

【Article】

Learning in English

*The Experiences of Japanese University Students
in an English-Medium University in Japan*

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Abstract

This paper reports the findings of a study that examined how students who have graduated from Japanese high schools developed their academic literacy in English and coped with the English-medium university program in Japan over a period of six months. The study used the students' TOEFL ITP scores, grades, survey data, interview records, learning portfolio, and classroom observation notes and attempted to discern the problems students encountered, how successful the students were in overcoming them, and what factors appear to have been involved in influencing the learning outcomes. The paper also demonstrates the existence of variation between students in how they developed as learners and suggests that this variation is related to the students' educational and personal backgrounds. Furthermore, it shows that contextual variables which include curriculum and instruction, interaction between students enrolled in the program, and the culture and ethos of the community co-constructed by those involved in the program affect the students in significant ways and impact their learning. In contrast to studies that focus on the problematic aspect of Japan's university entrance exam system and secondary education, particularly English-language education, this study examined these contextual variables in light of how students used their experience to cope with—sometimes successfully—the challenges of learning in an English-medium university program.

Introduction

Higher education in Japan is noted to be profoundly resistant to change even though it is often referred to as the Achilles heel of Japan's highly efficient social and economic system. Supporting this view is a much publicized global ranking of Japanese universities such as the one conducted by The Times Higher Education and Reuters (Japan Times, 2010) which indicates that only 5 Japanese universities made the list for the world's top 200 universities in 2010.

This result is not news to Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), which has been relentlessly attempting to revitalize Japanese universities by implementing significant reforms. These measures include the 2004 change in the status of Japanese national universities to independent administrative corporations that allow more flexibility though also exposing the educational institutions to the severe competition faced by private universities; the 2003 *Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities* that promotes the teaching of functional abilities in English in order to develop competitive human resources for the global society; and the 2009 *Global 30 Project* that gives funding to core universities to intake 300,000 international students so that Japanese universities can keep up with the global competition to attract high-quality students who might become Japan's valuable human capital in the future.

Impelled by such initiatives, the need to recruit qualified students amid the declining population of university-bound youths at home, and the spread of English as the language of higher education across the world,¹ many Japanese universities have started to offer English-medium programs in which students can take all their courses in English. These English-medium programs admit a significant number of domestic high school graduates, many of who are not immediately ready for coursework in English and offer preparation through academic English courses. From the perspective of the Japanese students, the English-medium programs are attractive because, by simultaneously providing opportunities to acquire both English and content knowledge, they could give the graduates an edge in today's globalized and competitive job market. However, little is known about the effectiveness of such programs and any yield regarding the desired learning outcome for the students.

Hence, this paper reports the findings of a study that examined how students who have graduated from typical Japanese high schools developed their academic literacy in English and coped with the English-medium university program in Japan, an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, over a period of six months. Specifically, the study attempted to discern the problems students encountered, how successful the students were in overcoming them, and what factors appeared to have been involved in determining the initial outcomes of their educational experience.

Previous Studies

Gaps between English Curriculum & High School English Classes

Many studies suggest that learning in an English-medium university is a major challenge for typical Japanese high school graduates because of gaps between EFL skills taught in the Japanese high school and the communicative and academic English skills needed to succeed in an English-medium university. Some studies (Gorsuch, 2000; Nishino, 2008; Sato, 2002) indicate that even though the EFL curriculum reform of 1998 and 1999 initiated by MEXT featured a departure from a traditional grammatical syllabus and an introduction of the communicative approach, its implementation was stymied by the pressures for teachers to teach to the university entrance exams which do not emphasize communicative skills. Other studies show other deficits: training to teach the communicative approach does not change the teachers' beliefs and practices that are shaped largely by the university entrance exams (Pacek, 1996); lessons were highly structured with little opportunity for students to engage in authentic communication even in MEXT-mandated oral communication classes (Taguchi, 2005); and the content of the MEXT-authorized communication textbooks consists of mostly mechanical and structured exercises that provide little opportunity for negotiation of meaning (McGroarty and Taguchi, 2005).

More recently in 2009, MEXT introduced yet a newer curriculum called New Course of Study [Shin Shidou Youryou] which in addition to communicative skills emphasizes academic English including skills to evaluate facts and opinions from multiple perspectives, summarize and present information, and speak and write using reasoning while considering the audience and purpose. Although it is still too early to evaluate its effect, with the continued presence of the same impediments that stymied earlier curriculum reform, much change cannot be expected. In fact, a recent study by Kobayakawa (2011) shows that writing tasks in MEXT-authorized textbooks feature mostly controlled writing tasks such as *fill in the blank* and *translate the following* rather than tasks which enable students to write freely to communicate their ideas and opinions. Additional studies (McKinley 2010; Rabbini, 2003) indicate that writing instruction is one of the neglected areas in EFL education and hence, Japanese high-school graduates cannot be expected to have acquired the requisite academic literacy skills in English to succeed in an English-medium university.

Transitioning to English-medium University

Research into how students with such background transition to an English-medium university is nearly non-existent. One exception is Taguchi's exploratory study (2005), which reveals that students attributed their academic difficulty to a dearth of communicative opportunities in English, a focus on translation of texts rather than comprehension, and a lack of experience writing essays during their English classes in high school as a primary source of the difficulty. However, this study relied on retrospective data obtained from a relatively small number of students after completion of two semesters (1 year) of instruction and did not address whether the students managed to overcome their academic English deficiencies and what their learning outcomes were.

Of a handful of studies that have been conducted that followed the academic literacy development of Japanese students, some involved ESL contexts where English is the dominant language while others involved EFL contexts. Generally, ESL context studies suggest that learners face major challenges but more importantly that these challenges are surmountable. The studies also indicate active learner involvement in the learning process. For example, Spack's (1997) 3-year longitudinal case study of a Japanese student in a U.S. university shows that time is required to acquire academic literacy in English demanded by the university. However, by illustrating how the learner reflected on her own experiences, advocated for herself, and appropriated the discourses of the academic community without necessarily accepting them, the study suggests the role of personal agency in successful learning. Morita's study (2004) that followed the academic discourse socialization of six Japanese learners in a Canadian university also depicts the challenges students faced but similarly demonstrates their exercise of personal agency as they attempted to shape their own learning and negotiated their participation in the academic *community-of-practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991) even though success depended partly on how power relationships were constructed in the different classroom contexts.

