



## Habitat for Language Learning International Volunteer Experience and Motivation

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### Introduction

When students step outside the language classroom in Japan, they may find little reason or opportunity to connect what they are learning with the world around them. As a result, English language education can appear as simply a course requirement with little real world value to students. After the university entrance examinations, the purpose of English language learning for many learners shifts toward increasing TOEIC scores as a qualification for job-hunting. For others, a lack of clear purpose can make English language learning simply an exotic encounter with Western culture.

In response to this gap and to an increasing need for young Japanese students to learn and work collaboratively across borders and cultures, options for studying abroad or international volunteering have been growing in popularity. These options include, but are not limited to, traditional study abroad programs, internship programs, service learning, study tours, and international volunteer projects. Given the opportunity to use English in an authentic and meaningful way can reveal the value of learning language and leave a lasting impact on student attitudes and motivation.

### International Posture, Ideal Selves, Motivation

Gardner's original construct of *integrativeness*, which is generally defined as a psychological and emotional identification with the L2 group (Gardner, 1985) has been expanded and redefined by the concept of *international posture*, which is a desire on the part of learners to communicate with the international community as opposed to a specific cultural group (Yashima, 2000). Focusing on the purpose of L2 acquisition of Japanese students, Yashima noted "For many learners, English symbolizes the world around Japan, something that connects them to foreign countries and foreigners [...], with whom they can communicate by using English" (Yashima, 2002). Another model often cited in motivation research is MacIntyre *et al.*'s (1998) willingness to communicate (WTC) model that places emphasis on the communicative goals rather than on communicative competence. Yashima argues that "international posture affects learners' motivation, which leads to proficiency as well as self-

confidence, which, in turn, accounts for L2 WTC." (Dörnyei, 2009). In addition to international posture, it has been argued by Dörnyei and Csizér (2002) that the ability to envision an *ideal self*, in this case communicating with people in various foreign countries, can be a powerful motivator to learn a foreign language. Furthermore, Yashima *et al.* (2004) argue that "those who are conscious of how they relate themselves to the world tend to be motivated to study and communicate in English as they probably visualize 'English using selves' clearly."

### Background

In the spring of 2011, I accompanied a group of students from Kwansei Gakuin University's *Habitat for Humanity* club to the remote region of Jhapa, Nepal. Part of my interest in joining this group was to examine the effect of participating in international volunteer projects on attitudes toward learning a foreign language.

### *Habitat for Humanity International*

Habitat for Humanity is a non-profit and non-governmental organization that was established in the United States in 1973 with the stated purpose to "seek to eliminate poverty housing and homelessness from the world and to make decent shelter a matter of conscience and action" (Habitat for Humanity International, 2012). Habitat achieves this goal by providing zero interest loans and coordinating work between homeowners, local contractors, and volunteers. Since its inception, Habitat claims to have built over 400,000 homes that shelter 1.75 million people around the world.

### *Kwansei Gakuin University "Uehabitat"*

Kwansei Gakuin University (KGU) was established as a Christian missionary school in 1889 with the motto "Mastery for Service". The Uegahara campus in Nishinomiya, Japan offers several extra curricular clubs and circles that students can join, including "Uehabitat" which has an average membership of 100 students year to year across all grade levels. Once a year, usually in spring, members can volunteer to join a Global Village (GV) group. This group participates in fundraising activities prior to traveling to a chosen host country and spending a week working in a local community

on one or more project sites. Countries where KGU students have volunteered include Indonesia, the Philippines, Nepal, and Cambodia.

**The Nepal Global Village Group**

The Nepal GV group consisted of 23 students including one student from Kinki University and one from Konan Women’s University. The students study in a wide range of disciplines with an overwhelming majority studying law. Out of the group, 14 had never traveled abroad. All of the students had started studying English in Junior High School with four students having extra experience studying at a language school.

The trip spanned 12 days, which included a few days for sightseeing in Kathmandu. Most of the time was divided between two worksites in Jhapa, a region located about an hour from the capital by airplane. The GV group had a student leader, a sub-leader and designated responsibilities to each of the other members. Two on-site coordinators from Habitat in Nepal assisted the group. Overall, the costs of the trip totaled 115,000 yen for airfare and roughly 1,600 yen per day for hotel and food.

The students divided their time between two worksite projects in which they helped build two types of homes for local families. One was a traditional brick home and the other was made from locally grown bamboo.

**Research**

Students were surveyed immediately before, immediately after and six months after the experience. The survey was designed to investigate the students’ expectations and impressions of the importance of English in an international volunteer experience, and to determine whether or not participating in an international volunteer experience had an impact on their attitudes toward English language learning.

**Pre-Survey**

The pre-survey contained 21 questions, including a section about the students’ background and experiences studying English, and a second section of 12 questions regarding the students’ expectations, attitudes, and motivation toward using English. The second section was re-administered on the post-surveys to determine any significant changes in attitudes.

**Expectations**

The first group of questions in the second section of the survey focused on what the students’ expectations were before the trip and whether or not those expectations matched the reality of the overseas volunteer experience.

*What level of English do you think is necessary to participate in international volunteer projects?*

	Pre	Post
Excellent	0	2
Good	8	11
Fair	10	6
Poor	0	0
Not at All	1	0
TOTAL	19	19

The post-survey results show a slight shift in attitude toward the belief that a higher level of English was necessary to participate in the volunteer experience. Even though the students underestimated the necessary level of English to participate, they overestimated the frequency of use of English during the experience.

