

## The Impact of a Study/Work Programme in Japan on Interactive Competence in Contact Situations

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Key words: **study/work programme, interactive competence, *hitsudan*, Japanese Language Proficiency Test, Japanese native rater**

The fifteen subjects investigated in this study were students at a Hong Kong university. The subjects had received 460 hours of formal instruction in Japanese and passed the Level Three test of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test before participating in a nine-week study/work programme in Japan. The paper reports on an investigation on what types of interactive competence in Japanese most of the subjects succeed or fail to acquire after the programme. The main data consisting of two sets of written tests, two sets of role-playing tests and two sets of composition exercises before and after the programme were collected and analyzed. Supplementary data from interviews with the subjects after the programme and written feedback from supervisors and host families on the subjects during the programme were also collected.

Although the period of the study/work programme in Japan was relatively short, its impact upon the development of students' interactive competence in Japanese was considerable. As far as linguistic competence is concerned, the most conspicuous gains were in aural comprehension, pronunciation, and intonation. Fluency improved dramatically, but vocabulary, grammar, and reading tests did not furnish comparable results. The subjects acquired confidence to produce longer written texts, but this confidence was not matched by improvements in accuracy. Sociolinguistic competence also improved, since pragmatic competence increased to include finer expressions of refusal, non-verbal features, and the use of back-channelling. In order to solve communication problems, the subjects actively used various communication strategies. They also acquired competence to correct the deficiencies in their lexicon through the use of written characters (*hitsudan*). The subjects also advanced to a considerable extent in their acquisition of sociocultural competence: knowledge of Japan, Japanese way of life, human relations in the work place as well as in home settings, and business customs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recently more and more programmes offered in tertiary institutions throughout the world are providing their students with opportunities to spend some time in the country (countries) where the target language is spoken. Such programmes can contain one of the following components, or their combinations: structured language courses and/or structured academic lectures at a university, observation tours of key industries of the target country, work experience (including formal placement and apprenticeship in a company/companies, and work experience without pay), home-stay programmes, and, of course, sightseeing trips.

A study/work programme abroad is generally credited with creating a very effective environment for learners and providing them with maximum exposure to the language outside the classroom. The belief that it leads learners to attain higher proficiency in the target language has made both teachers and students assume positive attitudes toward such programmes, even in spite of many difficulties that the organizers have to overcome. These problems include arrangements for such programmes in the home country and liaison with overseas receiving institution(s), which require much time and effort on the part of the teachers and administrators involved, as well as obtaining financial support, which is not an easy task. Furthermore, funding fully or partially the necessary expenses of the programmes may place a heavy burden upon the students.

Previous studies investigating second-language acquisition in natural settings where the target language is spoken have frequently dealt with immigrants or long-term sojourners (cf. Ekstrand, 1982; Ioup, 1989; Schmidt, 1983). However, these cases are very different from acquisition by short-term sojourners, such as high-school exchange students or university students in a semester abroad programme.

Recently a number of studies have been conducted to explore linguistic and sociolinguistic development of Australian high-school students who participated in exchange programmes in Japan (cf. Atsuzawa-Windley and Noguchi, 1994; Hashimoto, 1993; Marriott, 1993, 1994, forthcoming a, b and c; Mitsui, 1994). Most of the exchange students stayed with Japanese families and attended local high schools for approximately one year. The previous studies cited above all claimed that exchange students, on the whole, had gained a considerably high level of communicative competence and oral fluency in Japanese. However, they tend to have sociolinguistic deviations related to management of politeness and choice of appropriate honorific forms. According to Marriott (forthcoming b: 22), possible reasons for the deviations are due to the fact that most of them acquired the language not through formal instruction but rather naturalistically, and they rarely received negative feedback from their native-speaker interactants about their choice of honorific forms during their stay in Japan.

In relation to the effects of university students' study abroad programmes on language acquisition, much fewer papers have so far been published. Some studies reported that a period abroad did not provide very effective linguistic environment

for learners. For example, Freed (1990) claimed that the amount of interactive and noninteractive out-of-class contact did not appear to influence the grammatical achievement and oral proficiency of American university students studying French. Focusing on American university students studying Spanish, DeKeyser (1991) reported that a semester abroad did not "necessarily entail a radical change in communication processes (p. 116)."

