

English Proficiency Improvements of Advanced Students in EFL Contexts

Michiaki Matsumoto

1. Introduction

An increasing number of recent studies have investigated the development of Japanese college students' English proficiency (Midorikawa 2004, Shibata & Inoue 2005, Kumamoto University General English Education Research Group 2006). These studies discussed the development of English proficiency based on TOEIC scores¹, and revealed that Japanese college freshman and sophomore students in EFL contexts do not show significant improvements in TOEIC scores, especially in the reading section of TOEIC. The insignificant improvement of TOEIC score would be attributed to various factors, i. e., motivation, learning strategy, teaching methods, duration of English study, and thus, cannot be attributed to one specific factor. While they do not achieve remarkable improvement in the reading skill, listening skill tends to improve significantly as indicated in the listening scores in TOEIC. Kumamoto University General English Education Research Group (2006) discussed that the improvements of students' listening scores would be attributed to the increased number of English speaking classes by native English speaking teachers, establishing of listening specific classes and the adoption of a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) system.

The studies on the improvement of the English proficiency of Japanese college students in a short-term study abroad program also revealed that all English skills do not develop equally in the limited duration of the programs (Hashimoto 1992, Tanaka & Ellis 2003, Nakayama & Yoshimura 2006). Nakayama & Yoshimura (2006) discuss that the writing skill of Japanese college students improved after the three-week summer English study program, even though the program was not designed to improve writing skill. These studies imply that it is not an easy goal for Japanese college students to improve their English proficiency in EFL and ESL contexts. This appears to be the case even though more and more college students take TOEIC in recent years.

The present paper examines the development of advanced level students' English proficiency measured by TOEIC IP, and discusses the correlation between their English proficiency and duration of English study. In particular, I will discuss what effect what is called the Advanced English Communication course has on the development of the English listening skill. In the following section, I will survey the previous studies that investigated the improvement of Japanese college students' English proficiency in EFL contexts. I will also briefly discuss the development of English proficiency of Japanese

college students who participated in short-term English study programs. In section 3, I will discuss the characteristics of the advanced classes and the curriculum of the Career English Major at Kyushu Lutheran College. Then I will analyze the TOEIC IP results of the 2007 and 2008 advanced students in section 4. Section 5 deals with the advanced students' self-assessment of their English proficiency. In the final section, I will present the conclusion and future research questions.

2. Previous Studies

Many recent studies on the development of the English proficiency of Japanese college students have been discussed based on the score changes in TOEIC. These studies investigate if there are any significant differences between two TOEIC scores which are conducted as pre-test and as post-test.

Shibata & Inoue (2005) examined whether listening skill would improve in five months when students were instructed using context-based curriculum. They compared the two TOEIC listening section scores: one was the scores of the students having been instructed context-based curriculum, and the other was the scores of students instructed with using the textbook for TOEIC test. They first administrated the TOEIC listening test to all the subjects of the experiment, and then the subjects were divided into the two groups based on the scores: the experimental group and the control group. There was no significant difference between the listening skills of the experimental group and those of the control group ($t=0.678$, $p=0.499$). This means that the listening skills of the two groups were the same in the beginning of the instruction. Then, the same instructor taught the two groups once a week for five months. One session was 90 minutes, and the total time of the lectures was twenty-four hours. The instructor used context-based curriculum that was developed for the project in the experimental group class, and a popular textbook for TOEIC test in the control group class.

After five months of lectures, the students of the two groups took the TOEIC listening test as the post test, and the scores were analyzed by analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). ANCOVA revealed that there was no significant difference in scores between the experimental group and the control group, ($F_{1, 139}=0.196$, $p=0.659$). However, interaction effect between groups and pre-post tests was observed, even if the significant difference did not reach a significant level, ($F_{1, 139}=3.646$, $p=0.058$). These results imply that both teaching methods, context-based curriculum and textbook for TOEIC test curriculum, had positive effects on improving students' listening skills, but there was a possibility that context-based curriculum might have more positive effect on improving listening skills. Thus, Shibata and Inoue (2005) concluded that context-based curriculum had the same positive effect as textbook for a TOEIC test curriculum. They also implied the possibility that context-based curriculum might be more effective for college students to improve their

listening skill in the long run.