*How often do you/did you think you will use/used English during this volunteer experience?*

	Pre	Post
All the time	8	6
Sometimes	6	9
Occasionally	4	2
Rarely	0	1
Never	0	0
TOTAL	18	18

The experience varied wildly from student to student with some students stating, “I spoke English everyday” to “I talked to locals in Japanese” to “I didn’t use any new English”. Whereas some students used the experience in Nepal as an opportunity to employ their English communication skills, other students preferred not to try at all and only rely on Japanese, gestures, or other group members to translate for them. This is probably why there was very little significant change when students were asked about their confidence in communicating with foreigners during the experience:

*How confident are you that you can communicate with foreigners?*

(5= extremely confident, 1= Not confident at all)

	Pre	Post
5	0	0
4	2	2
3	6	8
2	8	8
1	3	1
TOTAL	19	19
Avg.	2.4	2.6

### Attitudes

The next section of the survey focused more specifically on the students' attitudes toward using English during the volunteer experience.

*Do you think your English education has prepared you adequately for this volunteer experience?*

	Pre	Post
Yes	3	5
No	16	14
TOTAL	19	19

An overwhelming majority believed that their English education had not prepared them to participate in the international volunteer experience. In both the pre- and post-surveys, students identified the lack of communicative skills as being a major factor in their inability to communicate. One student commented that his English education was inadequate "because we studied reading and writing English...not enough speaking and listening". Other students echoed this feeling by stating "Even if I know words, I can't use them in conversation when I go out". Even those students who believed their English education had adequately prepared them, indicated that they still needed to learn more by stating that "it isn't enough, but it was still helpful" or "I think I should study more".

Despite an overall general feeling of unpreparedness, students still believe in the value of English language education for their future.

*Do you think learning English is important for your future?*

	Pre	Post
Yes	19	18
No	0	1
TOTAL	19	19

Even with feelings of unpreparedness and struggles to communicate during the volunteer experience, the belief in the importance of learning English for the future remained practically unchanged and nearly unanimous. Reasons for this belief centered on ideas of connectedness to the world and foreign countries, increased interactions with people of different nationalities, and the establishment of English as the global language. One student, noting the importance of English outside of Japan wrote, "When we go out of Japan, we have to use English. If you know English, you can expand your views". Another student commented on the increasing opportunities to

speak with people of other nationalities within Japan saying that "many foreign people come to Japan and I have many chance to speak with them". Still, another student simply acknowledged the ubiquity of English by stating "English is the world language now". Clearly, these students see a future with increasing opportunities of interacting with other groups of people with English as the primary means of communication.

### Motivation

Overall, this group of students felt unprepared to use English in the volunteer experience, but still maintained a strong belief in the value of acquiring English language ability. One of the primary interests of this research was to find out if the volunteer experience would have an impact on their motivation to learn English.

*How motivated are you to study English now?*

(5= Extremely motivated, 1= Not motivated at all)

	Pre	Post	Post (6 months)
5	6	13	2
4	4	3	4
3	5	3	3
2	4	0	0
1	0	0	0
TOTAL	19	19	9*
Avg.	3.6	4.5	4

As the data shows, the immediate effect of the volunteer experience on student motivation to study English is significant. The number of students who identified themselves as being extremely motivated to study more than doubles in the post-survey results.

*How motivated are you to use English now?*

(5= Extremely motivated, 1= Not motivated at all)

	Pre	Post	Post (6 months)
5	7	12	3
4	4	3	1
3	6	4	2
2	2	0	2
1	0	0	1
TOTAL	19	19	9*
Avg.	3.8	4.4	3.8

Motivation to use English showed a significant increase following the volunteer experience. Combined, these questions indicate an overall increase in motivation toward acquiring English language skills. Therefore, it can be inferred that the

volunteer experience in Nepal had an immediate and direct impact on students' motivation toward English. In the post-survey results, students noted positive effects of using English to communicate during the volunteer experience. One student admitted "I like communicating with foreign people so I will study English more and more in Japan" while another confessed "I felt a little fun from using English during the experience". Even though the students had felt unprepared to use English in this situation, through the experience they were able to discover the joy of using language to communicate with people of different nationalities and backgrounds.

However, just over six months after returning to Japan, a second post-survey was distributed to measure to what extent the immediate effects endured after the euphoria of the experience faded into memory. Unfortunately, only nine members completed and returned the survey. Therefore, it is difficult to get a clear picture, but the motivation to study and use English appears to have decreased over the six months following the volunteer experience, with the motivation to use English returning to the pre-survey level.

Of the nine students who completed the survey, six of them admitted that they rarely had the opportunity to use English in Japan since returning, and the other three claimed to have had occasional opportunities. It appears that without an immediate need to use English in their environment in Japan, their desire to study and use English was adversely affected. Still, all nine unanimously maintained the belief that English is important for their future, and made references to a "global age" where English would be necessary in business, work, and relations with other countries.

### Conclusions

Too often, for many Japanese students, the connection between what (and how) they learn English in the classroom and real life opportunities to communicate in English are obscure and disconnected from reality. One way to address this problem is to change the way that English is taught in the classroom, including less focus on proficiency and accuracy and more focus on communicative meaningfulness by imagining context and goals and creating ideal selves. However, beyond the classroom, one way for students to find practical and meaningful value in learning English while having a concrete goal to use the language is through opportunities in international volunteering. *Habitat for Humanity International* provides this opportunity in addition to

the overall goal of providing homes for underprivileged families around the world.

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#### Habitat for Humanity

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*Habitat for Humanity* is an international non-profit organization dedicated to building simple, decent, affordable housing through volunteer labor for families in need around the world. *Habitat* programs are open to anyone. Since its founding in 1976, it has built over 500,000 houses sheltering 1.75 million people in 3,000 communities and five continents worldwide. Check out its international website or its Habitat Japan site above.