With regard to the merit and effect of foreign/second-language learning in natural settings, especially in relation to university students' overseas programmes, many important questions have not yet been answered. There are many unanswered questions concerning: 1) what most learners succeed in acquiring; 2) what linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural rules in the target language they fail to acquire; 3) how they develop interactive competence in naturalistic settings such as daily life, family, and educational and work domains; and 4) how the experience of the period abroad affects their motivation. Furthermore, we still possess insufficient knowledge about how their acquisition proceeds (cf. Freed, 1993). Marriott (1994), in a paper on student-exchange programmes between Japan and Australia, also proposes that much more research on study abroad programmes should be carried out in order to answer important questions such as the best age for the students, the optimal length of stay, and the most effective type of programme.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on Neustupný's model of interaction (Neustupný, 1973, 1978 and 1987), which was derived from Hymes (1972a and 1972b), and Neustupný's notion of contact situation (Neustupný, 1985 and 1987). According to Neustupný's model of interaction, interactive competence embraces sociocultural competence and communicative competence, which, in turn, consists of linguistic and sociolinguistic competence. Interactional situations can be divided into native situations and contact situations, in terms of participants' native language and culture. A contact (foreign) situation, in contrast to a native (internal) situation, is a situation in which members of two or more cultures interact (Neustupný, 1985 and 1987). Participants interacting in contact situations, whether they are native or nonnative speakers of the base language, are under greater strain than those in native situations. They have more language problems, communication problems, and interaction problems than in native situations. Because of the presence of "foreign" factors, a contact situation is full of communication problems, which the participants constantly try to remove. Communication problems in contact situations are distinctly different from those in native situations in terms of frequency and pattern.

### **The Present Study**

This paper reports on an investigation of what types of interactive competence in Japanese most of the learners succeed or fail to acquire after staying in Japan for nine weeks.

### Subjects

The fifteen subjects investigated in this study are Hong Kong Chinese female students who were in the third year of a Japanese-language programme at a Hong Kong university. The subjects went to Japan in the summer vacation of 1993 between their second and third year of tertiary education, to participate in a nine-week study/work programme. The programme consisted of: 1) a Japanese-language course at a university (four weeks); 2) a work experience at various companies in Japan (five weeks); and 3) a home-stay (nine weeks, for the whole period of the programme). Previously, only three of these subjects had traveled to Japan for sightseeing purposes and the duration of such previous trips ranged from four to seven days. The study/work period in Japan that is investigated here can therefore be considered as a time during which the subjects experienced intensive exposure to the language and culture of Japan for the first time outside the classroom.

The subjects had received about 460 contact hours of formal instruction in Japanese language in their first and second years before participating in the study/work programme in Japan. Though individual differences existed, the Japanese-language proficiency of all the subjects can be roughly categorized as lower intermediate to intermediate level. In December 1992 (six months before undertaking the trip to Japan), all of them took and passed the Level Three test of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, devised and administered by the Association of International Education, and the Japan Foundation. Table 1 shows the results from the December 1992 test. The test consists of the following three components: 1) vocabulary (100

Table 1 Results of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test: Level Three Test (December 1992)

Subjects	Vocabulary	Listening	Reading & Grammar	Total	(%)
S01	89	76	152	317	(79.3)
S02	69	60	125	254	(63.5)
S03	80	70	136	286	(71.5)
S04	84	73	145	302	(75.5)
S05	75	62	139	276	(69.0)
S06	79	71	136	286	(71.5)
S07	73	65	130	268	(67.0)
S08	78	68	141	287	(71.8)
S09	69	59	130	258	(64.5)
S10	75	69	139	283	(70.8)
S11	82	68	140	290	(72.5)
S12	83	74	143	300	(75.0)
S13	74	64	129	267	(66.8)
S14	80	67	135	282	(70.5)
S15	82	72	136	290	(72.5)
Average results	78	68	137	283	(70.8)
Total	100	100	200	400	

points); 2) listening comprehension (100 points); and 3) reading comprehension and grammar (200 points). The passing mark for the Level Three test is 260, that is, 65% of the total points (400). It should be noted that this test does not include speaking and writing components.

All fifteen subjects are proficient in Chinese (both Cantonese and Mandarin) and English.

