



## **Simulation of a Study Abroad Language Programme: The English Village at Kinki University**

by Nick Musty

For students in Japan, mastering a foreign language often involves overseas travel, which can be lengthy and expensive, disrupt schedules, and lead to unfamiliar and sometimes uncomfortable surroundings. However, as Sano, Takahashi and Yoneyama (1984, p. 170) suggest, most Japanese perceive little need for English in their everyday lives. This can make it hard for them to gain a desired level of fluency without going abroad. The English Village (known as EC, “E cube”) at Kinki University in Japan gives its users opportunities to immerse themselves in an environment that is more authentic than that of most language classrooms. The native staff (of which I am one) offer a range of facilities and activities designed to support student learning and boost English speaking ability. This paper examines the EC centre and how it offers students a credible alternative to studying a language overseas.

### **Justification for an English Village**

The concept of a “language immersion facility” is not new. Kinki University based the EC on the English Village project in South Korea (Kitazume, 2010, p. 22), which opened in 2006 (“English Village: Paju Camp,” n.d., para. 2). The oldest English immersion facility in Japan is said to be Katoh Gakuin in Numazu, which started its program in 1992 (Bilingual.com, n.d.). A communicative methodology is dominant, with learners being seen as able to gain competence by using English to communicate in an environment which is marked as being different to most classrooms (ibid, p. 11).

At first there might appear to be a lack of academic justification for such a facility. The prominent researcher, Krashen, himself a proponent of Communicative Language Teaching, has criticised such centres as lacking in authenticity and research based methodology (2006, p. 8). Indeed, little evidence exists that such immersion facilities themselves are able to boost competence, although there are obvious impracticalities of measuring user improvement, and comparing this with other approaches.

Despite such claims, the EC can be placed in the communicative approach to language teaching, which has spread far and wide. Nunan (2004, p. 23) points out that target and pedagogical tasks can comfortably coexist, which means that although a task may not always be completely authentic, a simulation of authenticity is effective for the learning process. Oral practice is also perceived as the most significant factor in language acquisition (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 228). Musty (2013) discusses the extent to which the EC is communicative, concluding that sufficient opportunities to communicate do exist, going on to make suggestions for how to make further improvements. Two further elements of the EC are supported by research. Firstly, it has been found that small group work is much more beneficial in building skills (McGroarty, 1989, p. 131). Another factor is that, according to Titze (1996), many Japanese are afraid of being laughed at. This could be one of the reasons so many are hesitant to speak a foreign language, given the great potential for mistakes. The EC is able to address these issues, providing tables suitable for small groups of one to six learners



who sit with a facilitator. The centre was partly constructed with the belief that anxiety could be greatly reduced if small numbers of people were listening to learners talking.

### **A description of the English Village**

Opened in 2006, the EC was designed for the benefit of all students within the university, regardless of their major, English ability or motivation. It was thought that students would attend in order to take advantage of the facility and enjoy its offerings, improving their language ability without even noticing. Students with high motivation to study English are encouraged to use Kinki University's Language Institute, which operates lessons on a more formal basis in a separate location. As Illustration 1 shows, the EC is housed in a striking, near cubical purpose-built unit, framed by wooden beams surrounded with glass. It is staffed by up to fifteen language facilitators per day, most from native-English speaking countries, as well as Japanese staff who operate the cafe.



*Illustration 1.* The English Village of Kinki University (Photo courtesy of Kinki University)

Although most staff have some teaching experience, none of them have classes within the university. This helps to position them in a more casual relationship with students than regular instructors can generally occupy. However, staff and students are not permitted to mix with one another off campus. The current mayor of the EC is Sachiko Kitazume, a professor in the Faculty of Literature, Arts and Cultural Studies, who also runs the university's library and international centre.

The guiding principles of the English Village are these three Es: English, Enjoyment and Education. Hence the name 'E cube'. The most significant rule, which all users are aware of, is that English is supposed to be used at all times. It is not expected that all students will enjoy studying English, but it is hoped that all of them can find something to do at the EC that they can enjoy through the medium of English. It is claimed that this purely communicative approach can be very effective (Savignon, 1972; 1983).