Another investigation of the development of college students' English proficiency using TOEIC was by Kumamoto University General English Education Research Group (2006). Their research question was whether Japanese college students show any improvements in their English proficiency after taking general English classes for two years. They analyzed 102 Japanese university students' average scores of TOEIC IP test, and reported that their scores improved slightly from 445.64 in their first year to 455.00 in their second year. The improvement of the scores was not statistically significant ($t=1.383$, $p=0.170$). However, they reported that students' average scores in the listening section improved from 248.92 to 260.58. One-paired t test revealed that the improvement was statistically significant ($t=2.688$, $p=0.0084$). On the other hand, the average scores in the reading section declined slightly from 196.72 in the first year to 194.41 in the second year, although the decline was not statistically significant ($t=0.539$, $p=0.591$). They (2006:56) stated that it could be concluded that the students' English proficiency did not significantly improved after taking general English classes for two years.

Kumamoto University General English Education Research Group (2006) further examined the scores that were classified by levels of English proficiency. They divided 102 students into three levels based on the scores of TOEIC IP that the students took in their first year. The three groups were low (300 – 390), mid (400–495), and high levels (more than 500). Then, the scores were analyzed by the levels. The statistical analyses revealed that the improvements of the scores in the listening section were statistically significant for low-level students ($t=3.264$, $p=0.003$). However, their scores in the reading section and the total score did not improve significantly. As for the mid-level students, the average scores in the listening section, in the reading section and the total scores improved, but the improvements were not statistically significant. The analysis revealed that high-level students' average total scores declined from 554.821 to 536.964. This decline was statistically insignificant. On the other hand, the average scores in the reading section declined drastically from 260.357 to 236.78, and the decline was statistically significant ($t=2.684$, $p=0.012$). The scores in the listening section improved from 294.464 to 300.179, but the difference was not statistically significant. Kumamoto University General English Education Research Group (2006: 61) stated that these results indicated how difficult it is for Japanese university students to improve their English proficiency just by taking general English classes in colleges. However, they also mentioned that the improvements of students' listening scores would be attributed to the increased number of English speaking classes by native English speaking teachers, establishing of listening specific classes and the adoption of a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) system.

3. The Current Study

The current study investigates if the advanced level students taking the intensive English classes show any progress in the English proficiency measured by the scores of TOEIC IP. The advanced students are nine students who enrolled in the Career English major at Kyushu Lutheran College in 2007 and thirteen students who enrolled in 2008. The study also discusses the characteristics of the English classes of the Career English major, and examines the effect of the English classes on the improvement of the four skills of English proficiency: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

3.1. The Advanced Classes

The advanced classes were created for the freshman and the sophomore students of the Career English major at Kyushu Lutheran College. The advanced class is introduced to incoming freshmen before the new student orientation, and they are encouraged to take an interview conducted by native English speaking teachers. Only one advanced class is organized for each year and the number of the students in the advanced class is limited to less than fifteen. Those who would like to join the advanced class take the short English interview conducted by two native English speaking teachers who teach the advanced class in the first and second years. The interviewers evaluate each student's English listening and speaking skills and decide if they can keep up with the advanced classes. The students also take a placement test that is utilized for placing students into other English classes. A few students who get high scores in the placement test, but do not initially interview are also encouraged to interview for the advanced class. In 2007, TOEIC IP was used as the placement test, but implementing TOEIC IP during the orientation was difficult because of the limited time of the orientation. Thus, CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication), which takes an average of less than 60 minutes, has been used as a placement test since 2008.

3.2. The Curriculum

One of the characteristics of the advanced classes is the number of the English classes taught by the two native English speaking teachers. The classes meet three times per week in the first and second years, and the same native English speaking teacher teaches the class throughout the year. In the first year, the classes mainly focus on the improvement of oral communication skills, how to use vocabulary to improve oral conversation skill, and basic grammar. In the end of the first academic year, the advanced students are evaluated for qualification to study in the advanced class in the second year. A few students in the intermediate class transfer to the advanced class, if their final grades in the intermediate English communication class indicate proficiency to study in the advanced class. The advanced class in the second year also meets three times a week, and another native English speaking teacher teaches the students how to deliver presentations and discuss issues in

English, as well as how to improve their speaking and listening skills.

