

Cultural Immersion and Language Acquisition: An Autoethnographic Study of Japanese Students in a Summer School English Programme

Nurfarah Athirah Binti Abdullah Sidek, Norazmah Suhailah Binti Abdul Malek

Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

Email: nurfarah@utm.my, norzamah.kl@utm.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i4/23837> DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v13-i4/23837

Published Online: 24 November 2024

Abstract

This study explores the experiences and progress of Japanese students enrolled in a summer school programme focused on English communication through the lens of autoethnography. By engaging in cultural immersion and language acquisition, students faced numerous challenges and opportunities. These factors influenced their learning trajectories. This research employs a qualitative method. Autoethnographic narratives provide an in-depth understanding of the students' personal journeys, reflections and transformations. The findings reveal the complexities of navigating a new linguistic environment. The strategies employed by students to overcome language barriers are also highlighted. Additionally, the impact of cultural exchange on their language development and self-perception is examined. This study contributes to the broader field of language education. It highlights the value of immersive learning environments and personal narratives in fostering language proficiency and cross-cultural understanding.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Japanese Students, Cultural Immersion, Language Acquisition, Summer School Programme

Introduction

It can be difficult for some non-native speakers to learn and acquire a foreign language. Learning a foreign language in an environment other than one's native tongue might help non-native speakers become more at ease and invigorated in their language acquisition process (McGregor, 2021). The summer school programme conducted at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia has the aim to expose and provide participants with meaningful learning experiences in learning and mastering English language. Participants go through the process of learning and grasping English in interactive activities designed for them, apart from the conventional ones such as in-class presentations and writing activities. Among the interactive activities are treasure hunt, local food hunting and tasting, visiting historical places, doing handicrafts, and interacting with local students. This programme is mostly open to universities in Japan and it has been conducted for several years. Even though this programme can be considered a success based on the positive feedback given by participants, the researchers discovered there is a lack of information on the right approach to conduct the activities and assessments

for this programme. Besides, there is also insufficient information on participants' experiences going through the programme. These two issues need to be addressed so that the programme can be more effective in future, and eventually enhance the reputation of the university generally and the faculty specifically in conducting such programme. In seeking the solutions to these two issues, the researchers employed analytic autoethnography to seek and analyse the data. Analytic autoethnography is a form of qualitative research emphasizing self-reflection of the participants and connecting personal insights to cultural, social, and historical contexts (Buckley & Cooper, 2022). By using this method, the researchers would eventually gain a greater grasp of the importance of personal narratives and immersive learning environments in promoting language competency and intercultural understanding among participants.

Objective

This study has three objectives which are to explore the personal journeys of participants through the autoethnography narratives, to understand the strategies used by participants to navigate and overcome language barriers, and to examine the impact of cultural emersion of participants' language proficiency and self-perceptions.

Methods and Instruments

This study employed analytic autoethnography which is a qualitative method that combines aspects of autoethnography with more traditional analytic approaches. Autoethnographers often utilise a range of data collection methods and research tools commonly found in other types of qualitative social research (O'hara, 2018). These methods include participant observation, interviews, conversational engagement, focus groups, narrative analysis, artifact analysis, archival research, journaling, field notes, thematic analysis, description, context, interpretation, and storytelling. They use these methods to create narratives that aim to convey and depict the researcher's lived experiences (along with any co-participants, if applicable) in connection to the phenomena being studied (Yazan et al., 2020). The intention was to delve deeply into the individual experiences of the participants while also placing them in larger social and cultural contexts.

Participants

The data was gathered from 13 Japanese students between the ages of 19 and 21 from Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology (TUAT) who joined a summer school programme at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. Their English proficiency level ranges from CEFR A1 and B1. However, their proficiency level is not an aspect that is investigated. These individuals were instructed to pen down their daily activities, findings, or situations that happened to them over the two-weeks programme within the journal.

Every individual's log was taken into consideration and analysed. The researchers applied reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019) to reach their conclusions. Braun and Clarke's (2019) reflexive thematic analysis (TA) is a qualitative research method emphasising the importance of reflexivity and the researcher's subjectivity in the analysis process. Figure 1 presents a quick overview of the reflexive thematic analysis involved in the process.

