

The Aloha Challenge Program – Language Assessment

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October 30, 2008

A Brief Description of the Program

The 2008 Aloha Challenge is a program that offered an opportunity for a total of 12 American and Japanese high school students to work on filmmaking projects collaboratively with the help of eight American and Japanese college student interns for a period of 14 weeks—through online activities for the first 10 weeks and then by living and working together in Hawai'i for the last four weeks. There were equal numbers of students who spoke English as a primary language and those who spoke Japanese as a mother tongue. There were also equal numbers of male and female students. Their levels of language proficiency varied, however. The American students' levels of proficiency in Japanese ranged from zero knowledge to that of the near-native; none of them except one had lived in Japan. The Japanese students' levels of proficiency in English also varied with different degrees of exposure to the English-speaking environment. No film production skills were required of the participants. Prizes such as cash, laptop computers and air tickets were awarded on a competitive basis as one way to motivate the students.

Prior to their arrival in Hawai'i, the participating students were required to communicate in Japanese and English using Skype, blogs and emails to plan for their filmmaking projects. They discussed who would direct the projects, what the topics should be, how their works might be presented, and so on. They made decisions on these matters to varying degrees. The first 10 weeks of such virtual collaborative work no doubt helped forge friendships among the American and Japanese students and develop team spirit and a sense of commitment to the projects. In terms of language learning, this phase of the program seems to have facilitated vocabulary acquisition in particular. However, assessment of vocabulary knowledge was not carried out, which could otherwise prove the observer's such impression.

During the four-week on-site part of the program in Hawai'i, each team of two American and two Japanese students produced four bilingual films in Japanese and English. During production, they were compelled to use their respective target languages—Japanese and English—to communicate with their teammates in order to accomplish their tasks. The pitch the students did in the target language was particularly noteworthy. Not only did they have to present in an exciting way, but they also had to answer questions on the spot from the three judges. Their language partner was there to assist them if they got stuck or lost understanding. Students typically practiced intensely to do well on their presentations. The students each gave one pitch and supported their partner for their partner's pitch as well as the other two team members in their preparation for their pitches. Furthermore, the students were required to blog on film production.

Leadership was also an important part of the program. The high school students each assumed the director role for one production. As director, they had to communicate with the college student interns and other team members in both languages. They had to master a certain set of expressions to be able

to communicate and to make sure all aspects of the production were covered. They also had to communicate with their activity site staff to get permission to film and interview.

The entire program was designed in such a way that language learning was a necessity rather than an object of activity. Most frequently used skills were interpersonal oral and written (i.e., person-to-person speaking and writing) communication skills and presentational oral (i.e., one-directional speaking) skills.

Language Assessment Instruments

In order to measure the effect of this project-based bilingual program on development of language proficiency, the interpersonal communication skills in writing and speaking, the skills most frequently required during the program, were measured at the beginning and the conclusion of the program in Hawai'i.

For the assessment of interpersonal speaking skills, the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview was administered over the phone by Language Testing International (LTI). ACTFL or the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages is “the only national organization dedicated to the improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction. ACTFL is an individual membership organization of more than 9,000 foreign language educators and administrators from elementary through graduate education, as well as government and industry” (an excerpt from the ACTFL homepage <http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3274>).

Among the ACTFL's major contributions to the field of foreign language education is the development of the Proficiency Guidelines in the four language skills and the testing procedure for assessment of oral communication skills known as the Oral Proficiency Interview or OPI (<http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3348>). The OPI takes the form of a carefully structured face-to-face or telephone conversation between a trained and certified interviewer and the person whose speaking proficiency is to be assessed. A ratable speech sample is elicited from the interviewee by a series of questions and tasks, which follow the established protocol. The speech sample is recorded and later independently rated by two certified testers. The ACTFL OPI Testing Program is currently administered by LTI and records of all official tests are kept permanently in the proficiency testing archive. The official OPI has been widely used for a variety of purposes including as one of the components of the teacher certification/licensure process in the states of California, Connecticut, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Virginia.

Since its inception in the 1980s, the ACTFL OPI has attracted much attention of language assessment specialists and received praises and criticisms. Most criticisms center on the scholarly question of whether the OPI is capable of assessing important aspects of the learner's communicative ability. The general understanding at the moment is that the OPI may provide only a partial assessment of discourse competence but it “does allow a thorough assessment of grammatical competence” (Yoffe, 1997).