### **Data Collection**

In this study, the main data, consisting of two sets of written tests, two sets of role-playing tests, and two sets of composition exercises before and after the subjects' trip to Japan, were collected and analysed. Follow-up interviews after the role-playing tests were conducted and recorded. Supplementary data from interviews with the subjects one month after their return to Hong Kong, and written feedback from supervisors and host families in Japan on the subjects during the study/work period were also collected.

#### **Written Tests**

Before and after the study/work period in Japan, the subjects undertook two sets of written tests. They were the past papers of the Level Two test of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test conducted in 1990 and 1992, consisting of: 1) a vocabulary test; 2) a listening comprehension test; and 3) a reading comprehension and grammar test. In the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, the Level Two test is one level higher than the Level Three test. As the average results of all the examinees were 252.3 (63.1%) in 1989, 248.2 (62.1%) in 1990, 248.5 (62.2%) in 1991, and 248.8 (62.2%) in 1992 out of a total 400 (100%), it can be claimed that the level of the test changed slightly, if at all (The Japan Foundation 1990, 1991, 1992 and 1993). The tests contained multiple-choice type questions and did not assess the subjects' production skills but only their reception skills.

As stated above, since all the subjects had passed the Level Three test of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test in December 1992, the Level Two test (one level higher) was considered appropriate to measure the subjects' reception skills in June and October 1993, before and after the study/work programme. Since the format and three components tested at all levels in the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test are identical, the subjects were familiar with the format of the test.

One drawback of using the past papers of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, however, is that the distribution of marks for each question is not clearly stated. Therefore, the subjects' results in the two sets of tests will be presented in Table 2 in percentage of numbers of correct answers against the total number of questions in each component of the test.

#### **Role Playing**

Role-playing tests which covered five situations were administered to the subjects before and after the study/work period in Japan. In each situation a native speaker

and a subject formed a pair and interacted with each other. The native speaker, playing five parts that differentiated age, social status, and relation to the subject, requested, invited, and/or asked each subject to complete a task. Each subject was given an instruction written on role cards to turn down a request, invitation, and/or proposal from the native speaker by giving appropriate excuses. Refusals require a considerably high level of pragmatic competence. As Beebe et al. state, "refusals are a major cross-cultural 'sticking point' for many nonnative speakers . . . and often involve a long negotiated sequence (Beebe et al., 1990: 56)." In order to refuse appropriately and politely in Japanese without offending one's interlocutor, one has to carefully choose appropriate expressions and style according to sociolinguistic variables such as the situation and status of the interlocutor. A certain degree of indirectness, not only through linguistic expressions but also by means of nonverbal signals, is also required to refuse appropriately. The purpose of the tests was to examine the subjects' interactive competence, especially sociolinguistic awareness and competence in appropriately using various levels of expressions and honorific forms in Japanese, before and after the study/work period in Japan.

All the conversations and follow-up interviews after the role-playing tests were recorded. The five situations were as follows:

1. The supervisor in your company requested you to work overtime until eight o'clock in the evening on the following Friday.
2. The mother of your host family asked you to go with her to a piano concert in which her child would perform. The concert is from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. on the following Sunday.
3. After finishing work at 5:30 p.m., one of your colleagues invited you to dinner together with two other colleagues.
4. Your friend invited you to participate in a student party scheduled for the following Saturday evening.
5. The child of your host family (aged seven to eight years) asked whether you could take him/her to a toy shop in a department store on Sunday afternoon.

### **Composition**

In order to compare the subjects' written production levels before and after the study/work period in Japan, they were asked to complete two sets of composition exercises. The first composition was about what the subjects expected from the programme in Japan and the second composition concerned their experience in the country.

### **The Interview**

Twelve of the fifteen subjects were interviewed by the researcher one month after their return to Hong Kong. Three subjects could not attend the interview session because they had to attend other classes. Each subject was interviewed for about ten minutes and asked questions related to her experiences in Japan and her Japanese-language study — for example, how she evaluated her stay in Japan, how she assessed her Japanese-language proficiency after her stay in Japan, and how she solved

language and communication problems during the period in Japan.