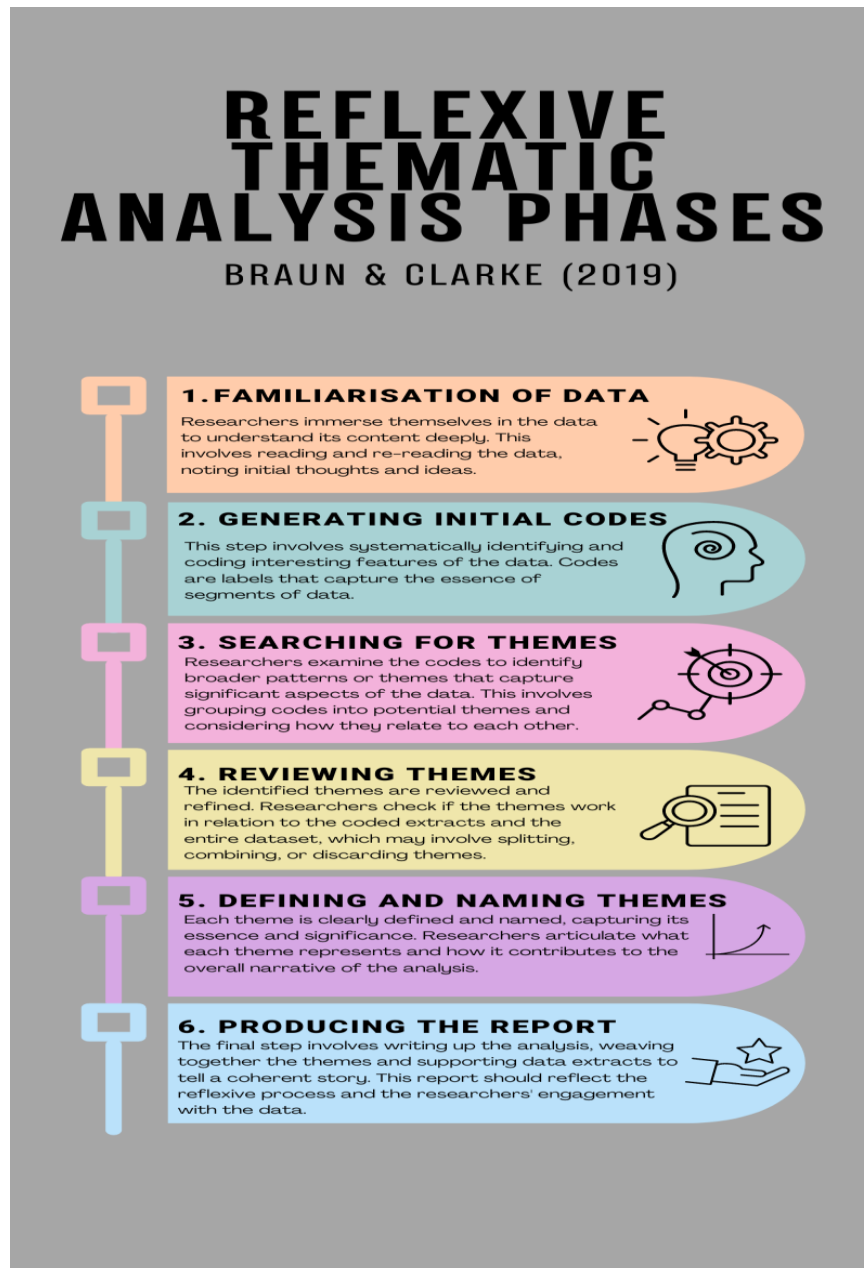


Figure 1: Reflexive thematic analysis phases (Braun & Clarke, 2019)