In addition to the advanced English communication classes, the advanced students take another small-sized English class by a native English speaking teacher. The class meets once a week throughout the year and the main focus of the class is to develop the English communication skills, English pronunciation, and English grammar. The instructor of the class is not the same native English speaking teacher as in the advanced English communication class in the first year. Therefore, the advanced students have four classes per week to study English with the two different native English speaking teachers in their first year.

The advanced students also take English classes taught by Japanese English teachers twice a week in their first and second years. The courses originally focus on developing both reading and writing skills, but its focus has been shifted to the improvement of reading skills. The classroom activities are composed of careful reading and autonomous learning. In the first year classes, the students read some articles in newspapers and websites, and translate them into Japanese. As training for autonomous learning, a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) system is used. The students access various questions of English grammar, English listening comprehension and English reading items and solve them at their individual paces. The results and detailed explanations are provided soon after they answer the questions. The total number of lessons is 140. Most students finish all the lessons at the end of the second semester. The students are also encouraged to study using the system in their free time. The course in the second year focuses on developing scanning and skimming of English materials. Accordingly, the total number of English courses that the advanced students take is six in the first year and five in their second year.

4. TOEIC Results

4.1. Advanced Students in 2007

Out of 43 students of the Career English Major, nine students were enrolled in the advanced class in 2007. They all had the interviews by the native English speaking teachers and were certified as the advanced students. The students took TOEIC IP as the placement test just after they entered the college. They took their second TOEIC IP at the end of the first semester and the third TOEIC IP at the end of the second semester in the 2007 academic year. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the advanced students' second and third TOEIC IP results:

Table 1. TOEIC IP results of the 2007 Advanced Students

	Total Score		Listening Score		Reading Score	
	2 nd TOEIC	3 rd TOEIC	2 nd TOEIC	3 rd TOEIC	2 nd TOEIC	3 rd TOEIC
	July 2007	January 2008	July 2007	January 2008	July 2007	January 2008
Mean	410.00	465.56	253.89	281.67	156.11	183.89
Std. Deviation	69.911	57.903	18.591	26.101	34.440	51.343
Minimum	290	410	150	250	110	120
Maximum	510	605	315	320	215	295
N	9	9	9	9	9	9

The average total score increased from 410.00 to 465.56. The average score in the listening section increased from 253.89 to 281.67. Additionally, the average score in the reading section increased from 156.11 to 183.89. It should be noted that the standard deviation of the listening score got smaller in the third TOEIC IP. This may be due to the increase of spoken English contact in the advanced classes and in the freshman seminar in which the advanced students were exposed to spoken English by native English speaking teachers. When they were high-school students, there might have been few English classes that mainly focused on English communication or were taught all in English. After they were enrolled in the advanced class and in the freshman seminar, they had four English classes per week, in which all class activities, including the directions by the instructors, were made in English. The exposure to spoken English in the classes might enhance the students' listening skill homogeneously, and the standard deviation of the listening score got smaller. Contrary to the listening score, the standard deviation of the reading score became larger from 34.440 to 51.343. This may be due to the fact that it is difficult for Japanese college students to maintain their English ability, especially the reading skill, in college years unless they make their effort, (e.g., Nakayama and Yoshimura 2006:6, Kumamoto University General English Education Research Group, 2006: 60-61).

Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was performed to examine if there are any statistically significant improvements in the differences between the two scores³. No statistically significant improvement was found in the total scores between the second and the third TOEIC IP, $z=-1.718$, $p>.05$. The statistic analysis also revealed that no significant improvements were found in the reading score, $z=-1.367$, $p>.05$, and in the listening score, $z=-1.843$, $p>.05$. These results are expected because it is difficult for college students learning English in the EFL contexts to achieve a significant improvement on TOEIC scores in such a short period (cf. Kumamoto University General English Education Research Group (2006).

