



A Japanese Learner's Sojourn in Croatia to Study English as a Lingua Franca

Meredith Stephens

Tokushima University, Japan

Introduction

Education can be enhanced by exposure to a variety of approaches to solving common problems. Cozolino (2014) explained that places where people of various cultures, beliefs, and customs congregate, such as seaports and trading centres, are the birthplaces of philosophy: "It is this exposure to alternative worldviews that turbocharges the expansion of perspective" (p. 225). This expansion of perspective may be one of the benefits for university students who participate in a study abroad program. They have been educated hitherto in the educational tradition of their home country, and when they are transplanted to another educational setting, they can obtain an alternative perspective on familiar problems. This is a study of a third-year university pre-service teacher of English from Japan who studied in English in Croatia over a semester. She was able to participate in a vastly different context for both the second language acquisition of English and second language pedagogy. This new setting for language learning both gave her insights into an alternative pedagogy and affirmed her appreciation of the sound pedagogical practices she had experienced in Japan, that she was newly able to appreciate from a distance.

Literature Review

English as a Lingua Franca

Japanese students have traditionally tended to consider countries where English is spoken as an L1 to be the ideal place to learn English. For example, Abe (2013) conducted a study where 81% of the 48 Japanese respondents indicated a preference to study English in a country where it was spoken as a native language. This was because students were not familiar with the notion of World Englishes. However, in practice, English will not necessarily be used to communicate with speakers from Britain, Australasia, and America (Fifer, 2013). Countries where English is spoken as an L2 are now also considered to be places where Japanese students can go to improve their English. As Kimura (2017) observed, "there is little doubt that study abroad programs in expanding circle countries hold great educational potential in cultivating participants' skills to negotiate English with diverse interlocutors" (p. 192). In Kimura's (2017) study, the site was Thailand. He conducted a longitudinal case-study of a Japanese sophomore's participation in an English-medium course on topics related to Thailand for international students at a



public university in Bangkok. Another destination that has also featured as a study-abroad destination for Japanese students learning English is Korea. Leane and Stephens (2013) conducted a small-scale study of five Japanese students who chose to study in Korea for three main reasons. Firstly, it was less expensive than an English-speaking country. Secondly, some students considered L2 English to be more comprehensible than L1 English, and thirdly, Korea had more international students than Japan and therefore afforded more opportunities for using English. Currently, the faculty at the author's university has agreements with universities abroad offering English-medium courses in Sweden, Canada, Malaysia, America, Latvia, Croatia, Belgium, Vietnam, Korea, India, and Portugal (Tokushima University, 2019). Out of this list of eleven countries, only two are L1 English-speaking countries. Accordingly, many Japanese students at her institution opt to improve their English by studying in countries in which English is spoken as an L2.

Why Study English in Croatia?

The current study concerns a preservice teacher who chose Croatia as her destination. Croatia is listed in the category of nations with 'very high proficiency' according to the *EF English Proficiency Index 2019*, with 63.07% of the population said to have very high proficiency (CroatiaWeek, 2010). Bradicic (2010) explained how the proliferation of television, music, and computers had facilitated the acquisition of English listening skills and vocabulary in Croatia.

Advantages of Studying Language Pedagogy Abroad

International destinations may be advantageous sites for pre-service Japanese teachers to learn about language pedagogy because they are likely to feature pedagogical practices that are not found in Japan. Traditional techniques of *yakudoku*, similar to grammar-translation, are still prevalent in English classrooms in Japan (Cook, 2012). *Yakudoku* is indeed a very old, even ancient method. According to Hino (1988), the *yakudoku* method was used over a thousand years ago in Japan to study L2 Chinese. "English is first translated into Japanese word-by-word, and then the resulting translation is reordered to match Japanese word order. In Japan, the learning of the *yakudoku* technique is often identified with the goal of studying English itself" (Hino, 1988, p. 45). *Yakudoku* may even persist in popularity over Communicative Language Teaching. In her study of seven Japanese preservice teachers on their teaching practicum, Yonesaka (2001, as cited in Yonesaka, 2004) observed that the teachers used *yakudoku*, rather than communicative teaching, because firstly, the class teacher had requested them to do so, and secondly, because of the students' desire for "unambiguous translations" (p. 30). Similarly, Gorsuch (1998) explained that the purpose of *yakudoku* in high school English classes was to have students produce an accurate translation of the English text, rather than of the English itself. Many teachers of English in Japanese high schools focused on decoding discrete words and structures to teach reading and relied on translation to foster understanding of the text (Umeda, 2014).