Reflexive Thematic Analysis of the Students' Journal Entries

#	Initial Coding	Codes	Themes
1	- Learning about pre-writing processes	Pre-writing and essay skills	Academic Growth and Skill Development
	- Importance of outlining essays		
	- Developing presentation skills	Presentation skills	
	- Practicing English writing and speaking	English proficiency improvement	
2	- Trying local Malaysian foods	Exposure to local food	Cultural Immersion and Intercultural Communication
	- Interacting with local students	Intercultural communication	
	- Learning about different cultural practices		
3	- Feeling nervous before presentations	Nervousness and anxiety	Emotional Journey and Personal Reflection
	- Anxiety about writing essays		
	- Satisfaction after completing tasks	Satisfaction and confidence	
	- Building confidence through positive feedback		
	- Reflecting on strengths and weaknesses	Self-reflection	
4	- Learning from peer presentations	Peer interaction	Social Learning and Peer Influence
	- Discussing topics with classmates		
	- Observing peers' strategies		
5	- Receiving constructive feedback from teachers	Teacher feedback	Guidance and Adaptation
	- Adapting to challenges in writing and presentations	Adapting to challenges	
	- Implementing feedback to improve work		

Results and Discussion

The results of this study, which have been obtained from the analysis of the students' journal entries, show some important themes related to their experiences in the summer school programme, that accord with the research objectives. These themes represent such aspects as the student's academic, cultural, and personal growth during the time of the programme.

Academic Growth and Skill Development

One of the most crucial discoveries is the considerable academic growth observed among the students. The participants reviewed substantial improvements in their English proficiency, especially in writing and presentation skills. For instance, the students' knowledge of how to write short articles helped them to come up with ideas for their essays that were then made into an outline, which allowed them to talk coherently, including their brainstorming of ideas. This is in agreement with the Academic Growth and Skill Development theme and aligns with the study's objective to understand how students navigate and overcome language barriers. According to Anandamayi and Madhumurthi (2023), those who have a growth mentality are more likely to see obstacles as chances to learn and improve their knowledge and abilities. Moreover, according to students, the ability to engage with presentations in English, despite the initial nervousness is a guiding factor to the gaining of confidence and the learning of public speaking. These experiences are the best example of the programme's well-planned learning design, which involves both conventional and interactive teaching methods. The writing and speaking tasks incorporated with the constant feedback from the instructors not only improved the students' academic standings but also met the programme's objective of enhancing their English language skills by presenting them with a more simulated environment through immersive learning.

Cultural Immersion and Intercultural Communication

Cultural immersion was yet another crucial aspect of the students' experiences, which was shown through their own experiences of socialising with local Malaysian students and discovering Malaysian food. This theme of Cultural Immersion and Intercultural Communication underlines how the interaction with another culture was behind not only the learning of a new language but also personal growth as well.

The students noted their excitement and interest in tasting local cuisines and engaging in cultural activities. These activities did not only expand their cultural perspectives but also offered opportunities for using English in real-life situations with the local students. The cultural immersion component of the programme also contributed towards further emerged purpose of bringing students to practice English outside the classroom as complementarily to language skills acquired through more organised educational processes in the classroom. The reflections of the students suggest that this kind of cultural exchange had a major effect on their self-perception and view of the world's cultures, addressing the research objective related to the impact of cultural immersion on language proficiency and self-perception. This finding is also aligned with Oigara's (2022) research that found study abroad and other cultural immersion initiatives are thought to enhance students' intercultural competency by giving them first-hand exposure to a variety of cultural contexts. Apart from that, according to Messinger (2022), as a result of reflective interaction with varied cultures, learning experiences become transformative, changing the identities and viewpoints of learners.

Emotional Journey and Personal Reflection

The students went through a lot of emotional ups and downs in the course of the programme, with several of them confessing to experiencing anxiety and tension at the early stages of the programme, especially concerning language and addressing an audience. However, these emotions would frequently turn into contentment and a sense of empowerment as they

moved on with the programme. This evolution is captured in the theme of Emotional Journey and Personal Reflection.

For example, some of the students articulated their fears of standing in front of their colleagues in the early stages of the task, but in due course, they all described the sense of satisfaction they obtained from overcoming such challenges. Receiving positive evaluations from the instructors and peers was crucial in this transformation, supporting students to gain such self-esteem and construct a better self-image as users of the English language. According to van Schie et al. (2023), positive evaluations have the potential to raise self-esteem, which in turn improves one's capacity for social interaction learning. Therefore, this theme illustrates the influence of emotional comfort and encouragement on language acquisition because it motivates learners to use the language even in the face of challenges.