On weekdays from 10AM to 6PM when school is in session, students are able to enjoy the following:

- The EC café sells a variety of international foods and drinks and orders need to be placed in English
- Free chats (with students numbering one to six at a time)
- A basketball court
- A games console
- A variety of board games and cards
- A library of English language magazines, books, newspapers, travel guides and comics
- Musical instruments
- An EC club, which eager students can join, leading them to volunteer in the running of the EC
- A daily activity, including cooking, crafts, quizzes
- Advanced activities (including debates or discussions of TED videos) for small groups of higher level speakers
- Monthly events, such as a Christmas dinner, an art and craft market and guest speakers
- Four compulsory first-year tasks, of ten minutes each, including a quiz and a treasure hunt

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
<b>Activity Hours</b> 1:20 - 2:00 (1st period) 2:00 - 3:40 (2nd period) 3:40 - 5:20 (3rd period)	<b>November Events (with Stamp)</b> Rakuten (Nov. 13th): Englishization Special guest presentation by Rakuten's Mr. Takeda & Mr. Fujimoto. World Food Festival: Lunchtime Quiz and Food Tasting			<b>1</b> Closed
<b>School Festival</b> 11/2 - 11/4 10:00 - 4:00	<b>Kinki University</b> No School	<b>Chocolate Art</b> w/ Jeremy	<b>International Food Quiz</b> w/ Brett	<b>Single Mexican</b> w/ Kaito
<b>Single Chocolate Cookies</b> w/ Mark	<b>Tsuzuki</b> w/ Nick	<b>Lecture by</b> Mr. Kazumasa Terasaki w/ Naoki Fujimoto 12:20 - 1:00	<b>Tiramisu</b> w/ Ruyika	<b>Healthy Spring Rolls</b> w/ Gordon
<b>Hummus</b> w/ Tim	<b>Macaroni &amp; Cheese</b> w/ All	<b>World Food Festival</b> 11:00 - 5:20 (your schedule varies, ask staff)		<b>International food stalls, Lunchtime events and Food Tastings</b>
<b>Pasta Salad</b> w/ Andrew	<b>Honey Joys</b> w/ Matthew	<b>Brandon's Tasting Challenge</b>	<b>Chocolate Oatmeal Cookies</b> w/ Johanna	<b>Bananas</b> w/ Alex

**We are open from 10:00am - 6:00pm.**

**Coming up in December...**

- ☐ Monday & Tuesday, Dec. 9th & 10th: Charity Christmas Art Market
- ☐ Thursday, Dec. 12th: Planetarium by the Astronomy Club
- ☐ Tuesday, Dec. 17th: Christmas Dinner!! (Booking for Christmas Dinner starts at 10:00am on Monday, Dec. 2nd.)

Illustration 2. Sample EC activity schedule, November 2013 (Courtesy of Kinki University)



While some students use the facility regularly on their own initiative, others enter with the aim of getting stamps in their EC passports, a document in which student attendance can be recorded, contributing to their oral English class assessment.

### **Simulation of overseas study**

Students who go abroad to study English can immerse themselves in the language, being surrounded by their target language whether in the home with their host families, at school, or in the street. A classroom cannot offer such intensity or contextual variety, and neither can a facility like the EC. However, motivated students can gain a lot of exposure to English through the EC. In most Japanese university contexts, it may seem unrealistic to expect that all students will speak to each other in a foreign tongue at all times, particularly at times when there are not any staff members available to talk to them and they are surrounded by others who share the same first language (usually Japanese). It is also too much to expect this at the EC at all times, but my personal observation is that motivated students will use English much of the time, through conversation, games or reading newspapers. Such learners gain ample exposure to the language for the entire duration of their course. Students with less motivation to study English or who lack free time can choose activities to attend from the schedule. This is somewhat different to a typical English class in which students are expected to attend all lessons.

Furthermore, occasional programmes to further simulate the experience of studying abroad have taken place. During long university holidays the facility opens to members of the general public. There tends to be a focus on free chat but users are also offered activities such as baking cakes or answering questions on local tourist spots, which often attract forty to fifty participants. In 2009, when there was an international swine influenza scare, several of the university's study abroad programmes were cancelled and it was decided that those expecting to go overseas could attend a programme at the EC instead. The centre opened earlier than usual in the morning and staff prepared cereals, toast and spreads in time for the participants' breakfast. Over the course of a week, students were involved in a number of activities, such as preparing a presentation on Japanese history to teach to foreign staff or a day trip to the agricultural department of the university, located on a separate campus, where they were able to learn about recent techniques. These students were treated as though they were in a foreign country. To give one example to illustrate this, they were criticised for leaving their bags in a public space from where they could easily be pickpocketed. On the campus it would usually be quite acceptable to leave a bag somewhere in order to keep a space but they were told to take more care with their belongings. The stern warning which they were given left them feeling quite alarmed but served as a reminder that they were expected to behave as though they were in another country, in which they need to follow a different set of rules. Students responded very positively to this program, and many became regular users of the facility as a result.