#### **Written Feedback from Supervisors and Host Families**

Simple questionnaire forms were sent to eleven offices where the subjects underwent work-experience programmes for five weeks. Supervisors in the offices in charge of the programme were requested to freely comment on the subjects' work performance and their Japanese-language performance by making a comparison of the students' level at the beginning and at the end of the work-experience programme.

Similar questionnaires were also sent to twenty-one host families where the subjects stayed during their sojourn in Japan. Host parents were requested to comment generally on the study/work programme and to express their observation on how the subject had improved their Japanese-language proficiency during their stay in Japan.

The return rate of the questionnaires was 100%.

### **Findings**

#### **Results of the Written Tests**

Table 2 shows the subjects' results in the first and second tests before and after their stay in Japan. The figures indicate the percentage of correct answers against the total number of questions for each component.

Both before and after their stay in Japan, the results of vocabulary component is highest, followed by those of reading and grammar comprehension and listening comprehension components. In a large-scale analytical survey of the 1991 test results conducted by the Japan Foundation, this tendency was also reported as distinctively unique to the group of examinees whose first language is Chinese (The Japan Foundation, 1993: 68–75).

The vocabulary test contained multiple-choice type questions to check the examinees' receptive knowledge of words and Chinese characters. In this regard Chinese students have an advantage because of their background knowledge of characters. This is confirmed by the official statistics, which show that the average results of all examinees on the vocabulary test (Level Two) ranged from 61% to 65% in the four consecutive years 1989–92 (The Japan Foundation, 1990, 1991, 1992 and 1993). However, the average results achieved by the subjects in this study, in contrast, were much higher, that is, 85.0% and 87.2% in the first and second sets of tests, respectively (see Table 2).

Most of the situations and conversations presented in the listening comprehension test were related to everyday speech events and authentic interactions in Japanese, and were intended to test the examinees' knowledge of sociolinguistic and sociocultural rules. The official statistics also reported the biggest gap in the results for the listening comprehension test across four consecutive years (1989–92) to fall between the average results of examinees in Japan and those in overseas countries (The Japan Foundation, 1990, 1991, 1992 and 1993). While the former average was as high as 70% to 78%, the average for the latter group was only around 55% to 67%. The average results for the subjects in this study were also comparable to those of the

Table 2 Results of Tests Taken before and after Trip to Japan (June 1993, October 1993)

Subject	Vocabulary		Listening		Reading & Grammar		Total	
	1st %	2nd %	1st %	2nd %	1st %	2nd %	1st %	2nd %
S01	92.9	93.9	71.4	79.2	80.5	78.8	81.6	84.0
S02	74.3	75.4	42.9	58.3	56.1	65.4	57.8	66.4
S03	82.9	87.7	57.1	66.7	63.4	73.1	67.8	75.8
S04	87.1	93.9	61.9	70.8	70.7	75.0	73.2	79.9
S05	85.7	84.7	57.1	75.0	67.5	67.3	70.1	75.7
S06	88.6	89.4	52.4	66.7	67.5	67.3	69.5	74.5
S07	82.9	84.7	47.6	66.7	63.4	67.9	64.6	72.9
S08	88.6	89.2	52.4	70.8	67.5	73.1	69.5	77.7
S09	80.0	76.4	38.1	54.2	58.5	65.4	58.9	65.3
S10	84.3	87.7	52.4	66.7	63.4	71.2	66.7	75.2
S11	85.7	89.2	57.1	75.0	73.2	73.1	72.0	79.1
S12	91.4	93.9	71.4	83.3	75.6	75.0	79.5	84.1
S13	77.1	80.0	42.9	62.5	70.7	65.4	63.6	69.3
S14	87.1	89.2	61.9	70.8	68.3	69.2	72.4	76.4
S15	85.7	92.3	57.1	70.8	75.6	71.2	72.8	78.1
Average	85.0	87.2	54.9	69.2	68.1	70.6	69.3	78.0
Number of Questions	70	65	21	24	41	52		

latter group, that is, 54.9% and 69.2% in the first and second sets of tests, respectively. The wide gap between the results of the two groups is probably because learners in overseas countries have limited input of Japanese and find Japanese in authentic situations very difficult to comprehend, whereas learners in Japan can more easily understand Japanese in these situations.

The average results for the subjects in the reading and grammar test (69.3% in the first test and 78.0% in second test), are comparable to the average results across the four consecutive years (1989–92) for all examinees of the test.