The idea that learners' personal agency influences the path of learning accords with the findings of studies focusing on language learning motivation and learner autonomy which also indicate that L2 motivation is dynamic and its transformation is mediated by context: the classroom and communities in which learners interact (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Gao, 2008; Gan, Humphreys, & Hamp-Lyons 2004; Noels, Clement, & Pelletier, 1999; Tanaka 2011; Ushioda, 2009). Of note too is that the concept of the community has evolved to include not only the macro- and micro- communities that surround the learners but also communities that exist within the world-wide-web or are

imagined. Indeed, some studies have suggested that an imagined community facilitates L2 learning motivation. For example, Sasaki's study (2009) found that imagined L2 community was critical in fostering motivation to improve L2 writing in the participants of her study. Tanaka's study (2011) also shows that learner motivation was enhanced not by the actual communities that surround the learner but also by the community of international students with which the learner interacted as well as the imagined community of English speakers in which the learner claimed membership.

The Need to Re-examine the Assumption

The assumption based on studies introduced above that Japanese high school graduates are ill-equipped to succeed in an English-medium university needs to be re-examined on a number of grounds. First, some studies (Oi, 2005; Stapleton, 2001; Tanaka, 2009) show that this deficit is easily remedied. For example, Stapleton (2001) demonstrates that given appropriate instruction, Japanese university students acquire skills to write essays in English that display critical thinking in a relatively short time. Rinnert and Kobayashi (2009) demonstrate that students studying for the university entrance exam often receive intensive essay writing instruction and practice that emphasizes logical argumentation. The study also suggests that such skills learned in Japanese aid in writing essays in English.

Hence, the present study was undertaken, leaving open the possibility that even though Japanese high school graduates may not bring to their English-medium university classroom the requisite academic English skills to *display* academic literacy in a form prescribed by western academia, they may have acquired a divergent form of academic literacy, which demands an equally challenging intellectual exercise. Indeed, the national language arts curriculum articulates as its standard the ability to think logically, and to analyze and understand a text.² That academic literacy itself is a socially constructed concept has been suggested by various researchers (Brookfield, 1997; Hull, Rose, Fraser & Castellano, 1991; Vandermensbrugge, 2004).

Likewise, this study re-examined how the students' experience in high school as well as experience studying for the university entrance exams played out in their academic lives after matriculation into an English-medium university. This step was taken in consideration of an ethnographic study by Tanaka (2011) which suggests salient differences in how learners viewed the university entrance exam with some claiming and demonstrating its positive effect not only on achievement motivation but also on the development of

time-management, and effective study skills.

The present study, unlike most of the studies in L2 learning, was conducted in an English-medium university within a larger social context where Japanese is the language of the community. Whether this bilingual aspect impacts academic literacy development is not well researched. Hence, a major point of inquiry was whether an EFL context can drive learner motivation and what mechanism is involved in this process.

Methodology

Research Setting

This 6-month mixed-method study was conducted in a mid-size private university in eastern Japan. The participants of the study were drawn from an English-medium academic department within a larger faculty in the university. Though the faculty is international in some respects with a well-travelled bilingual professorial staff, it still maintains a distinctively Japanese flavor in terms of both curriculum and instruction, and organizational structures and practices.

The academic department where the participants belonged was new when the study began and had matriculated a small cohort of students. This cohort had several students who were returnees from overseas and were nearly fluent bilingual Japanese-English speakers. However, the majority of the students were from Japanese high schools with little experience using English for communication or academic studies. The Academic English Program in which the participants belonged had clearly articulated goals and preferred instructional practices, though how well these are implemented are unknown. All students had to take a 4-unit freshmen composition course, and students who matriculated from Japanese schools were required to take a 4-unit academic skills course. Additionally, students had to take a 1-unit tutorial course and a 4-unit support course in reading and writing, which was attached to a freshmen seminar course taught by a team of content faculty members. In fact, during the first term, the majority of the courses students took were in the academic English program.

Participants

This six-month study drew 26 participants (20 females and 6 males) whose experiences living overseas were less than 10 months each from a larger-pool of students.

Because this study focused on typical Japanese high school graduates, only those who had not studied in a school overseas during elementary and secondary schooling were selected as participants. The average Institutional TOEFL (TOEFL ITP) score of the participants when the study began was 460.

The participants had volunteered to participate in this study after attending a meeting, which took place after classes that explained the present study and its goals and what was expected of them. They were also told of the option not to participate, that participation had no bearing on course grade, and that identities would be protected.

Data Collection and Analysis

Multiple data collection methods including surveys, in-depth group interviews and discussions, follow-up face-to-face interactions, informal conversations, and observations of participants in classroom and other contexts were used in this study. The students responded to a survey during the first day of university. Then, in-depth interviews were conducted in groups of 2 to 4 participants approximately 5 weeks after the participants began studies in the English-medium university and were approximately 90-120 min in duration. Data collection continued through interactions with the participants after their classes during the duration of the study.

Some of the participants were students in the classes of the authors, while others were not. While we weighed the possible disadvantage this might cause, such as the need to overcome the student-faculty barrier, we concluded that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages. We were able to immerse ourselves in the research setting so that we could understand the meaning of the participants' experiences and activities. Also, our familiarity with the research setting assisted us in understanding the data.

There were specific questions that needed to be asked about the participants' language learning history and experience, the changes in motivation they experienced from the beginning of the term through the end of the term as they studied in English and their immediate academic goals as well as their future personal and career goals. These sessions were conducted primarily in Japanese though the participants and code switched between Japanese and English often.³ Notes were taken during the interviews although students were also asked to write out their own thoughts on the questions retrospectively after the interviews. Notes were also taken on observations and informal conversation sessions afterwards but within the same day.

Following the procedures of qualitative research, we let the participants inform us

by heeding to their observations, thoughts, and insights. We held many analytical and discussion sessions in which we examined the data, and through these sessions, recurring themes emerged inductively. We took advantage of being co-researchers in the understanding of the data to increase the validity of the research.