Other programmes since then have offered shorter immersion experiences to students from kindergarten to high school, as well as to teachers from public schools throughout Osaka.

### **What are the advantages of staying in Japan?**

Kinki University students every year go overseas on programmes of varying length in the belief that they will be able to improve their English. They also seek to achieve other aims such as increasing their employability, learning about foreign culture and making friends. While the intensity of such programmes leaves little doubt that a learner motivated enough to take part stands a good chance of developing their communication skills and picking up some new aspects of the language, this does not imply that their classmates who opt to stay in Japan will automatically lose out in these areas. In fact, there are plenty of Japanese who have achieved a high level of English competence without studying overseas. This section will explain some of the benefits of learning in this way.

#### *Economical*

For students living in Japan, especially those in the area surrounding Osaka, a programme at the EC will obviously incur very few transportation costs in comparison with those flying overseas. Additionally, for many the cost of accommodation will be the same as usual, and learners with part time jobs, if these are flexible, can continue to work in much the same way as normal.

#### *Continue with normal life*

In addition to part time jobs, learners can continue to carry out many of their everyday activities, attending family events, meeting friends or relaxing at home. For students taking time-demanding subjects such as pharmacy or engineering, and those heavily involved in school clubs, there is insufficient time to spend a whole semester overseas, but they can take advantage of the opportunity by going to the EC for about an hour each day. What such learners are unlikely to be able to do is use English at all times. This obviously reduces the intensity of the learning experience, but students at Kinki University are able to make use of the EC throughout the duration of their studies. This is considerably longer than a typical overseas study programme.

#### *Familiarity*

Many study abroad programme participants report concerns regarding food, laws and crimes, time differences, even differences in electricity supplies. It is obvious that moving motivated learners from their familiar surroundings and placing them in new situations will give them an opportunity to use a greater variety of language and gain in fluency. However, there are also advantages to having participants stay in comfortable situations.

#### *Tailored to Japanese*

Although students who go overseas to study often have good opportunities to develop their fluency by working with classmates from a variety of cultures, who are unable to rely on Japanese, staff at the EC all live in Japan and therefore have at least a minimal understanding of Japanese culture, which can make conversations somewhat easier and put students at ease. They can talk about Japanese television shows, celebrities and food, topics which many students easily engage in. At least for those of a less adventurous nature, such an advantage is reassuring for students. In fact,



the EC offers just as culturally rich an environment as some overseas courses, as regular attendees include exchange students from China, Indonesia, Russia and Korea, and staff are from the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Japan (and previously from France, Ghana and Italy, amongst others).

### **Successes and Shortcomings of the English Village Model**

As section two pointed out, measuring the success of an English Village in a quantitative manner is not easy, but there is at least anecdotal evidence (Kitazume 2010, pp. 31-34) of regular users whose test scores showed a significant increase during their time using the facility. In order to measure student opinions, a twenty-two-item survey, which appears in Appendix A, is carried out annually. The results of the 2009 survey (as reported in Kitazume, 2010, pp. 27-28) suggest that 88% of the 979 respondents indicated that they agreed that their opportunities to use English had increased. It also showed that 61% had developed an interest in overseas travel and study abroad. Such positive ratings are a good indication that the system is well-liked. Staff also monitor feedback on social networking sites such as Twitter. The posts on these sites suggest that many students of the university attend with a degree of apprehension concerning their ability but ultimately enjoy their experience and express their intention to visit more frequently.

Positive motivation like this could be the most important factor in the learning of language, (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 65), and it is obvious that positive attitudes will help lead to increased usage and a resulting improvement in ability. Therefore, it is in the interests of other establishments to operate similar systems, an issue which will be dealt with in the next section.