4.2. Advanced Students in 2008

In 2008 academic year, thirteen students out of 53 were selected as the advanced students. In the same way as the 2007 advanced students, they all took the interviews by two native

English speaking teachers, and were certified as the advanced level. Instead of TOEIC IP, CASEC was used as the placement test in 2007. Therefore, the first TOEIC IP that the 2008 advanced students took was implemented at the end of the first semester in 2008. Before they took their first TOEIC IP, they studied TOEIC-like questions in Reading & Writing class. Thus, they all learned what kinds of questions were set in TOEIC. The advanced students took their second TOEIC IP at the end of the second semester in the 2008 academic year. Thus, the advanced students in 2007 and in 2008 took TOEIC IP both at the end of first and at the end of second semester in their freshman year respectively. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the 2008 advanced students' first and second TOEIC IP results:

Table 2. TOEIC IP results of the 2008 Advanced Students

	Total Score		Listening Score		Reading Score	
	1 st TOEIC	2 nd TOEIC	1 st TOEIC	2 nd TOEIC	1 st TOEIC	2 nd TOEIC
	August 2008	January 2009	August 2008	January 2009	August 2008	January 2009
Mean	430.38	476.54	246.92	285.77	183.46	190.77
Std. Deviation	71.194	96.919	40.080	50.202	41.552	50.574
Minimum	355	355	200	230	130	120
Maximum	600	695	330	395	285	300
N	13	13	13	13	13	13

The average total score increased from 430.38 to 476.54. The average score in the listening section also increased from 246.92 to 285.77. The average score in the reading section slightly increased from 183.46 to 190.77. The standard deviations of the total score, the listening score, and the reading score all got greater in the second TOEIC. This may be due to the fact that there were a few students who obtained the very high scores in the second TOEIC, including one, 695.

In order to examine if there are any significant improvements between the first and the second scores, Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was performed. A statistically significant improvement was found in the total score, $z=-2.797$, $p>.01$. There was a statistically significant improvement in the listening score, $z=-2.868$, $p>.01$. However, no significant improvement was found in the reading score, $z=-1.337$, $p<.05$. The fact that the listening score in TOEIC improved significantly in short period is consistent with the studies on the improvements of Japanese college students English proficiency (e.g., Shibata and Inoue 2005, Kumamoto University General English Education Research Group 2006).

The significant improvements in the total scores and in the listening score may be due to the increased number of advanced students in 2008. However, it may also be a possibility that the 2008 advanced students improved better in their listening skill than the 2007 advanced students in six months. The native English speaking teachers who taught the advanced students in 2007 and in 2008 pointed out that the 2008 advanced students were more

active and willing to speak English in classes. The positive attitude toward speaking English might improve the listening skill as well as their English speaking skill. In the next section, I will examine how the advanced students in 2007 and 2008 evaluate their own improvements of English skills by using questionnaires.

5. Questionnaires

The advanced students in 2007 and 2008 answered the questionnaires on the improvements of their English speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills. They assessed the improvements of their own English skills by 5 points scales: 1 greatly improved, 2 improved, 3 no change, 4 deteriorated or 5 greatly deteriorated.

The following pie charts show the 2007 advanced students' self-assessments of their improvements of the English speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills.

2007 Students' Speaking Skill Self-Assessment

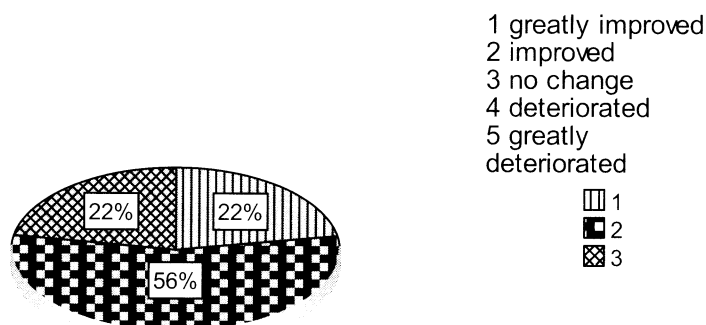


Figure 1

Regarding the speaking skill, 22% students assessed that their speaking skill had improved greatly and 56% felt that there was some improvement. Thus, 78% of the 2007 advanced students thought their speaking skill had improved. This may be due to the intensive English communication classes by the native English speaking teachers. In these classes, the students met the native English speaking teachers four times a week, which provided the students a lot of opportunities and confidence to speak English.

Figure 2 shows the 2007 students' self-assessment of their writing skill improvement.