Pre-service teachers in Japan have a lack of grounding in language pedagogy (Umeda, 2014; Yonesaka, 2004), and even the trainers themselves lack this (Umeda, 2014). Even when pre-service teachers have been trained in alternative methods, they may revert to the methods that they were familiar with as learners themselves (Umeda, 2014). As Cook's (2012) study revealed, "this group of teachers, perhaps because of a lack of pre- or in-service training, or even in spite of it, is likely teaching as they have been taught since in spite of MEXT's [Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology] communicative demands, they continue to use traditional methods" (p. 91). The lack of grounding in language pedagogy is not confined to pre-service teachers. Nagatomo (2012) explained that English teachers in universities might not have had sufficient training in language pedagogy; one of the Japanese university teachers of English in her study described the conflict concerning her training as a scholar of literature and the unrelated work of being an English language teacher.

Because of this lack, there is a need for preservice teachers to be educated in methods other than those they have grown up with in Japan. Cook and Brown (2019) suggested that it may be beneficial for pre-service teachers to be exposed to alternative teaching methods while they are still students through participating in a study abroad program, and this forms the focus of the current study.

The Current Study

This preliminary study investigated the study abroad experience of a pre-service English high school teacher from Japan who went to Croatia for a semester. The Croatian university did not offer ESL classes, so the pre-service teacher took content classes in English and Croatian as a second language. This study investigated the following questions:

RQ1: Could the preservice teacher learn English in Croatia?

RQ2: What did the pre-service teacher learn about language pedagogy from her experience as a student in Croatia?

The Participant

Block (2007) made a global survey of ethnographies of students studying abroad and drew attention to the need for more ethnographies of Japanese women studying abroad. The current study sought to address this gap. Rio, the participant, went to study abroad for a semester in Croatia. Rio had taken required classes to obtain her teacher's license in Japan but had not yet started her teaching practicum.

Data Collection and Analysis

Block (2007) criticized the use of questionnaires to collect data on students who study abroad because when the data is expressed as statistics, the lived experience of the student is lost. He contrasted this with diaries, field notes, and interviews, in which students become ethnographers and researchers, and their subject position moves from a somewhat passive one to an active one. In diary studies, the participant is a co-researcher who provides an insider account (Dörnyei, 2007). In the current study, the participant documented her progress in English and Croatian, and her intercultural experiences, by making regular diary entries during her stay in Croatia and sending them to her English teacher in Japan (the author). Triangulation was done through a follow-up questionnaire after her return to Japan, designed to elicit responses indicating how her study abroad experience had changed her perceptions of language pedagogy, and also through a follow-up email correspondence between Rio and the author.

Results and Discussion

RQ1: Could the pre-service teacher learn English in Croatia?

Rio went to Croatia with the express purpose of learning English. One may wonder about the extent to which you could learn English in a country where English is not the native language. However, Rio's diary entry revealed that she found English to be widely understood in Croatia.

There are a lot of people who can speak English well in Croatia. I also went to other countries while I lived in Croatia, but I always felt that Croatia has more people who can speak English than other countries. In Croatia, most people talked with me in English other than elderly people.