Social Learning and Peer Influence

Another key discovery from the study was how much social interaction and peer learning mattered. This can be seen in the theme Social Learning and Peer Influence, which came from students reflecting on how valuable they found learning with each other. A lot of students mentioned that they found the presentations and group work to be helpful because it gave them strategies on what to do and not do from an observing/interaction standpoint with their classmates.

In addition to enabling the students to practice the language, this social learning environment helped in bringing the students together. Amiruddin et al. (2022) found language acquisition to be improved by constructive interactions among peers that teachers facilitate. So, the motivation and help they received from the other students were important for the students as they were trying to get past their language issues and develop self-esteem. Therefore, this theme reinforces the idea that language skills can benefit substantially from collaborative learning settings, especially in immersive programmes where there is a lot of interaction with the language and their peers.

Guidance and Adaptation

Last but not least, teacher feedback, as well as students' responsiveness to adversity, were emphasized in the theme of Guidance and Adaptation. Students often spoke of the constructive criticism received from their teachers and how it helped them enhance their written work and their presentation skills. They also spoke about their attempts towards addressing the problems of writing longer essays and making presentations in a foreign language.

Adaptive learning and personalised feedback are two important matters in language education. The students' capacity to receive feedback and demonstrate the courage to change their way of doing their tasks was a crucial aspect of the development of the students in general, especially in terms of their academic growth and self-directed learning. Constructive criticism develops critical thinking and self-evaluation, two crucial meta-skills, in addition to improving content knowledge (Ion et al., 2018). So, this finding supports the research objective to explore the strategies employed by students to overcome language barriers and indicates that, with the requisite instruction, students can easily overcome the difficulties of learning in a new linguistic environment.

Conclusion and the Implications for Research

In brief, this study has brought out the best practices for the design of lessons and activities for the summer school programme. Through autoethnography, the researchers can 'walk' with the participants when they tell their own stories and by doing so, the researchers get a deeper understanding of how the outcomes of language proficiency and perceptions of self are influenced by complete cultural immersion. Therefore, this study gives researchers, syllabus designers and instructors of summer school programmes the ability to enhance and strengthen the effectiveness of the programmes they are developing.

References

- Amiruddin, M., Sy, E.N. and Zuhri, M.D. (2022) 'Peer interaction in language learning at SMAN 1 galis pamekasan', *Journey: Journal of English Language and Pedagogy*, 5(2). doi:10.33503/journey.v5i2.2131.
- Anandamayi, S. and Madhumurthi, K. (2023) 'An Assessment on Growth of Knowledge and Skills', *Contemporaneity of Language and Literature in The Robotized Millennium*, 2(2), pp. 31–38. doi:https://doi.org/10.46632/cellrm/2/2/4.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019) 'Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), pp. 589–597. doi:10.1080/2159676x.2019.1628806.
- Buckley, R., & Cooper, M. A. (2022). Analytical autoethnography in tourism research: when, why, how, and how reliable? *Tourism Recreation Research*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2022.2155784
- Ion, G., Sánchez Martí, A., & Agud Morell, I. (2018). Giving or receiving feedback: which is more beneficial to students' learning? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 44(1), 124–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2018.1484881
- Messinger, J. C. (2022) 'Chapter Interculturality in language and culture education', in *Language Education in Multilingual Colombia*. 1st edn. New York: Routledge, pp. 167–171.
- McGregor, J. (2021). An investigation of L2 learning peer interactions in short-term study abroad. *Language learning in study abroad: The multilingual turn*, 72-96.
- O'Hara, S. (2018) 'Autoethnography: The science of writing your lived experience', *HERD: Health Environments Research & Design Journal*, 11(4), pp. 14–17. doi:10.1177/1937586718801425.
- Oigara, J. N. (2022). Cultural Immersion: Exploring Ways to Increase Cultural and Global Awareness Among American College Students. In J. Keengwe (Ed.), *Handbook of Research on Promoting Global Citizenship Education* (pp. 41-57). IGI Global. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-9542-8.ch003
- Yazan, B., Canagarajah, S., & Jain, R. (Eds.). (2020). **Autoethnographies in ELT: Transnational identities, pedagogies, and practices** (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001522