Findings

Participants as Individuals

Every participant of our study is a unique individual with different aspects:

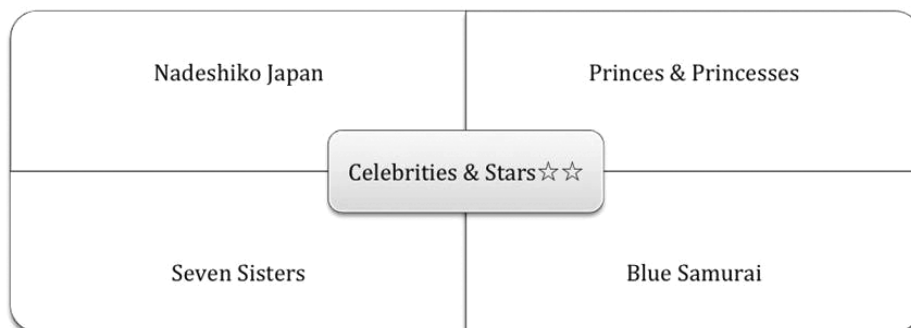
1. Academic history: While some participants attended private schools others attended public schools, and participated in their studies and other activities differently. There are differences in the way in which they prepared for getting into university.
2. Personal history: The participants hailed from different geographical regions, were brought up in different types of homes with different family configurations, and had built relationships within various communities.
3. Personal characteristics: The participants showed individual differences in cognitive and social styles, communicative styles and needs, and affect.

These differences mean participants have unique stories of EFL learning even though they found themselves together in an English-immersion university program in Japan (EIP) situated within the broader socio-cultural context of Japan.

Participants as Members of Micro-Communities

While each participant showed unique qualities as an individual, we observed that they at once shaped and were shaped by the micro-communities within the EIP community, and that these micro-communities were forming based on similarities between the participants in key experiences and in response to the challenges of finding a way to survive in the EIP environment. Hence, the participants were categorized into groups and given iconic names that best represented who they are from the researchers' perspective. Other students in the community who interacted with the participants were also given iconic names.

Table 1 Iconic Names of Participants & Their Friends



Below is an explanation for the naming of the non-participants of the study. The explanation of naming for the participants of the study will be given as each of the groups—Nadeshiko Japan, Blue Samurai, Seven Sisters, Princesses, and Princes—is discussed in detail below. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants as well as all those who interacted with them in order to protect their identity.

Celebrities

Madelene, Monica, Michele, Melissa, Michael, Mark, Matthew

One group of students—Madelene, Monica, Michele, Melissa, Michael, Mark and Matthew—named Celebrities, is a group of ethnically Japanese returnee students who, in a program devoid of non-Japanese students, were de facto the program's *foreign students*. Some of them are in fact more like foreign students than Japanese students because of living a majority of their lives overseas and being educated in English. They are rivals to some and role models to other participants of the program. At once admired and identified as objects of envy, they are given the label Celebrities.

Stars

Eva and Kai

Two students—Eva and Kai—have been labeled Stars because though they belong to the Celebrities group, they have earned a special status as a pair who bridged the gap between the Celebrities and the other students, and facilitated the development of friendship across the program.

The Others

The participants interacted with the professors in the program, the university community and student activity groups and clubs outside the EIP, their families and significant others, and the world outside the university.

Nadeshiko Japan

Nanako, Moeko, Yukiko, Michiko, Asako, Rikako, Akiko

Nadeshiko Japan can be characterized as participants who rose to the challenge and overcame difficulties to become successful in the EIP by the strength of goal-orientation, hard work, and ability to endure and persevere. In this sense, they are like Nadeshiko Japan, the women's soccer team that won the 2011 World Cup.

Specifically, what were they like as students? The data gleaned from the participants' narratives, observations, and other sources indicate that all of them have led an intense and rigorous life as high school students. In Japan, some students avoid becoming involved in time-consuming extra-curricular activities and devote themselves to passing the university entrance exam. However, Nadeshiko Japan was fully involved, working hard to maintain top-tier academic status as high school students, participating in sports and other extra-curricular activities, and attending *juku*⁴ to prepare for the university entrance exam. Such a strenuous schedule is comparable to working 6 a.m. - 1 a.m. for 6-1/2 days a week with little relief during the semester breaks for several years.

For example, Michiko became a member of her high school orchestra group, which required a significant amount of practice time (10 hours a week). She continued to balance being a member of this group and studying for the university entrance exam until a semester before the university entrance exam in which she began to put all her energy into passing the exam. Hence she states, "I am proud that I could study hard and also be active in the club." Similarly, Yukiko participated in a sports team, was involved in an international exchange program, and also studied intensively for the university entrance exam.

Interestingly, all members of Nadeshiko Japan are the quiet, studious type, but also highly competitive and competent enough to pass the entrance exams to top-tier universities. For example, Nanako stated that in the national standardized practice test for university applicants, she was ranked 4th nationally, which means that she was highly likely to have been accepted at any university in Japan if she had been able to perform

competently during the university entrance exams. In addition, she was a recipient of a highly competitive scholarship award based on academic excellence. In fact, of the six Nadeshiko Japan, five entered EIP through Ippan Nyushi (General Exams) and only one was accepted based on the recommendation from an affiliate high school, which indicates that she was at the top of the class.

An important inquiry was whether they were well prepared for the English language university program. The answer to this question comes in two parts. First, research data indicate that they were self-confident as they began their studies, presumably because of their past academic successes. However, their excellence in English—demonstrated by top scores in the university entrance exams and high marks in high school English classes—was completely inadequate to predict success for EIP. All of them lost self-confidence as they experienced the reality of undertaking serious academic work in English. Their affective responses underscore the difficulty they experienced:

I was happy to be in this department. But soon, I realized that keeping up with all the assignments was difficult. I had no time to sleep or refresh myself. I was surprised at the level of fluency of my classmates who were returnees and I nearly lost my motivation. (Moeko)

My expectation of being immersed in English was met. But right away, I felt I couldn't keep up with the lectures...the returnees' English abilities shocked and silenced me. I lost my self-confidence and became depressed. (Nanako)

I thought I made the right choice. This program was an opportunity to develop my English and myself. The English ability of the returnee students overwhelmed me. I felt ashamed to speak English because I couldn't speak perfectly and I was upset I couldn't understand the lecture. (Yukiko)

However, our Nadeshiko Japan's recovery was almost instantaneous. Research data indicate that within a few weeks, they picked themselves up toward the road to recovery. Not only that, their academic success toward the end of this 6-month study is indisputable. Their average GPA is 3.3 and their TOEFL ITP score rose from an average of 480 to 515. More importantly, however, classroom observational data as well as their academic portfolio, which contains their essays, show remarkable advances in their academic English and communicative competence in English.