It appears that Croatians assumed Rio was a tourist and would address her in English. When Rio switched to Croatian, her interlocutors in Zagreb demonstrated surprise and pleasure, but when she used Croatian at a famous tourist destination, she received a cooler response to her attempts to use Croatian, so she switched back to English. Rio attributed this to Croatians' perception that Croatian is not a lingua franca and that they need to use English as a lingua franca in their communication with interlocutors perceived to be outsiders.

In Zagreb, people who work in restaurants and shops spoke English at the beginning of the conversation, but when I replied in Croatian, they were surprised and started to speak Croatian with their smiling faces. Even though my Croatian was bad, they were kind and tried to listen to what I said. However, people talked with me in English in (.....) which is a famous tourist destination even though I tried to speak Croatian. So, I gave up speaking Croatian because people who works in (.....) were chilly and I was embarrassed to continue to speak Croatian. I think that Croatian people know Croatian language is a minor language, and they can speak English well. That's why I think they speak English to foreigners so that they can understand well. (diary entry)

Rio contrasted this with her experience during a trip to Germany. There she was asked her preference to speak English or German. She attributed this to German being a more widely spoken L2 than Croatian.

In contrast, when I went to Munich in Germany, some people who were working in restaurants asked me "Deutsch or English?". I think that Germany also has many people who can speak English, but the difference between Croatia and Germany is that German is a major language. (diary entry)

Not only strangers, but Croatian friends also acted as English teachers.

My Croatian friend knows that I'm not good at English and I want to improve my English skills, so she often corrects my mistakes. For example, when I texted her "What a good news" on WhatsApp, she replied "What good news". Then, I could notice my mistakes. (diary entry)*

In fact, Rio considered the level of English in Croatia to be "too high" because, unlike Japan, the university did not need to offer classes in English grammar and essay-writing.

I think that Croatia is a useful place if the student has a good English skill in Japan. However, if he or she doesn't have a good English skill like me, Croatia is not a useful place. The reason of that is English level is too high in Croatia. Many people acquired English since they were kids through movie, game and so on. That's why they learn the high level of English or something about their major in English in the University. So, I couldn't take any English language classes. I didn't study English grammar, how to write English essay and so on. If someone wants to improve English from the basic level, I think it's better to go to an English school or some University which has English language class.

However, if someone already has enough English knowledge and just wants have opportunities to speak English, Croatia is really nice place. Most people can speak English well in Croatia and they usually use English for foreign people. In addition, there are many international students in Zagreb, so we usually talk in English. My academic knowledge such as grammar had not improved, but I came to reply quickly compare to before going to Croatia. I also could know some casual phrases and vocabulary through my daily conversation. There are not so many Japanese compare to other countries. It was also a good point. Even though I talked to Japanese in Japanese sometimes, their English level and motivation were high. Therefore, it became a good motivation to improve my

English. I also can study grammar in Japan, but it is difficult to have many opportunities to speak English like in Croatia. So, it was a good place to practice English. (not to learn) In addition, most people study English as a second language. So, I could feel that everyone is same, I have to make more efforts. (Questionnaire)

The final comments above suggest that Rio perceived the status of English as a second language in Croatia to be advantageous. Rio could identify with the Croatians as second-language speakers of English. If she had gone to Britain, America, or Australasia, she might have felt more of a barrier between herself as a second language speaker of English and a majority of the rest of the population perceived to be first language speakers of English. Feeling on equal terms with Croatians as a second language speaker inspired her to make an effort to attain their level of English.

RQ2: What did the pre-service teacher learn about language pedagogy from her experience as a student in Croatia?