2007 Students' Writing Skill Self-Assessment

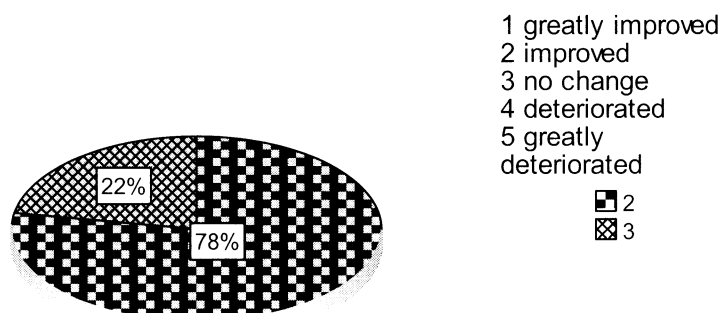


Figure 2

78% students assessed the writing skill had improved more or less. However, 22% of the students felt there was no change. This may be attributed to the content of the Reading & Writing course for freshman students. At first, the course put its aim in improving the writing skill as well as the reading skill. Since the students did not have the expected skill to write essays in English, most of the class activities were focused only on reading English materials.

The following pie chart illustrates the 2007 students' assessments of their listening skill improvements.

2007 Students' Listening Skill Self-Assessment

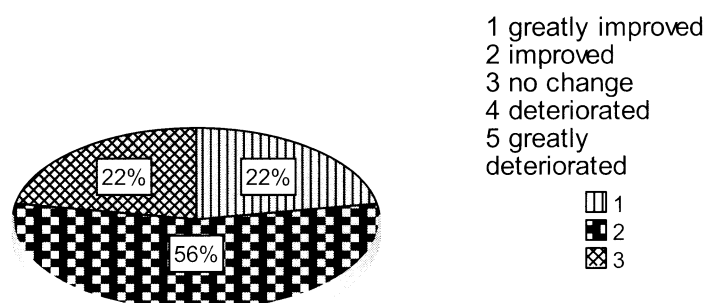


Figure 3

22% of the students felt their listening skill had greatly improved, and 56% of them judged it had improved more or less. This is the same result as their speaking skill improvement. More opportunities to speak and listen to English in the native English speaking teachers' classes might contribute to make the students feel that their listening

skill had improved.

2007 Students' Reading Skill Self-Assessment

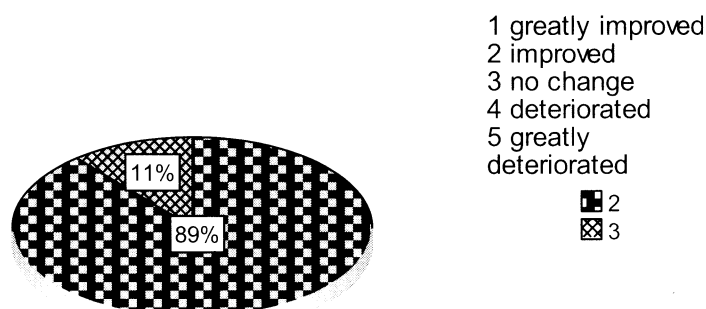


Figure 4

Figure 4 shows the 2007 students' assessments of their reading skill improvement. Eighty-nine percent thought their reading skill had improved more or less. This may be due to the intensive reading activity in Reading & Writing classes.

The following pie charts show the 2008 advanced students' self assessments of their improvements of the English speaking, writing, listening, and reading skills.

2008 Students' Speaking Skill Self-Assessment

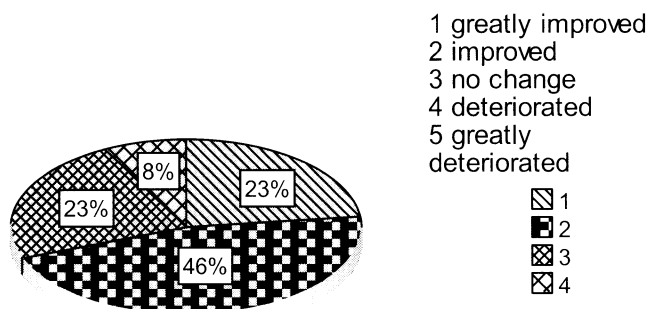


Figure 5

Of the 2008 advanced students, 23% thought that their English speaking skill had improved greatly. This may be due to the positive effect of two courses by the native English speaking teachers: Advanced English Communication course and Freshman Seminar. The students met the native English speaking teachers four times a week. Furthermore, the number of students was less than thirteen in both classes. This combination of frequent class meetings and small student teacher ratio provided students ample opportunity to speak English to the native English speaking teachers and other students, as long as they were willing to speak English.