Their success most likely has to do with their academic experience. We suggest that they have acquired effective academic survival skills during their high school careers. Specifically, the data show that they are likely to have already acquired the following skills that they utilized to cope with the challenges:

- Academic literacy in L1, which is likely to be important for the development of L2

academic literacy.

- Learning strategies to help cope with challenging academic tasks.
- Time management skills to cope with multiple tasks.
- Perseverance to forgo immediate gratification to satisfy goals.
- Endurance to withstand and even thrive under competition.
- Ability to study autonomously.

We further suggest that they succeeded because of their autonomous learner behavior, effective learning strategies, and their fortitude, which can be evidenced by their narratives:

I decided not to worry about my lack of English or about making mistakes. I actually studied the words I did not know and tried to use them. I made an effort to express difficult things using expressions I knew. I motivated myself by thinking about the future and used the returnees as my behavioral model. (Yukiko)

I studied harder to overcome my depression. I recorded lectures and created opportunities to speak English. For example, I spoke English with my sister. I accepted the situation of not being the best student in the class and reminded myself again and again that the assignments were improving my English and that I am a person who never gives up. I also realized that I could do some things better than the returnees. (Nanako)

I worked on my English by renting movies and listening to parts again and again to improve my listening skills. I looked at others' essays to learn how to write essays. I tried to use English as much as possible and looked for English speaking jobs—like working for McDonalds on a U.S. base. (Moeko)

As shown above, Nadeshiko Japan's high school experience is likely to be related to their exceptional ability to transform themselves from being shocked and silenced students into successful students in the EIP. However, another common feature that was noted was that they all had clear future goals expressed as a desire to transform to *become a successful person*, to use one participant's words. Indeed, research data indicate that Nadeshiko Japan selected this EIP not just to pursue a specific career goal or learn specific skills such as English, but also to put themselves in a challenging environment in order to transform their identity. That is, learning English is associated with acquiring a different identity—what Dörnyei (2009) calls *ideal L2-speaking self*.

To sum up, English is an agent of change to them, and the EIP is seen as a link to an English-speaking community in the world in which they want to participate. The data also indicate that their desire to participate in an English speaking community developed

from a vague idea to something more concrete as they interacted with the socio-cultural context in which they were embedded. For example, Asako's idea during the first few weeks of studying in the EIP was to become a competent English user. However, following classes in which she heard inspiring speeches and lectures on the importance of making decisions based on synthesizing multiple perspectives, her narrative changed:

I'm a competitive person. I am happy to see myself doing better than other students. My goal is to acquire an ability to see things from multiple perspectives, to be flexible and be able to communicate with people from abroad. I want to be like Steve Jobs—to be someone who loves what she is doing. Before coming here, I never thought about helping others, but, after watching TED.com videos, I learned more about the real world and began to consider what I can do for the world, especially what I can do for people in poverty. (Asako)

Similarly, while Nanako toyed with the idea of taking over her father's business and also wished to follow her sibling's footsteps by going overseas as her university life started, five months later, her goal had changed somewhat:

If I want to be successful in the future, I need to try difficult things...at first, I wanted to do what my sister did—study abroad, acquire English, and have a successful career. This idea has now changed: Now I want to be a university English professor like Professor Iwasaki. I want to teach applied linguistics. (Nanako)

I don't want to be beaten by other students, so by comparing myself with other students, I stayed motivated. I think the international way of thinking is better than the Japanese way and I have now come to understand the importance of expressing my opinion in front of others. I want to get a job that is connected to international relations, so I need to improve my English skills. (Akiko)

A central inquiry of theirs led Nadeshiko Japan to be *sotomuki* (interested in going overseas and communicating with those outside Japan) when many Japanese youths are reputed to be *uchimuki* (apathetic about what is going on outside Japan). Hence we examined their vision of ideal L2 self in relation to their personal histories. The results of this investigation are similar to the findings of Yashima (2000): We found that all the Nadeshiko Japan had had a brush with international experience in their past and or knew significant others with international experience whom they wanted to emulate:

Now, I really want to join international volunteer activities because I was so impressed with the work of international volunteers from Canada who were in my hometown, which was devastated by an earthquake. (Yukiko)

I did a homestay in the US and grew to like English. I am really interested in becoming a good English speaker, a better speaker than my cousin who speaks English fluently. With English skills, I feel I can do something for people in developing countries and help establish good

relations between Japan and other countries. (Rikako)

When I went to China, my friend's family looked at my behavior and usually said, "Oh, that is exactly how Japanese behave and think..." I want to be flexible and think differently. (Moeko)

With which communities did Nadeshiko Japan interact? According to Ushioda (2009), the community in which a language learner finds herself is multi-layered and this situation appears to be the case for all the participants of the study. Not surprisingly, at university Nadeshiko Japan identified first and foremost with their teammates—the other Nadeshiko Japan who shared common challenges (difficulty communicating in English), and common characteristics (competitiveness, goal-orientedness, and high achievement motivation). They appeared to find solace in associating with one another and also helped one another with academic work by relying on one another's strengths.

Also, while they unanimously stated that the lack of overseas students in the program was a disappointment, they nevertheless felt embedded in a distinctive community in which the dissimilar others that occupied their gaze were the Celebrities—the returnee students. They commented frequently on the returnees conversing in English with apparent ease within and outside the classroom and displaying behaviors at once admirable and overbearing. For some Nadeshiko Japan, Celebrities were symbolic rivals with whom they must one day engage in a conversational match:

I felt a great gap between my own background and that of the returnees...I joined the English Speaking Society [university English-speaking club], which enabled me to enjoy speaking English outside the class with people outside the program. (Michiko)

This program is supposed to be an international community with foreign students so I was disappointed that there weren't any USU [US University] students and foreign students. I have learned a lot from the returnee students about the importance of expressing my opinion. Sometimes, they are intimidating, threatening, and irritating but they are also inspiring. (Yukiko)

Indeed, classroom observation data indicate that Nadeshiko Japan were cowed by the returnee students in the classroom and were often reticent to speak up during group work that included the returnees as group members. On the other hand, when grouped together with students who were not returnees, they were more forthcoming.