Although it was expected that Rio would learn English in Croatia, there were no English classes in her program. Rather, Rio learned about language teaching from her experience as a student in her Croatian class:

I could not take an English class, but I could learn many important things about pedagogy through a Croatian language class. I thought that I can find other good aspects when I learn a new language. (Questionnaire)

Japanese pre-service teachers may have difficulty identifying with the needs of their future students because they may have forgotten what it was like not to have knowledge of their subject. According to Hattie and Yates (2014), “the more you know about an area, the more difficult it can be to see the same area from another person’s position” (p. 11). They explain that in mathematics, this is known as the “expert blind spot effect” (p. 18); expertise lowers sensitivity to understanding the position of the novice. In the case of Rio learning Croatian, she had not experienced being a language beginner since junior high school. In Croatia, she was sensitized to both the discomfort and pleasure of being a novice.

I re-noticed the first feeling of learning a language such as what is difficult and what is fun. (email correspondence)

Secondly, Rio appreciated having the opportunity in the Croatian class to use what she had learned:

In particular, I was really happy when I could use what I learned. Therefore, I want to give students many opportunities to speak English in the class. (email correspondence)

Finally, the method of teaching vocabulary differed between the Croatian class and the English classes she had taken at junior high school in Japan. In Japan, vocabulary had been taught as a discrete skill through flashcards, but in Croatia, Rio learned to guess the meaning of vocabulary from the context.

How to learn vocabulary was different from the Japanese class of English. We did not practice vocabulary in the class so much. The English teacher normally uses flash cards to teach vocabulary in Japan, but flash cards were not used in the Croatian language class. The students usually asked the meaning to the teacher if we did not know some words after reading a text. I think that using flash cards is not bad, but I thought that Japanese people need more ability to guess the meaning from the content. The teacher should not teach vocabulary and other things separately. (email correspondence)

Not only did Rio learn new pedagogical practices in Croatia, she was able to make a critical comparison of the teaching practices in both Croatia and Japan. This comparison enabled her to identify good pedagogical practices that she had enjoyed in Japan, such as feedback. Judicious feedback facilitates learning, but tends not to be taught in teacher training (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2010). As Hattie and Zierer (2018) explained, feedback serves “to close the gap between where the student starts and where they are optimally ending in the sequence of lessons” (p. 88). As for the Croatian university, Rio reported thorough feedback of assignments but not of exams:

I could not get a good feedback of the exam because I had to return quickly and could not take a picture of it. Therefore, I could not review of my mistakes so much. (questionnaire)

This experience of being a student who was dissatisfied with the lack of feedback will arguably affirm her commitment to providing feedback when she becomes a teacher.

Limitations

This is a case study of a single Japanese preservice teacher who went to Croatia to further her English and therefore the findings cannot necessarily be generalized. Rio was the first student in her university to take up the opportunity to study in Croatia; this in itself indicates a willingness to explore the unknown. Her teacher considers her to be persistent, meticulous, and forward-looking. These qualities enabled her to make a success of her experience and arguably would have helped her succeed if she had chosen an alternative study-abroad context.

Conclusions

For L1 English speakers, the choice of Croatia as a destination to learn English may be counter-intuitive, but Rio’s data reveals that there were rich opportunities for her to learn English in Croatia. Firstly, the level of English in Croatia appears to be high. Secondly, her classes were held in English, although there were no classes specifically for English language learning. Furthermore, both strangers and her bilingual Croatian friends addressed her in English. (The exception tended to be elderly Croatians, with whom she spoke Croatian rather than English.) Finally, the commonality of English being a second language in both Croatia and Japan was motivating and spurred Rio on to make a greater effort.

It was the experience of learning Croatian, rather than her English classes, that taught her the most about language pedagogy. The experience of being a beginning student of a language helped Rio anticipate the needs of her future students, thus reducing the likelihood of her experiencing the “expert blind spot effect” (Hattie & Yates, 2014, p. 18) when she becomes a teacher. Her future pedagogical practices, which she hopes to adopt as a result of this experience, including providing students with opportunities to use what they have learned and teaching vocabulary in a more integrated way by fostering the ability to make intelligent guesses from the context. Not only did she learn alternative pedagogical practices in Croatia, the new perspective she attained when abroad enabled her to identify sound Japanese pedagogical practices that she may have otherwise taken for granted.