2008 Students' Writing Skill Self-Assessment

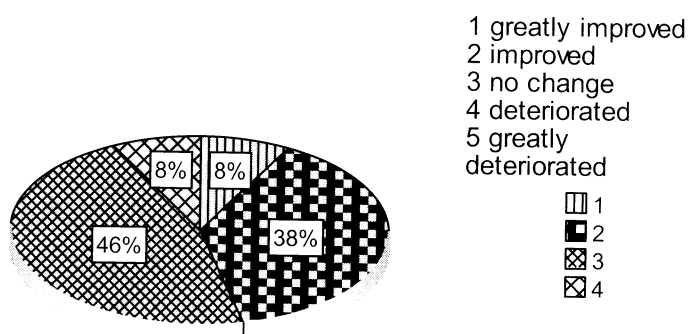


Figure 6

Regarding writing skills, only 8% of the students assessed their writing skill improved greatly, and 38% of them thought it improved more or less. This may be due to the lack of opportunities to write journals or essays in English. Originally, Reading & Writing focused on journal writing in English as well as reading materials in English. However, it shifted its focus only on reading English materials. Few opportunities to write English might make the students feel their writing skill had not improved.

2008 Students' Listening Skill Self-Assessment

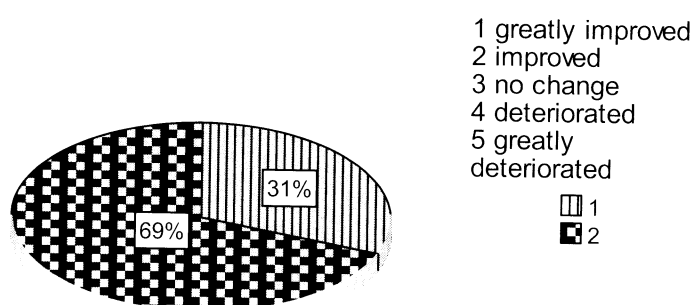


Figure 7

Students' self-assessment of their listening skills indicated remarkable results. Thirty-one percent of students felt their English listening skill had improved greatly, and 69% thought it made some improvements. Therefore, 100% of the students judged that their listening skill had improved. This result is consistent with the statistically significant improvement of the listening score in TOEIC IP for 2008 advanced students. The statistically significant improvement is reconfirmed by the students' self-assessments.

2008 Students' Reading Skill Self-Assessment

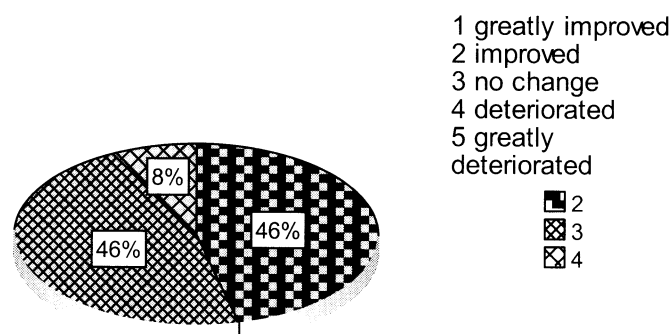


Figure 8

Contrary to the listening skill evaluation, no student thought their reading skill had greatly improved. Forty-six percent of students felt the reading skill had made some improvements, and 46% felt there had been no change. This result is consistent with the statistically insignificant improvement of the reading score in TOEIC IP for 2008 advanced students. This indicates that it is difficult for Japanese college students to improve their reading skill after they enter the universities.