Table 2 shows that after the study/work period in Japan the subjects performed better in all three components of the test, especially in the listening comprehension test of the second test, where the results were 14.3% higher than in the first test. This, along with the results quoted in the Japan Foundation's statistics above, supports the hypothesis that learners' exposure to authentic situations and interaction through actual interaction in Japan enhances their listening comprehension ability (e.g., Ellis, 1985 and 1994; Gass and Madden, 1985; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991). Although there was no remarkable improvement noted in the other two components, the subjects seemed to have improved their listening comprehension skills during their stay in Japan to a considerable extent. However, whether their other communication and interaction skills in Japanese also improved cannot be established through this type of test.

### Role Playing

Anderson (1990: 5–6) states that in order to acquire full communicative competence, foreigners as well as children must learn to speak not only grammatically, but also appropriately. He stresses the importance of the knowledge of the register variation. According to Canale (1983), sociolinguistic competence includes the knowledge in which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts (Canale, 1983: 7). Comparing the first and the second role-playing tests before and after the overseas travel period, the subjects in the second test demonstrated a stronger awareness of sociolinguistic rules, particularly of register variation.

In the first test, eleven subjects simply repeated similar expressions of apology in all five situations. The expressions employed to give excuses were limited to basic conversational phrases mostly in the formal/polite style. For apology, “I am very sorry, but . . .” (*sumimasen ga . . . / sumimasen, demo . . .*) was the only expression used. For excuses, the following simple conversational phrases were used: “because I am busy” (*chotto isogashii node . . .*), “it is not convenient for me today” (*kyoo wa tsugoo ga warui desu*), and “because I have something to do” (*chotto yooji ga arimasu kara . . .*). These expressions are too direct when addressed to a supervisor (in situation 1), and too formal and unfriendly when used with host parents, colleagues, and friends, as in the situations 2, 3, and 4. When used with children, as in situation 5, they are equally inappropriate.

Only four subjects in the first test attempted to differentiate speech according to the situation. Talking to supervisors in situation 1, these four subjects used more polite expressions and honorific forms than for the other situations. For expressing apology, in order to show their commitment and responsibility, very polite expressions such as “I am terribly sorry, but . . .” (*hontoo ni mooshiwake arimasen ga . . .*) were used by two subjects. For giving excuses, more specific and detailed accounts were given by two subjects using polite expressions such as, “because I have a night course to attend in the evening” (*yoru gakkoo e kayotte imasu node*) and “I have promised to attend a friend’s wedding dinner” (*sono yoru wa tomodachi no kekkon hiroo-en e iku yakusoku o shita node*).

However, even the four subjects who demonstrated stronger sociolinguistic awareness did not differentiate their utterances in situations 2 to 5. Generally, their expressions sounded too formal, because they used polite/formal style rather than a casual/informal style, which is inappropriate in these situations. In other words, these better performers could adjust their speech appropriately in formal situations, but not in informal situations. They were confident in speaking in formal style, the style that was more frequently practised in classroom settings in Hong Kong. Models for informal situations were not easily available in overseas settings. Three subjects reported in follow-up interviews that they preferred speaking Japanese in formal style because it was safer and less offending to one’s interlocutor(s). Two subjects said that they spoke in formal style because they thought being polite would be evaluated more positively by the Japanese people than being rude.

In the second test, however, all subjects made some stylistic adjustments to their speech according to the age and social status of the participants in the five situations. Moreover, three Japanese native raters after listening to the two sets of data confirmed that all the subjects' intonation and pronunciation in the second test were more natural and fluent than those found in the first test. In situation 1, all the subjects used polite expressions appropriately to apologize, and gave specific and detailed excuses similar to the four better performers in the first test. Five subjects gave alternatives, such as a display of willingness to work overtime on another day of the week. In situations 2 to 4, most of the subjects succeeded in expressing apology and excuses in an informal/casual style, using a more friendly tone than their speech in situation 1. However, some subjects' utterances mixed formal and informal styles. The most notable changes in the second test in comparison to the first test were as follows:

- a. use of informal/casual register in situations 2, 3, 4 and 5;
- b. the content of excuses became more personal and specific, and the reason for turning down the request, invitation, or proposal sounded more sensible;
- c. almost all the subjects gave alternatives in their speech, and about 15 cases in the entire role-playing situations in 2, 3 and 4 (totaling 45 situations) showed that the subjects negotiated with the native participants and reached a mutual decision on another date/time or other activities;
- d. the subjects used communication strategies such as requests for clarification, other-repetition, comprehension checks, and confirmation;
- e. the tone of voice was softer, and facial expressions were more relaxed;
- f. more back-channelling expressions, such as, "yes" (*ee, hai hai*), and, "is that right?" (*soo desu ka, hontoo?*) were used;
- g. more nonverbal signals, such as smiling, nodding, and gestures appeared; and
- h. the subjects employed female informal/casual speech, indicated by the use of final particles at the end of the sentences as in *ii wa yo* (informal, female), instead of *ii yo* (informal, male) or *ii desu yo* (formal, neutral). (All three sentences mean "That's all right with me.")

In situation 5, stylistic adjustment to the informal situation in which a child was a participant was the most drastic. Particularly when expressing excuses, four subjects demonstrated their sociocultural knowledge about Japanese children and their close relation with mothers, saying, "Do you remember. Your mother always says that you have got so many toys. You don't have to buy toys any more," and "If you want to buy anything, you should talk to your mother." All subjects tried to employ informal/casual speech in situation 5, though some subjects' utterances were a mixture of formal and informal styles.

On the whole, therefore, the subjects indicated higher proficiency in the Japanese language in relation to linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural rules in the second test. As I listed above, they had shown remarkable improvement in sociolinguistic awareness, particularly in register variation (items a and h), pragmatic competence (items b, c, e, f and g), and strategic competence (item d). However, many grammatical errors and sociolinguistic deviations, such as inappropriately

mixing informal and formal forms, were also recorded. As for mixing the polite and plain styles, and inappropriate selection of speech styles, Hashimoto (1993) and Atsuzawa-Windley and Noguchi (1994) also reported it as characteristic behaviour of former exchange students after their experience in Japan. The three Japanese raters, after listening to the two sets of audio-taped data, noted and confirmed all the items except items e and g as improved points in the subjects' performance of the second test compared with the first test. Unfortunately, the data in the present study was not video recorded, so the subjects' acquisition of nonverbal signals such as items e and g were not noted by the native raters.

### Composition

The first set of data (before the trip to Japan) was characterized by basic vocabulary, simple sentence patterns, and short sentences. Since the subjects wrote their composition in the form requested by the receiving institution in Japan (one A4-sized paper), the length of the composition samples was short (approximately 400 to 700 Japanese letters), and the content was also simple. The grammatical errors found in the samples were related to the use of tense and aspect, verb forms, and polite/plain forms. Furthermore, some examples of errors due to the lack of understanding of the meanings of lexically similar words such as *rikai suru* / *ryookai suru* (understand), *tokubetsu ni* (especially) / *betsu ni* (not especially), and *mezurashii* (rare) / *kichoo-na* (precious) appeared. Despite such errors, the samples in the first set of data were all comprehensible and coherent.

As for the length of the composition in the second set of data (after the subjects returned from Japan), the researcher regulated it to be between 800 and 1,200 letters. However, the subjects' compositions turned out to be much longer (approximately 1,200 to 1,800 letters) and contained information concerning the subjects' activities, experiences, and feelings during their programmes in Japan. Linguistically, as a whole, the subjects actively employed newly acquired and more advanced vocabulary, particularly idioms and colloquial expressions. The examples of advanced idioms include *doji o suru* (make a terrible mistake), *urochoro suru* (hang around), *yarikirenai kimochi deshita* (felt unbearable), and *urotaete imasu* (become confused). Some subjects, however, could not distinguish the meaning and usage of seemingly similar idioms such as *ki ni iru* (be fond of), *ki ni naru* (feel uneasy about), *ki ni suru* (be sensitive about), *ki ga au* (be congenial with), *ki ga aru* (have a liking for), and *ki ga mukanai* (do not feel like). A few better performers, having applied newly acquired linguistic rules carefully and effectively, produced written work in Japanese of an advanced standard. Though some minor grammatical errors appeared, the few better performers demonstrated that their written production skills had improved greatly in Japan. On the other hand, the majority of the subjects who had been less successful in acquiring fundamental grammatical rules of the Japanese language produced many errors in the written samples. Consequently some parts of their compositions were not intelligible. It should be noted that these errors were made not only due to their lack of mastery of the new vocabulary and grammatical rules, but also due to their lack of control of the previously learned, elementary rules. For