Finally, what appeared to work in favor of Nadeshiko Japan was their association with other communities of coaches and cheer-leaders: Teachers, academic advisors, friends in and outside the program, and family members appeared to provide moral support:

I talk a lot with my friends who are very supportive. My friendship with Kika is helpful and my tutorial is really helpful. I come from a family in which we discuss a lot of international

issues and that has an influence on who I am today. (Moeko)

Talking to friends really motivates me. Eva is great even though she is a returnee since she understands us when we speak and doesn't make us feel bad. I am motivated by Professor Iwasaki's words and the help I get from the tutorials. (Rikako)

In conclusion, Nadeshiko Japan showed a high degree of success in the 6-month duration of the study. This success can be attributed in part to their prior academic experience, which prepared them well except in performing academic tasks in English. However, to a large extent, their success involved a synergy between their personal and life goals and the community the program created and populated with faculty, students, and others.

Blue Samurai

Chikara, Yasushi, Mamoru, and Kaito

How can Blue Samurai be characterized? Research data indicate that all Blue Samurai have experienced rigorous training in high school sports teams and way of coping with this challenge of becoming successful in an all-English environment was influenced by sports discourse, and hence the label Blue Samurai, a name given to Japan's beloved national soccer team. For example, their narratives frequently contained phrases such as *I need to get accustomed to hardships*, *I need to make an effort and fight against any kind of hardship*, and *I need to struggle to be successful*. Indeed, in Japanese high schools, for those belonging to a sports team, often, the choice is to give up on academics and hence on entering a top-tier university or to master time-management skills to balance school life between sports and academics.

All the Blue Samurai entered the EIP through Ippan Nyushi, making them similar in academic preparation to Nadeshiko Japan. However, they were not the male counterparts of the quiet, studious, and competitive Nadeshiko Japan, and while they liked English, they did not all excel in it in high school like Nadeshiko Japan.

Regarding the inquiry of whether they were well prepared for the English language university program, the data show that because they experienced some degree of success in their high school career like Nadeshiko Japan, they too began university studies with some amount of self-confidence. Their self-confidence, also fueled by an optimistic demeanor and high hopes for the program, were shattered mercilessly just as soon as classes began. As in the case of Nadeshiko Japan, their affective response was to feel *ashamed*:

I wanted to be in an all-English environment and my expectation was met. But it was a lot

harder than I expected. I found out that my level of English was low and I quickly sought help but really felt ashamed about it. (Yasushi)

I was mortified because everyone else spoke English much better than me [sic]. I was afraid of speaking in front of others in English and was ashamed of my poor ability to speak English. (Kaito)

However, as in the case of Nadeshiko Japan, they were able to turn around dire circumstances relatively quickly. Their average GPA of 2.5 during the first term is not as admirable but decent. Their TOEFL score increased an average of over 50 points from an average of 447 to 501 collectively. Classroom observation data and the essays in their academic portfolio show significant advances in the development of their academic literacy and communicative competence in English.

Their success engaging in challenging academic tasks most likely has to do with coping strategies acquired in the past, most likely in high school:

- Academic literacy in first language, though not as developed as Nadeshiko Japan.
- Time management skills to cope with multiple tasks, though they had to work on improving it further.
- Perseverance to forgo immediate gratification to satisfy goals equal to Nadeshiko Japan.
- Endurance to withstand and even thrive under competition equal to Nadeshiko Japan.

Clearly, the Blue Samurai shared some important coping strategies—namely perseverance to forgo immediate gratification to achieve goals—and endurance to withstand and even thrive under competition. Also, although they did not display coping strategies which Nadeshiko Japan possessed, they displayed different types of coping strategies: (a) readiness to rely on others for support; and (b) willingness to rely on the coaching of the Celebrities and Stars who have become their de facto role models. Blue Samurai described coping:

In this difficult situation, I proactively studied. I worked on learning how to study English and also my time management skills to balance my academic life with my athletic life—I am a member of an athletic team. I remind myself of my goals of studying abroad and the need to make an effort. One thing I do is to use the returnee students as my role model—I try to imitate their attitude and behavior. (Yasushi)

I began to actively investigate how I could best learn English and decided that I need to get along with others, seek advice from them, and work with them. I decided to use the returnees as language models and imitate their language use. Also, I decided never to be absent from class and recognize my own problems of motivation and engagement and work to improve

them. (Chikara)

This contrast between Nadeshiko Japan and Blue Samurai is curious, breaking a common notion that women tend to seek cooperation and support from others to find solutions to problems and that men tend to be more individualistic and reluctant to seek help from others when trying to solve their problems.

Just like Nadeshiko Japan, Blue Samurai had clear future goals tied specifically to learning English. However, while Nadeshiko Japan saw English as an agent of change, and as a means to acquire a different identity, Blue Samurai saw English as a necessary tool to fulfill an ideal self-image:

I want to feel globalization...I want to participate in overseas aid programs and contribute what I know. I envision myself going to many different countries, becoming involved in giving food and education to the needy. (Yasushi)

I want to be a bridge between Japan and the rest of the world. I used to think that English was something particularly specialized, but now I have come to understand that it is a necessary tool for our future. (Mamoru)

In other words, to the Blue Samurai, learning English was not driven by intrinsic or extrinsic motivation but by an altruistic need to do something positive for the world. However, like Nadeshiko Japan, their past international experience and the influence of their significant others and immediate role models most likely convinced them to become *sotomuki*. For example, Yasushi was influenced both by his parents who had experience studying abroad and spoke to him about the merit of studying abroad and by his own experience of participating in volunteer work in Southeast Asia. Chikara was influenced by his *Juku* teacher, a study abroad returnee and by his older sibling who attended an international university.

To Blue Samurai, joining a community of people within their immediate surroundings, such as the Celebrities, the Stars, and even the non-Japanese faculty members, was a first step to venture beyond Japan. Interacting with the Blue Samurai, we got a sense that they have strong needs to affiliate that match their favored coping strategy of seeking support from others. For example, they were more than happy to narrate their stories and to gain something from the experience. Also, unlike members of Nadeshiko Japan who were quite reticent to associate with the returnees, the Blue samurai enthusiastically joined the community of returnees and admired them as role models:

I really feel that the way of thinking and the attitudes of the returnee students are different—talking to them has made me become more interested in things I don't know—the

world I haven't seen. (Yasushi)

Natasha, Eva, and Mark have been supportive of me. When I was in class with these returnees, I was really impressed by them—they are cool in their manners and exude a positive attitude. (Mamoru)

Classroom observation of Blue Samurai shows that their willingness to get close to the returnees supported their language learning endeavors. For example, during group work, Yasushi showed a special talent in listening to the utterances of the returnees and by using the same phrases, facilitating his group's discussion.