6. Conclusion

This paper investigated if the advanced freshman students in two different academic years would show any significant improvements in the TOEIC scores in six months. The statistical analysis revealed that the reading score in TOEIC did not improve significantly in six months for both years. This result is consistent with other studies that investigated Japanese college students' improvements in the TOEIC scores. Kumamoto University General English Education Research Group (2006: 62-63) pointed out the difficulty for Japanese college students to maintain the reading skill that they acquired in their high school days. The present study also confirmed the tendency that it is difficult for the advanced level students in the EFL contexts to improve significantly their reading skill unless they intentionally make efforts to improve the reading skill, e.g., building vocabularies, reading various kinds of English materials and so on.

The listening scores of the 2008 advanced students significantly improved in six months, while no significant improvement was found in the 2007 advanced students' listening scores. The advanced students in 2007 and 2008 studied English in exactly the same curriculum in their freshman year. However, only 2008 students showed significant improvement in listening scores. This may be due to the different attitudes in English communication classes. As the native English speaking teachers who taught the both students pointed out,

the 2008 advanced students were more active and positive about speaking English in the classes. The more positive and active attitudes about speaking English might contribute to enhance the listening skills of the 2008 advanced students. In sum, the intensive English communication classes and the positive attitude about speaking English in classes was effective for the listening skill improvement even if the duration of studying was short.

The questionnaire survey was also conducted to investigate the students' self-assessment of their English skill improvements. The students' self-assessment revealed that the questionnaire results were almost consistent with the statistically examined TOEIC results. The 100% students in 2008 assessed that their listening skill had improved, and this result were reconfirmed by the statistically significant improvements in the listening score in the TOEIC IP. On the other hand, 78% of 2007 students assessed that their listening skill had improved. The insignificant improvement of the listening score in the 2007 students' TOEIC result would agree with the self-assessments of their listening skill improvement. The insignificant improvement in the reading score of the 2007 and the 2008 students were also consistent with the students' self assessment. No student felt that their reading skill had greatly improved in their freshman year. This result might reflect the insignificant improvement in the reading score in the TOEIC IP. Thus, it is an urgent matter for the Career English major to discuss how to improve students' reading skills and to provide more effective classes to enhance their reading skills.

Together with the statistical investigation and the questionnaire survey, it could be concluded that the intensive English classes are effective for the improvement of English skills, especially for listening skills. Although reading skills had not improved significantly, listening skills did improve significantly in six months. However, the key to improving English skills depends on the learners' motivation and attitude toward improving the English skill. Additionally, effective English classes would help learners to develop their English proficiency.

Note:

1. TOEIC is the registered trademark of Educational Testing Service in the United States of America.
2. According to the report of TOEIC operating committee (2007), more than three hundred thousand TOEIC in 2007.
3. Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was used because the sample was too small to secure the normal distribution.

References

- Hashimoto, M. (1992). Pre-TOEFL no kekka o tooshite mita Kanagawa daigakusei no tanki eigo kenshuu no seika [Effects of Kanagawa University's Short-term Study Abroad: A Report Based on the Results of Pre-TOEFL]. *Kokusai Keiei Forum* 4, 114-120, Kanagawa Daigaku.

- Kumamoto Daigaku Kyouyo Eigo Kyouiku Kenkyu Gurupu. (2006). Kumamoto daigaku kyouyo eigo kyouiku ni okeru gakushuu tootatudo ni kansuru kisoteki kenkyu [A Basic Study on the Learning Achievement in the General English Education at Kumamoto University]. *Kumamoto daigaku heisei 17 nenndo jyuuyou haibun keihi niyoru jissai jigyou kenkyuu seika houkokusho*.
- Midorikawa, H. (2004). Daigakusei no eigoryoku to toutatsumokuhyou [College Students' English Ability and Achievement Goal]. *Eigo Seinen* 150, 9, 8-9
- Nakayama, M. and N. Yoshimura. (2006). Skill Development in a short-term English Study Abroad program. *The Proceedings of AFR 2006*, LSIHK, on March 5, 2007.
- Shibata, J. and H. Inoue (2005). TOEIC D reberu no kousensei ni muketa Context-Based Curriculum no kaihatsu [A Development of a Context-Based Curriculum for TOEIC Level D Students]. *TOEIC Research Report* Number 2. Kokusai Bijinesu Komyunikeeshon Kyokai [The Institute for International Communication].
- Tanaka, K. and R. Ellis. (2003). Study abroad, Language Proficiency, and Learner Beliefs about Language Learning. *JALT Journal* 25. 1, 63-85