Thus, while the OPI results must be treated cautiously with this in mind, they can be used as a highly reliable indicator of the learner's grammatical competence, that is, the learner's ability to use grammatical structures accurately in the contexts and under the conditions included in the OPI testing procedure.

As for the assessment of interpersonal writing skills, due to a lack of suitable standardized tests, a simulated email communication task developed expressly for the 2008 Aloha Challenge program was

administered at the beginning and the conclusion of the program. The task was to read an email message (of approximately 200 characters in the case of Japanese and about 100 words in the case of English) and respond to it in 10 minutes in the target language. As the participants had varied levels of language proficiency, the difficulty level of the email message was adjusted accordingly. The following are two sets of pre- and post-program tasks of the medium difficulty level in Japanese and English, shown here as examples.

[pre-program assessment]

来月の六日から一週間父が仕事でそちらに行くんですが、私も父のアシスタントとしていっしょに行きます。でも、九日は私は仕事がなく、一日中フリーなんです。もしよければ、その日にいっしょにミュージアムにでも行きませんか。夜は、父も時間があるので、私たちが泊まるホテルの近くのレストランでいっしょに食事を、と言っています。ホテルは、ダウンタウンのグランドホテルです。どうですか。返信メール、待っています。ひでみ

[post-program assessment]

パーティーのことなんですが、九月八日になりました。場所は、たぶん学校のアクティビティ・ルームになると思うんですが、まだ分かりません。もしアクティビティ・ルームがだめだったら、ぼくのうちでするつもりですが、はっきり決まったら、またメールします。それから、このパーティーでやってもらう日本語のスピーチは、この前お願いしてましたが、だいじょうぶですよ。今月中にそのスピーチのトピックを返信メールで教えてください。としき

[pre-program assessment]

Since my father will be visiting Japan for work for a week, I have decided to go with him. I will be there as his assistant. But I will be free all day on the ninth and I wonder if you would like to go to a museum with me that day. My father, who will also have time that evening, is suggesting that we have dinner together in a restaurant near our hotel. We will be staying downtown and the name of our hotel is the Grand Hotel. What would you say? Please write me back. I look forward to hearing from you.

Bob

[post-program assessment]

For the Japanese club's party, we've decided on the eighth of September. As for the place, I think it will probably be the activity room at school, but it's not finalized yet. If it turned out that we could not use the activity room, we will have a party at my place. In any case, I will let you know as soon as it's finalized. Also, I had asked you to give a speech at the party. Is that still alright with you? Please email me with the topic of your speech before the end of this month.

Theresa

The email responses were evaluated holistically by a Japanese-English bilingual assessment specialist on a 6-point scale. The score 6 is the highest with such characteristics as natural and easily flowing

expression, rich vocabulary, and excellent use of grammar. The score 1 is the lowest possible score with such characteristics as labored and incomprehensible expression, insufficient or inappropriate vocabulary, and limited control of grammar.

Language Assessment Results

A total of 11 high school students completed the pre- and post-program OPIs. As the summary of ratings in the following chart shows, most of them demonstrated improvement (the post-program ratings with (*) indicate improved ratings); four out of the six Japanese-language learners and four out of the five English-language learners scored one level higher over the period of four weeks. The improved students were the ones who had possessed the Novice-Mid to Intermediate-Low range of proficiency at the start of the program. It may be that learners of this range of proficiency benefit most from project-based programs like the Aloha Challenge in terms of language learning. There was no improvement in the oral performance of an Advanced-Mid, Intermediate-Mid, or Novice-Low student.

Pre-program OPI rating	Post-program OPI rating
<i>High school student learners of Japanese</i>	
Advanced-Mid	Advanced-Mid
Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Mid*
Novice-High	Intermediate-Low*
Novice-Mid	Novice-High*
Novice-Mid	Novice-High*
Novice-Low	Novice-Low
<i>High school student learners of English</i>	
Intermediate-Mid	Intermediate-Mid
Novice-High	Intermediate-Low*
Novice-High	Intermediate-Low*
Novice-Mid	Novice-High*
Novice-Mid	Novice-High*

All the participants completed the pre- and post-program interpersonal writing assessment tasks. The results are shown below together with their corresponding OPI results. The post-program scores with (*) indicate improved scores and the ones with (**) mark the students who showed improvement in both oral and writing tasks. First, language gains in the interpersonal writing tasks were not so obvious as those in the oral interview tasks, which is in line with the findings of previous studies on students studying abroad (e.g., Freed, So, & Lazar, 2003), the context similar to the one afforded by the Aloha Challenge program. Nonetheless, all but two students either improved or maintained the writing skills that they initially had. There were two students who demonstrated improvement in both speaking and writing tasks.