Blue Samurai as a group had its own communities of friends who appeared to serve as the *coaches* and *cheerleaders* just like the communities that surrounded Nadeshiko Japan. Perhaps because there were fewer male students or because they were a cohesive group, they had layers of communities that supported them including the fellow Blue Samurais, other classmates, the returnees, the cram school teachers, high school teachers, tutors, professors, academic advisors, sports club sempai and kohai, siblings and parents. As will be discussed later, not all participants were blessed with supportive communities. Indeed, some participants associated with communities which worked against language learning by exerting demotivating influences.

The Seven Sisters

Miya, Nana, Mina, Kara, Mona, Kika, Nena

The Seven Sisters coped with the challenge of attempting to become successful in EIP using strategies similar to one another. Hence, they were labeled Seven Sisters. Generally, they displayed dispositions associated with academic literacy: Most of them had near perfect attendance records and were in class with their notebooks open and pencils poised to take notes when professors walked into their classrooms, like Nadeshiko Japan. However, unlike the latter, they showed less self-confidence about their ability to succeed in EIP. Also, even though they liked English as a subject matter, they did not consider themselves adept students of English. A dislike of some aspects of their past school experience may have dampened their enthusiasm for studying and lowered the academic self-confidence of some Seven Sisters. For example, Kara disclosed that she had no choice but to attend a high school for special students with low achievement orientation because she had only completed one year of middle school. Similarly, Nana disclosed, "I wanted to improve my English speaking ability and I studied English for 6 years but in the

end, I couldn't find the true meaning of studying English" about her high school English classes.

The way Seven Sisters coped with the surprisingly challenging academic life EIP suddenly imposed upon them was markedly different from the coping strategies of Nadeshiko Japan:

I could hardly understand what the professors were saying and was overwhelmed by the returnees. Therefore, I had to face the reality that my English proficiency was not as good as I anticipated and I lost my self-confidence. This was a stressful experience and I became passive for a while. But I somehow pulled myself together and began to hang out with friends who are motivating—Michiko, Nanako, and Mark. (Kara)

I was overwhelmed by the assignments and worried that I had chosen the wrong university. For a while, I withdrew and isolated myself from everything. But by talking to friends and sharing our mutual concerns, I have come to feel more relaxed. (Mona)

The primary strategy used by Seven Sisters was to team up with those who could support them academically and more importantly, those who could enhance their motivation. Observation data indicate that notably Mona, Kara, Nana were gifted with interpersonal intelligence that permitted creation of a tight and well-functioning network of friends mutually supportive in dealing with a wide range of problems—both academic and personal—in the context of the EIP.

How were they prepared for EIP? First, research data show that they were not self-confident beginning studies perhaps because past academic record was not stellar. They lacked confidence realizing they lacked English competence. Indeed, they were aware that their TOEFL score—with the group average of 460—was not high enough to thrive in EIP. Nevertheless, they were brave or perhaps eccentric enough to immerse themselves in an extremely challenging environment. Like Nadeshiko Japan, their initial joy of joining a very special program turned quickly into a major source of stress. Their affective responses underscore the difficulty:

I loved the all-English program with lots of great English speakers from whom I can learn more English than other students in the university. However, the program was harder than I expected because my level of English was low...I felt both nervous and sad. (Miya)

The program was more difficult than I expected. I was stressed, overwhelmed, and worried that perhaps I couldn't keep up with the courses. (Mina)

However, research data show that within a few weeks, they all learned to cope with their predicament. While their academic performance during the first term was not stellar, it

was not disastrous: Their first term GPA was all above 2.7 and their TOEFL score after 5 months rose more than 30 points. More importantly, classroom observational data and their academic portfolio show moderate advances in academic English and communicative competence in English. For example, while they hardly participated in group discussions during the first 3 months, at the end of the 6 months period, they became capable of making a positive contribution to discussions.

That their interpersonal intelligence helped them find support within the community—from the Celebrities, the Stars, the Blue Samurai and the Nadeshiko Japan—has been discussed above. Beyond that, however, it appears that even though they may have disliked their high school experience, they most likely acquired some academic survival skills in high school:

- Academic literacy in first language, though not as high as Nadeshiko Japan.
- Perseverance to forgo immediate gratification to satisfy goals equal to Nadeshiko Japan and Blue Samurai.
- Endurance to withstand and even thrive under competition equal to Nadeshiko Japan and Blue Samurai.

These narratives depict their resourcefulness and their fortitude, which found expression in active visualization of ideal L2-speaking selves:

I went to friends for help and seek advice from others. I tried to envision my future to remind myself that I can do it. (Kika)

I kept on telling myself that even if the assignment is difficult, it will be over. I kept reminding myself of my future and why I was doing this. (Mona)

I also attended Professor Iwasaki's class imagining that I could speak English to become motivated. (Kara)

Another common feature of Seven Sisters is clear future goals—both personal and professional—connected to using English. While the idea of learning English to change one's identity was a strong theme for Nadeshiko Japan, for Seven Sisters English was seen as the key to joining an *imagined* English speaking community somewhere in the world in which they wanted to also live and work:

English is important for getting a job. I want to work in an NGO that serves the international community or work in the tourism industry to bring people of different countries closer. (Nana)

My mom used to say, "In order for girls to survive and be successful in this world, we need English." In high school, I'd forgotten my hungry spirit but it's coming back now. I used to

dreamily think about becoming a newscaster. But now, I want to get a specific qualification though I want to get married too. (Nena)

Among the Seven Sisters, six experienced a home stay in either the US or Australia. The exception had experience living in a school dormitory with international students visiting Japan. They all stated early international experience as having a significant influence on their thinking.

As a group, Seven Sisters were diverse in some aspects. Some, by using social skills, they floated in and out of different communities and enjoyed doing so. For example, Mona, Kara, and Nena appeared to be so well connected that they knew everything that was going on with everyone in the entire program. Mona, for example, informed us of the various communities within the EIP and drew us a picture of how everyone was placed in this community. Other members of Seven Sisters stated that they had their own *best-friends*. For example, having similar interests, Kika and Moeko were always together. Nena and Rikako were close perhaps because of similar backgrounds.

