us now examine the data from Program B students. The survey was conducted at the end of their eight month (one academic year) study abroad program in Japan. They came to Japan after completing at least one academic year of Japanese language courses at American colleges or universities; the majority of them had taken two academic years of Japanese prior to coming to Japan. Twenty-four students participated in the survey.

First, how difficult do they think that the activities such as "participating in a dinner conversation" and "initiating a conversation" are for them at the end of their eight month study abroad program? I asked them to evaluate their own language skills, on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=no problem, 3=comfortable, and 5=very difficult. The results, given in Table 6, indicate that they feel that they can do these activities comfortably in Japanese.⁶

Table 6. Difficulty of language activities (Program B students)

	Shopping	Introducing own culture	Dinner conversation	Initiating a conversation	Small talk	Storytelling
# of students	1.86	1.71	2.04	2.36	2.33	2.46

I also asked them to choose activities from of the list that they wish they were better at in Japanese. Some of them gave multiple answers. Table 7 presents the activities that got more than three votes.⁷

Table 7. The language skills that Program B students want to improve (Program B students)

	Entertaining people (e.g., jokes)	Storytelling	Dinner conversation	Initiating a conversation	Expressing anger	Resolving misunderstanding
# of students	7	6	5	3	3	3

Table 7 shows that the learners who lived in Japan much longer feel that they want/need to improve their language skills in non-transactional interactions in Japanese. Note also that in this group, more learners express the desire to improve their language abilities in the categories of entertaining people and storytelling. Program A students, who arrived in Japan three to four weeks prior to the survey, wanted to get to know more people in Japan, thus, "initiating a conversation" was crucial for them. On the other hand, Program B students, who stayed in Japan eight months, had already established some relationships with Japanese people at the time of the survey. It is likely that they felt the needs to entertain their host families and friends in Japanese.

To sum up, we observed that the learners in study abroad programs in Japan recognize the importance of non-transactional communication in Japanese from the beginning to the end of their stay in Japan.

Host family responses to the survey

We will now examine the responses of the members of the students' Japanese host families regarding their students' language skills.⁸ A survey form was sent to each household and one member of the host family answered the questions. Forty-two host families who had hosted American students at their home participated in the survey. It is most likely that the vast majority of the survey participants are host mothers. They all hosted a student from an American college or university during the 2005-2006 academic year; many of them hosted one student for eight months. The survey was conducted in May 2006, after most of their homestay students had left Japan.

First, the host family was asked how much of their students' speech they thought they understood. The results are shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Host families' understanding rate of their students' talk

	100%	95%	90%	80%	70%	60%	50%	> 50%	No answer
# of families	10	5	9	7	3	1	1	1	5

Table 8 demonstrates that the majority of the people who answered this question estimated that they understood more than 90% of what their students said.

Second, the host families were asked if they enjoyed communicating with their students. Nineteen out of forty-two said that they enjoyed talking with their students and did not experience communication problems; ten said they enjoyed talking with them although there were communication problems. One answered that he/she could not find enough time to talk to his/her student; and twelve indicated that they did not enjoy communicating with their students.

Third, they were asked what kinds of language skills they think are most important for their students' homestay life. In Table 9, I present the responses that were selected by more than five people.

Table 9. Important language skills in the homestay setting (host families' point of view)

	Participating in a dinner conversation	Expressing worry/anxiety	Student's initiation of a conversation	Asking about what they don't understand	Resolving misunderstanding	Expressing gratitude
# of families	16	15	11	11	6	6

Moreover, I asked them to evaluate their students' ability to "participate in a conversation" and "initiate a conversation" on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=No problem, 3=There are some problems but could do, 5=Could not do. As shown in Table 10, there seems to be a correlation between the host family's perception of the student's ability to conduct these activities and whether or not the host family enjoyed communicating with the student.

Table 10. Host families' evaluation of their students' language skills

	Participating in a dinner conversation	Initiating a conversation
Those who answered that they enjoyed communicating with their students and did not have communication problems	1.11	1.11
Those who answered that they enjoyed communicating with their students although they had communication problems	1.36	1.22
Those who answered that they did not enjoy communicating with their students	3.50	3.75

People who did not enjoy communicating with their students evaluate their students' ability to participate in a dinner conversation and to initiate a conversation as much lower than those who enjoyed communicating with their students. Interestingly enough, nearly half of the twelve

people who answered that they did not enjoy communicating with their students wrote that their students Japanese was good in the sense that he/she received good grades in Japanese courses and his/her e-mail was very well written.⁹

What can we, as instructors of Japanese, do?