There is an abundance of opportunities for students in Japan to study in countries where English is not the L1 and which offer English-medium instruction. Further study into English-language acquisition should be undertaken in such contexts.

The Author

Meredith Stephens is a faculty member in International Liberal Arts at Tokushima University, Japan. She holds a Master of Applied Linguistics from Macquarie University. Most of her writing concerns second language pedagogy, and has appeared in *The ELT Journal*, *English Today*, *Reading in a Foreign Language*, *The Journal of Literature in Language Teaching*, and *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*. In her free time she enjoys writing fiction and creative non-fiction.

International Liberal Arts
Faculty of Socio-Arts and Sciences
Tokushima University
1-1 Minami Josanjima-cho
Tokushima, Japan, 770-8502
Email: meredithstphns@gmail.com

References

- Abe, E. (2013). Communicative language teaching in Japan: Current practices and future prospects: Investigating students' experiences of current communicative approaches to English language teaching in schools in Japan. *English Today*, 29(2), 46-53. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078413000163>
- Block, D. (2007). *Second language identities*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bradicic, A. (2010). *SLA in Croatia from the perspective of a teacher and PhD student*. The Clarion online. <http://www.eurosla.org/TheClarionIssue7Bradicic.html>
- Cook, M. (2012). Revisiting Japanese English teachers' (JTEs) perceptions of communicative, audio-lingual, and grammar translation (Yakudoku) activities: Beliefs, practices, and rationales. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly Special Issue: Teacher Education, Identity and Development* 14(2), 79-98.
- Cook, M., & Brown, H. (2019). Using the study-abroad experience to augment pre-service teachers' practicum. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & P. Bennett (Eds.), *Diversity and inclusion* (pp. 95-102). JALT.
- Cozolino, L. (2014). *Attachment-based teaching: Creating a tribal classroom*. W.&W. Norton & Company.
- Croatiaweek (2019, November 10). *Croatia among world's best for English language proficiency*. Croatiaweek. <https://www.croatiaweek.com/croatia-among-worlds-best-for-english-language-proficiency/>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.
- Fifer, M. (2013). Obstacles to Japanese membership in the imagined global community of English users. *The Language Teacher*, 37(5), 39-43.
- Hattie, J., & Yates, G. (2014). *Visible learning and the science of how we learn*. Routledge.
- Hattie, J., & Zierer, K. (2018). *10 mindframes for visible learning: Teaching for success*. Routledge.
- Hino, N. (1988). Yakudoku: Japan's dominant tradition in foreign language teaching. *JALT Journal*, 10(1-2), 45-55.
- Kimura, D. (2017). Changing orientations to English during English-medium study abroad in Thailand. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Transformation in language education*. JALT.
- Leane, S., & Stephens, M. (2013). Japanese students' sojourn in Korea: For linguistic and cultural exchange. *Tottori University Departmental Bulletin Paper*, 10, 53-77.
- Nagatomo, D. H. (2012). *Exploring Japanese university English teachers' professional identity*. Multilingual Matters.

- Tokuhama-Espinosa, T. (2010). *The new science of teaching and learning: Using the very best of mind, brain, and education science in the classroom*. Teachers' College Press.
- Tokushima University, Sogo-kagakubu (2019). *International Exchange*. <http://www.souka-international-tokushima-u.net/app/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/7e61fadb45aadce7bfad498b1eb6b9f1.pdf>
- Umeda, K. (2014). *The teaching of English in secondary schools in Japan: From curriculum to the classroom* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Waikato, New Zealand.
- Yonesaka, S. (2004). Teaching what, to whom, how, and why: A review of pre-service Japanese EFL teacher beliefs. *Hokkai Gakuen University Studies in Culture*, 29, 19-40.

(Received October 16, 2021; Revised November 20, 2021; Accepted December 18, 2021)