Like the Nadeshiko Japan, they too identified the Celebrities—the returnees—as dissimilar others even though they did not view them as rivals like the Nadeshiko, and felt closest with those with similar interests or backgrounds:

Michiko, Yukiko, Nanako and I sympathize with each other's situations. (Kara)

My friends with similar backgrounds helped me a lot by explaining many things to me in English. (Mina)

I feel closest to Rikako, Mona, and Kara. I consider demotivated students as people who are different from us. I felt pressured by the returnees because they have everything going for them. (Nena)

Finally, what appeared to work in favor of Seven Sisters is their lack of reserve associating with and getting support from both students and faculty, and others outside the university community. Indeed, all of them stated that they depended on tutorial classes where they could get individual attention. Hence, their inclination to associate with different communities of coaches and cheer-leaders —teachers, academic advisors, friends in and outside the program, and family members who gave them academic and moral support was their most important strength:

I feel close to my friends with similar backgrounds who help me a lot by explaining many things to me in English. On the other hand, I feel pressured by the English speaking skills of the returnees. I am inspired by Professor Andrew's class and my club, LASA really motivates me. (Mina)

I feel closest to those struggling like me—when I see them make an effort, I get inspired and motivated. I depend on my tutorial teacher and teacher in the support classes. (Miya)

In conclusion, Seven Sisters showed commendable success in the 6-month duration of the study in terms of the TOEFL score increases and academic performance as indicated by their GPA. This success is attributed in part to their prior academic experience. However, their success involves their interpersonal skills that enabled them to weave multi-layered communities which supported them and cushioned them from various hardships.

Princes & Princesses

Taira, Takuya, Sachi, Saki, Sayo, Saho, Saya, and Sae

The eight participants who comprise the group Princes and Princesses were given this name because they appeared to have spent a large part of their high school years doing as they pleased, avoiding activities and subjects they disliked, and were to a large extent, able to get away with it. Also, while they each had a vision of their future, without a serious reality-check, it had a dream-like quality. As Sachi states, “My friends and I were basically living in Disneyland.... a fantasy world where everything just falls into place.” They were the only group which did not prioritize passing the university entrance exams and only a few began to focus on the exams around the middle of their last year in high school which is by most standards late. As a group, they also attempted to manage the challenges of adapting to EIP in ways that were significantly different from other participants of this research.

It is important to note that the Princes and the Princesses differed from one another in how they reconstructed their experiences during their high school years. The narratives of the two Princes indicate that neither of them were highly active or motivated high school students. Taira reported that he did not participate in extra-curricular activities and was not studious. Takuya also reported being inconsistent in studying and in participating in school activities. They both stated starting to study for the entrance examination quite late compared to Nadeshiko Japan, and doing so without enthusiasm. Takuya commented that studying was, “just a boring task for me – it was just a task”. He originally intended to get a job directly after high school. He stated, “It was hard for me to enjoy the process of studying so much.” In addition, while they had specific subjects that they liked, they did not embrace the whole process of learning and disliked and avoided studying a number of subjects.

Princesses, in contrast to the Princes enjoyed their high school experience, participating in sports and other extra-curricular activities. Also unlike the Princes, they appeared to have had an active life working part-time in the community and participating in extra-curricular school activities including sports and volunteer work.

How well were they prepared for studying in EIP? The answer to this question is that they were not, for although they were self-confident in some subjects such as world history, they demonstrated unawareness of how academically under-prepared they actually were. Their narratives from the outset of the study indicate that they did not anticipate that there would be a huge gap between their English ability and the English ability that EIP demanded. Their affective response underscored the surprising difficulty they experienced as a result:

I was, to some extent, confident in my English when I was a high school student, but my confidence was shattered when I entered this program and discovered that almost all the other students were better than me [sic]. (Takuya)

I got the impression that my friends who speak English fluently are smarter than me. I used to be chatty and noisy but now, because of my lack of English speaking ability I have become silent. I am a coward, and I feel like I am in hell. I feel that I can't manage being in this program and think about quitting. (Taira)

I failed to pass the entrance exam to my first choice university....I decided to come to this university, put myself in this challenging program to prove my worth to others. What I didn't know was how behind I was compared to others. (Saki)

While other participant groups recovered from initial shock relatively quickly, the Princes and Princesses struggled through the duration of this study with not only academic difficulties but also issues of self-confidence and demotivation. Toward the end of the study, some of them—Saya, Saki, Sae, and Takuya—began to show signs of progress by practicing self-advocacy, for example, seeking advice and support from faculty members and asking for help in completing assignments during tutorials. For example, Saya stated toward the end of the study, “In hindsight what I was trying to do at the beginning was impossible. Because I was so busy with part-time jobs and driving school I couldn't study sufficiently. I now realize that studying everyday is the only way to keep up with the program.”

By the end of the study period, half of the participants in this group appeared to have checked out mentally, if not physically, from EIP. Saho, Sachi, and Taira, for example began to skip classes and ignore assignment deadlines. In addition, classroom

observational data as well as their academic portfolio, which contains their essays, showed no great improvement in their communicative or written competence in English. For example, during a discussion session, Taira spent a lot of time asking the person who was sitting next to him to translate what was being said. This group's average GPA is less than 2.0, which is significantly lower than that of other groups, and their TOEFL scores also did not rise significantly beyond an average score of 450.

What set Princes and Princesses apart from the other participants of the study? Research data suggests that their lack of success had to do with their lack of academic survival skills. Most likely, because they avoided studying subjects they disliked or found hard, they were unable to acquire the requisite skills or disposition to challenge difficult academic tasks. Specifically, they lacked learning strategies, time-management skills, self-confidence, perseverance to stay focused on their studies, competitiveness, endurance to maintain motivation, and autonomous learner behavior. Hence, they resorted to an alternate strategy which was to depend on others:

When I couldn't communicate, I asked Michael and James to translate my words into English. I often ask Akiko and Nena for help....recently though, I found someone who depended on me which made me feel good and want to try harder. But then one day I just couldn't complete the assignment and though I came to school, I skipped class for the first time ever and just sat in the cafeteria trying to finish the assignment, feeling depressed and guilty. (Taira)

I coped by asking my friends for help again and again. Before summer, I got some advice from Mark and that really helped me cope. I also got advice from Nena, which was really helpful as well. (Takuya)

I could not understand the class lectures. So I had to put together my own essay using information I got from my classmates in the reading and writing section. I hated myself for doing this. (Saho)

While Nadeshiko Japan and Blue Samurai incorporated the advice from others to develop their own skills and autonomy, some participants in this group continued to rely heavily on others for advice and support to the point of burdening the latter. In fact, other students commented on their dependency with a bit of annoyance.