instance, some subjects mistook *mondai* (problem) for *shitsumon* (question), and *ureshii* (happy) for *tanoshii* (enjoyable). The subjects also intended to express too many things as well as their feelings about the programme in Japan, which unfortunately required more advanced level of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary than they possessed. Lightbown and Spada (1993: 53) actually states that this kind of “increase in error is sometimes actually an indication of progress.” Typical grammatical errors, however, included tense, informal/formal verb endings, auxiliary verbs (*-te morau*, *-te ageru*, *-te yaru*, *-te kureru*, etc.), adjectival forms, conjunctions, and particles.

The content of the second set of data showed the subjects’ stronger sociolinguistic awareness relating to register variation (junior-senior, male-female, standard Japanese-dialects), non-verbal communication, and choice of appropriate topics in a certain situation. As for the sociocultural aspect, the subjects also displayed considerable improvement (Neustupný, 1987). Most of them wrote about the Japanese way of life, way of thinking, customs, festivals, tradition, or food. Some of them touched upon human relations in the family and at work in Japan in comparison with those in Hong Kong. A few of them were surprised to find that young female workers were expected to pour tea every morning for all the male colleagues, even if they were equally as educated and qualified as their male counterparts.

All subjects reported in their second composition exercises that their motivation to study the language, people, society, and culture of Japan has become much stronger after the programme in Japan.

### The Interview

All of the twelve subjects who were interviewed evaluated the study/work programme in Japan as highly beneficial, considering it one of the most precious and unforgettable experiences they had ever had. (Three subjects could not attend the interview since they had to attend other classes.) They enjoyed meeting many people, particularly Japanese university students. Some subjects reported that the most rewarding experience was when they were treated as members of the team at the workplace to which they were assigned. All subjects said that they frequently spoke on customs and current issues in Japan and Hong Kong in Japanese with young colleagues after work. These Japanese colleagues answered their questions about Japanese sociolinguistic and sociocultural behaviour, and were always willing to explain and correct their mistakes in Japanese. Namely, as reported in Hashimoto’s (1993: 222) study, frequently discussed topics in contact situations seem to be related to the language, society, people, and customs of the native cultures of the participants.

As for the university programme, all the subjects claimed that they had enjoyed participating in discussions with Japanese students, and chat first-hand experience of cooking Japanese food, attending a tea ceremony, wearing a *kimono* and writing *haiku* poems had been very interesting and would be unforgettable. Some of them found, however, that some lectures on Japanese history, literature, and culture were too difficult to follow, because their knowledge of Japanese was insufficient to appre-

ciate the material presented in the lecture.

All subjects assessed that their listening and speaking levels in Japanese had improved after the period in Japan. However, they themselves realized that they have difficulty in expressing themselves verbally, as well as in writing, matters of a more complicated or technical nature appropriately and precisely. Some subjects expressed their concern in maintaining their present level of competence in speaking Japanese, since much less opportunity existed for them to interact with Japanese people in Hong Kong.

In order to solve language/communication problems during their stay in Japan, the subjects often requested clarification and/or repetition from Japanese participants. One of the most interesting points reported by all the subjects was that they communicated with the Japanese participants by writing Chinese characters (*hitsudan*) when they could not understand each other. This is one of the unique features in Chinese-Japanese contact situations, which needs to be explored more in details in the future. Fan also points out that the participants' shared knowledge of Chinese characters (*kanji*) plays an important role in Chinese-Japanese interaction (Fan, 1992: 293).

The subjects reported that toward the end of their stay in Japan they could cope with most of the everyday situations in Japanese at home and at work, provided that they were interacting in dyadic or small-group situations. In other words, the subjects could solve communication problems in one-to-one contact situations in which native speakers adjusted their speech to facilitate the subjects' understanding. On the other hand, they had difficulty in comprehending conversations in which a number of Japanese participants were involved. This is partly because the subjects could rarely have a chance to negotiate for comprehensible input, and partly because Japanese participants did not modify their utterance to make it comprehensible to the subjects. Similar results have also been reported by Lightbown and Spada (1993: 71–72) as characteristic features of second-language acquisition in natural settings.