We have observed that both the students and the host families agreed that non-transactional interactions such as "participating in a dinner conversation" and "initiating a conversation" are two of the most important language activities in the student's life in Japan.

A question arises as to whether we, as instructors of Japanese, can help developing learners' interactional competence in participating in this kind of non-transactional activity. Given that the vast majority of the study abroad participants will go to Japan only after one to two academic years of language instruction, it is desirable to incorporate something helpful into our elementary level courses. One of the Program A students wrote "dinner conversation also tends to be more abstract or less relevant to the physical content and therefore harder to participate in often because of a lack of vocabulary or slowness in thoughts." It is impossible to predict what the topic of a dinner conversation will be or where the conversation will go. How can we help our students?

We know that teaching "a dinner conversation" is different from teaching "how to order food in a restaurant". For example, there is no particular set of vocabulary and phrases that we can teach to conduct a dinner conversation. As pointed out in Hudson (2004), in a daily casual conversation, the use of the language tends to be very different from "textbook conversations". However, we can focus on pragmatic routines and strategies. Kasper and Rose (2002, p. 2) state "[p]ragmatic meanings arise from choices between linguistic forms, such as using one discourse marker or particle over another; or opting for one linguistic format of a communicative act instead of a contextually possible alternative to convey illocutionary force or politeness."

At the 2002 and 2003 Summer Institute *Pragmatics in the JFL Classroom*, Director and Workshop Facilitator Dina R. Yoshimi emphasized the importance of certain interactional discourse markers in small talk and storytelling in Japanese.¹⁰ Aida (2004, 2006), Lipton (2004, 2006), and Nemoto (2004) report how they have incorporated Yoshimi's approach and included the instruction of storytelling and small talk into their first-year Japanese classrooms. For example, *kyoo-wa samui desu* "it's cold today" is a mere statement of the weather but *kyoo-wa samui desu-ne* is a perfect way to initiate small talk. We can definitely include this type of instruction into the first semester of Japanese classroom instruction. It may be a small point but it seems to be an important step toward developing learners' awareness of the relationship between their choice of linguistic forms and the task they aim to accomplish.

Notes

1. A portion of this paper was presented in the workshop entitled *Adding a Pragmatic Dimension to 1st Year JFL Classroom* at Pragmatics in the CJK Classroom: The State of the Art (the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa on June 5, 2006). I would like to express my deep gratitude to Hisayo Okano Lipton, the co-conductor of this workshop, and Dina R. Yoshimi, the organizer of the conference, for giving me this wonderful opportunity. I would also like to thank the participants of the workshop for their enthusiastic participation and warm encouragements, including Yukie Aida, Yukiko Hatasa, Mutsuko E. Hudson, Tomoko Iwai, Kayoko Madsen, and Emily Nitta. Very special thanks go to Terry McDougal, Thomas Rohlich, Chihiro Yamaoka and the students and host families who helped with my surveys. I am also indebted to a reviewer of the CJK Proceedings. Needless to say, all shortcomings are mine. My travel to the conference was made possible by generous support from the Associated Kyoto Program and the NRCEA at the University of Hawai'i.
2. In this paper, the phrase "American College students" refers to students from American colleges and universities; their nationality and native languages are varied. About 90% of the students who participated in my surveys are native speakers of English.
3. Because of this sub-grouping, I did not use the data from students who did not belong to any of the three categories for this paper. Therefore, the data presented in this paper are slightly different from those presented in the workshop on June 5, 2006.
4. Note that the question was how much they think they understand when their host family talked to them. Some noted that it is far more difficult to understand the content of a conversation when the host family members talked among themselves.
5. The list is provided in the Appendix. The surveys for the other two groups used a very similar list, although the questionnaires for host families were written in Japanese.
6. Note that this is how they "feel" and does not necessarily reflect their language proficiency.
7. "Making reservations/ordering over the phone" got seven votes too.
8. For more detailed discussion on the survey responses from the host families, see Nemoto (in preparation).
9. Japanese host family members and their students exchange e-mail via cell phone on a daily basis. For example, students inform their family what time they will go home or whether they will eat dinner at home on that day via cell phone text messages.
10. See also Yoshimi (2001).

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Appendix

The list of activities presented in the survey for Program A students

Ordering food in a restaurant
Shopping at a store
Asking directions and understanding what was said
Initiating a conversation
Expressing gratitude
Participating in a conversation at the dinner table
Entertaining people with storytelling
Expressing disagreement
Expressing anger/discomfort
Asking a favor
Resolving misunderstanding
Seeking help
Introducing your own country/culture
Apologizing
Expressing worry/anxiety
Making small talk
Making reservations/ordering over the phone