The writing task results, however, must be viewed with caution. For no validation work was performed on the instrument used for this assessment; nor was the score reliability test conducted. Thus, the results should be taken as supplementary information about the participants’ language development during the program.

Pre-program writing score	Post-program writing score	Pre-program OPI rating	Post-program OPI rating
High school student learners of Japanese			
5	4	Advanced-Mid	Advanced-Mid
1	1	Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Mid*
3	3	Novice-High	Intermediate-Low*
2	2	Novice-Mid	Novice-High*
1	2**	Novice-Mid	Novice-High**
0	1*	Novice-Low	Novice-Low
High school student learners of English			
5	6*	Advanced	<i>not available</i>
3	4*	Intermediate-Mid	Intermediate-Mid
3	3	Novice-Mid	Novice-High*
3	2.5	Novice-High	Intermediate-Low*
2	2.5**	Novice-High	Intermediate-Low**
2	2	Novice-Mid	Novice-High*

Summary

The assessment results overall show the effectiveness of the 2008 Aloha Challenge program in terms of language proficiency development. The improvement of many of the students’ oral language skills over such a short period of time is particularly noteworthy in light of the current literature on language gains during the study abroad or in learning contexts that afford immersion experience, which only paints an inconclusive picture of the matter and highlights nothing but variability in language performance (DeKeyser, 2007).

Iwasaki’s (2005) study on five non-Asian American college students who studied in Japan for a year may serve as point of reference. The study reports the students’ ACTFL OPI results before and after their study in Japan. The results were as follows (the post-program scores with (*) indicate improved scores):

	Before one-year study in Japan	After one-year study in Japan
College student learners of Japanese		
Student 1	Advanced-Low	Advanced-High*
Student 2	Intermediate-High	Advanced-Low*
Student 3	Intermediate-High	Advanced-Mid*
Student 4	Intermediate-Mid	Intermediate-Mid
Student 5	Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Mid*

Most students in Iwasaki’s study did make improvement. It should be noted, however, that it took them a year to receive a rating of one level higher (students 2 & 5) or two levels higher (students 1 & 3). Student 4 made no improvement after studying in Japan for a year.

Final Remarks

Different language-learning contexts can lead differentially to gains in language performance. The relationship between what a context offers and the nature of what an individual brings to the learning situation is complex and crucial. Contexts differ in terms of what learning opportunities they present and learners differ in terms of how ready they are linguistically and cognitively to seize the opportunities provided and to benefit from them once they do.

Apparently these complex interactions worked well for the participants of the Aloha Challenge program. They are successful examples in oral language acquisition, even though their improvement could be seen only as that of grammatical competence in the given interview situations (as the OPI critics would argue). It is hard to pinpoint what factors might have contributed to those students' impressive language gains without information that enables a fine-grained analysis of individual students' attitudes and behavior. Having said that, I believe that the strongest determinant of success is the students' behavior as language learners during the program, which works as intervening variable between aptitude and initial proficiency on one hand and language learning success on the other.

It remains for future studies to identify what individual (aptitude, attitude, motivation, etc.), cognitive, and linguistic variables are involved in the dynamic of context-learner interaction. As we gain more knowledge about this dynamic, it should become easier to make appropriate fits between learners and learning contexts and to better understand the potential influence of one context of learning such as the Aloha Challenge program on language acquisition success.

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Author

Sufumi So directs the Japanese program at George Mason University (Fairfax, VA). She is one of the 12 original members of the Task Force formed in 2004 for the development of AP Japanese and has since been continuing to dedicate her expertise to AP Japanese in various capacities. She is currently serving as chair of the AP Japanese Exam Development Committee, College Board workshop consultant, and AP Course Audit reviewer. She has presented numerous workshops and lectures on AP Japanese at College Board-endorsed and other professional development events. She holds a Ph.D. in second language education from University of Toronto and has several publications in the field of applied linguistics.