#### **Feedback from Supervisors and Host Families**

In the questionnaires sent to eleven companies and twenty-one host families, the Japanese interactants who had constant contact with the subjects during the programme commented as follows:

- a. the subjects' Japanese-language proficiency at the beginning of the programme was rather poor, and the Japanese participants frequently could not understand them;
- b. the subjects' intonation, pronunciation, and accent became more natural toward the end of the programme;
- c. the subjects had acquired enough vocabulary and expressions to communicate well with the Japanese by the end of the programme, and some of them could even joke in Japanese;
- d. the subjects seemed to be more confident and relaxed when they spoke Japanese toward the end of the programme;
- e. the subjects were very diligent and always carried small notebooks in which to

- jot down new words and expressions;
- f. the subjects often looked up words in dictionaries and asked questions after work as well as in home settings;
  - g. Japanese colleagues and members of the host families often corrected the subjects' mistakes in Japanese, and explained/discussed points of grammar and usage;
  - h. the Japanese at work and at home enjoyed exchanging information concerning Hong Kong and Japan;
  - i. in the work-place settings, the subjects engaged in the following jobs: clerical work, on-line operation, telephone conversation with customers/clients, filing, translation, and Japanese word processing; and,
  - j. in the host families, the subjects participated in activities such as cooking, cleaning, shopping, and travelling.

The results of the feedback show very useful information not only on the subjects' acquisition of interactive competence in Japanese, but also on the activities in which the subjects engaged during the programme. The subjects' improvement on their oral competence in Japanese during the nine-week programme was actually observed and evaluated by their Japanese interlocutors (items a–d). They also gained confidence in speaking Japanese, and some of them could even joke in Japanese. They used various learning strategies to improve their Japanese, and also often sought assistance from Japanese co-workers and family members when they had questions related to the Japanese language (items e and f). They received negative feedback on their mistakes in Japanese and explanation about the Japanese language from their Japanese interactants (item g). The studies conducted by Marriott (forthcoming b) and Hashimoto (1993) also reported that many Japanese host family members acted as 'attentive caretakers' to assist the subjects' learning of the language. Both native and nonnative participants in contact situations in this study often spoke on topics related to Japan and Hong Kong (item h). Items i and j provide us with interesting information on the jobs and activities in which the subjects engaged during the programme.

## CONCLUSION

This study has revealed a number of interesting points concerning interactive competence of the subjects from Hong Kong in contact situations with the Japanese before and after a study programme in Japan. As far as linguistic competence is concerned, the most conspicuous gains were in aural comprehension, pronunciation, and intonation. Fluency improved dramatically but vocabulary, grammar, and reading tests did not furnish comparable results. The subjects acquired confidence to produce longer written texts, but this confidence was not matched by improvements in accuracy.

Sociolinguistic competence improved since pragmatic competence increased to include finer expressions of refusal, non-verbal features, and the use of back-channelling. In order to solve communication problems, the subjects actively used com-

munication strategies such as seeking assistance, comprehension checks and requests for clarification and repetition. They also acquired competence to correct the deficiencies in their lexicon through the use of written characters (*hitsudan*), even when conversing.

The subjects also advanced to a considerable extent in their acquisition of socio-cultural competence: knowledge of Japan, Japanese ways of life, human relations in the work place as well as in home settings, and business customs. Data derived from the composition and interview revealed that the subjects had become strongly motivated to continue improving their competence in the Japanese language.

Although the period of the study/work programme in Japan was only nine weeks, the impact of the programme upon the development of the subjects' interactive competence in Japanese was considerable. Pica (1987: 17) emphasizes the importance of social interaction in second-language acquisition, stating that "languages are learned, not through memorization of their rules and structures, but through internalizing these rules from input made comprehensible within a context of social interaction." In order to further develop the subjects' production skills both in speech and in writing, to reinforce and consolidate their linguistic skills, and to facilitate their acquisition of sociolinguistic and sociocultural rules, a variety of meaningful contexts that contain appropriate linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural rules must be provided to the subjects in classrooms.

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