The narratives of other groups clearly indicate a strong awareness of self and achievement orientation. Their narratives also indicate high standards for themselves in terms of academic achievement and knew the steps required. In contrast, the Princes and Princesses had little idea of how to become successful. For example, they tended to think that learning to simply converse in English was a measure of academic success:

I'm happy I don't find it so hard to use English in my private life these days. I can take care of

foreign visitors at my part-time workplace. When I could understand what the foreign staff is saying, I was really happy. (Sachi)

Most importantly, compared to others who saw qualities like leadership and sense of purpose in their role-models, what they saw in their role-models was superficial:

When I communicated with classmates and professors in English, I felt a great sense of accomplishment. When I saw some other foreign teachers, I thought I wanted to be like them in terms of behavior because they are brave and self-confident. (Takuya)

Being able to observe and interact with people who have lived in other countries has opened my eyes to different customs and cultures. (Sayo)

I get the impression that my returnee friends who speak English fluently are really smart. (Taira)

Princes and Princesses wanted to succeed like the other participants. For example, Taira stated, “I don’t want to worry my parents about my future so that is a great motivation for me. I want to show my parents that I have chosen my path well.” However, they did not know how to escape the vicious cycle of dependence on others, which prevented them from becoming autonomous learners. Despite their failure, the Princes and Princesses stated that they had selected this program to learn English and pursue a meaningful career and were not ready to abandon their goals: Takuya wanted to work in the field of diplomacy or in an international organization and Taira wanted to work in either transportation or tourism industry. Saho confessed, “My mother wanted me to attend university and become a teacher, so I want to learn many things and fulfill my mother’s dreams.” How soon they would overcome difficulties and succeed in EIP depended largely on themselves. However, what would have been helpful is a support system, which militates against failure within the initial short period of six months.

Statistical Data

Instead of a narrative summation of the findings above, this paper will provide a report card of the EIP under investigation using objective performance indicators (TOEFL ITP Scores and GPA) for all participant groups (Nadeshiko Japan, Blue Samurai, Seven Sisters, and Princes and Princesses) in order to answer the ultimate research question: Were the university students who had little experience communicating in English except in their typical Japanese middle and high school English classrooms able to succeed in acquiring academic English to cope with an English-immersion university program in Japan? Hence,

we provide the following measures in Table 2 below:

- TOEFL Improvement – Comparison of TOEFL ITP score between April – November.
- TOEFL Average – Average TOEFL score of the participants in the group.
- GPA – overall academic performance at the end of Semester 1.
- Classroom Performance – observation of students in the academic English classes, portfolio assessment, and teacher assessment.

Table 2

	TOEFL Improvement	TOEFL Average (Spring)	TOEFL Average (Fall)	GPA Average (Spring)	Class Performance
Nadeshiko Japan	+35 points	480	515	3.3	A
Blue Samurai	+54 points	447	501	2.5	A
Seven Sisters	+34 points	454	488	2.7	B
Princes & Princesses	+20 points	430	450	1.9	C

From our perspective as researchers and participant-observers of EIP, our answer to the research question above is an enthusiastic yes; high schools in Japan can prepare students for successful EIP if key conditions are met.

Implication: The Context, the Students, and the Future

Involved with the individual learners, this paper did not focus on the sociocultural context or the classroom context. However, we would like to underscore the importance of the three elements (the context, the student community, and the future) in making possible the results we have shown. We believe that if any of these three elements were missing, the results would not be the same.

Context

The EIP in this report has a curriculum that supports learners with these key features:

- A lecture course which has a small group discussion section and a support class, which pre-teaches, and reviews the content of the lecture course. If it had not been for this cooperative teaching between content faculty and the academic English faculty, students may have not been able to assimilate the lectures.

- A tutorial class where a small group of students study under the supervision of a teacher but also where students are selected for individual instruction. Many students have attested that the tutorial classes where they can get the individual attention of the professors have helped them tremendously.
- Advisory system in which students consult with the faculty are crucial. Some participants of the study discussed the relief at being able to talk about academic issues with the faculty. Nearly all the participants stated that motivation to study English was greatly heightened by the study abroad and internship advice received in the 3rd month.
- Language policy which decided that everyone (students, staff, and faculty) use English for communication was a source of anxiety for some students. Some faculty members pushed for modification in this rule in the interest of communication. However, the participants of the study attest that this feature of the program was what created an L2-community that allowed them to practice using English for authentic communication.
- Classroom materials, strategies and teacher-talk influenced not only L2 learning but also motivation. When teachers did not select materials that stimulate discussion, or did most of the talking, or did not group students thoughtfully in discussions, valuable opportunities for both learning and language development were lost. Students need ample opportunities to practice using the new language.

Students

A successful EIP should have all the necessary players. The program featured in this study enrolled very few foreign students. However, it enrolled quite a few returnees. Although these returnee students are not necessarily strong students, they are invaluable for bringing diversity into the program. Most importantly, the students in the program benefit when, as in the case of our two Star students, the returnees can empathize with the difficulties that the students are having because of similar experiences.

The Future

What is education if it cannot let students envision their ideal future selves? The participants of this program received, through activities within and outside the classroom, an occasional enabling dose of *pixie dust*. This power to draw on the capability of bettering oneself included interacting with cosmopolitan, multilingual faculty members, guiding high school students during campus visits, watching Steve Jobs' Stanford commencement speech, working with admirable *sempai* who had returned from studies abroad, participating in the university NPO aid group, and talking to a highly regarded

international programs officer from an overseas university. Many of these events were orchestrated by the faculty and the staff and had an important role in the education of the participants in this study.

Notes

- 1 See for example, Coleman, 2006; Crystal, 2004; and Graddol, 1997 for discussion on the spread of English in higher education.
- 2 See MEXT Language Arts Curriculum—Kokugo Shidou Yoryo year 1999.
- 3 English was used in discussing some key concepts: motivation, identity, self-esteem, strategy, and image. These words are now frequently used in their original English form in Japanese conversation.
- 4 Juku, sometimes called *cram school* is a Japanese word for a special school students attend after their regular school in order to boost their academic preparation and to pass the entrance examinations to educational institutions at various levels—elementary-, middle-, and high school as well as university.

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