It is also necessary to consider some of the shortcomings of the English Village system. Firstly, it is doubtful that its users are truly following the rule of speaking in English only throughout their time inside the facility. It is unreasonable to expect users to self-enforce such a demand when they are unsupervised, which can happen very easily in such a large place. A smaller-scale centre may be able to monitor this more closely. Another drawback is that voiced by Krashen (2006, p. 8) that there is no authenticity in a place such as the EC. Being in an educational establishment, it is natural that staff are charged with the responsibility of helping students with their language learning development. In an English speaking country, this is not the concern of a waiter in a cafe, a clerk in a department store or an immigration official. It is impossible for a member of staff in an immersion facility to accurately put herself into a situation where they deal with the student in the same way as the one they would encounter in the real world. In fact, there is very little research available which justifies such a learning method, and this is because it is very hard to prove its success. The introduction of an immersion facility by an educational establishment may have to be based on personal convictions rather than hard evidence of success.

### **What are the implications for other establishments?**

Kinki University is a large, private institution with around 30,000 students. Smaller establishments may not be able to replicate the facility on the same scale, and might encounter some of the following problems, to which some solutions are given:

*Operating such an facility for 40 hours a week is too costly*



Although longer opening hours allow students to benefit from a more intense learning experience, the practicalities of operating this could be an obstacle for smaller establishments. Experience has shown that the hours of 12PM to 4PM on weekdays tend to be the busiest times, so centres operating even twenty hours a week can still offer substantial value to students.

#### *Native staff are not available*

Instructors are obviously a key asset of an immersion facility. However, it is a fallacy that students will expect native teachers at all times (Phillipson, 2009, p.12). Personal experience tells me that while some students prefer a native teacher (who may be able to offer a more natural command of the language) others seem to prefer speaking with Japanese staff, perhaps feeling that they have more in common with them. It is up to the establishment to decide what kind of staff they prefer. Smaller establishments can ask regular teachers to take turns staffing the centre. Alternatively agencies can be found throughout Japan which specialise in the provision of English speakers. Another option is to contract private language schools to staff the centres or use exchange students. Staff with less teaching experience or who are younger may find it easier to build up friendly relationships with students (Kanel, 2010, pp. 40-42). Teaching skills are not actually necessary at all - staff members need to have the ability to relate to the students to whom they are talking.

#### *It is impossible to provide as many facilities as those offered by the EC*

The activities listed earlier in this paper are wide ranging and attract learners with a variety of interests. However, those which were perceived to be the most useful by students in the 2009 survey were *free talk* and *activities* (Kitazume, 2010, p. 27-28). These do not need to incur a lot of costs. The rather more costly cafe is actually operated by a catering company that already provides other facilities within the university, although it could be replaced by a vending machine and a selection of pre-bought cakes.

#### *Students might not want to attend*

The EC is able to easily offer its users a regular opportunity to communicate in English. A more ambitious goal is to attract those who are less interested in the language, encouraging them to use English even if they do not enjoy studying it. This has been achieved by the creation of compulsory tasks, which require all first-year students to complete four pieces of homework, in small groups, with a member of staff to facilitate. In addition to this, teachers of oral English classes throughout the university set students the task of attending a given number of times in one semester. Although this cannot guarantee that all participants can enjoy English communication, it can help timid students to get to know staff and the facility, encouraging them to make return visits. The passport system has been a good way of recording participation. The key successes in this area have come when class instructors have encouraged students to engage with the facility. Furthermore, programmes which take university students overseas to study for long periods are usually aimed at students with a high motivation to study. Those with little motivation for English are unlikely to attend every day, but a moderately motivated student can easily attend the EC on a regular basis and make great improvements in their language ability.

Although smaller establishments might be discouraged by the apparent costs and efforts involved in the running of a language immersion centre, there is plenty which can be done to



operate the facility on a smaller scale, thereby providing learners with a chance to develop their communication skills in a non-classroom environment.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to exemplify how students are able to develop their English communication skills successfully without leaving Japan. It has described part of the approach taken by Kinki University, explaining the advantages of learning languages in this way and giving some suggestions for how other establishments might replicate it. Further research could look at issues such as how to build on authenticity in an English Village, and the effects that English Villages have on their users' competence in English, test scores (particularly listening and speaking components) and motivation to study a foreign language. It has been demonstrated here that there are ways for students to build their English ability outside of the classroom without going overseas. It is now the responsibility of other education providers to develop their own versions, building on the work done at the EC to enhance the model further still.

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### Appendix A. English Translation of the Annual Assessment Form Used for Kinki University's English Village (Courtesy of Kinki University)

E3 Questionnaire [Please choose your answer and circle the letter(s) next to it.]

1. Please circle the letters in the box on the right if you have partaken in any of the following activities.

2. From the activities listed on the right, which one(s) do you \_\_\_\_\_ ?

- A. Like [            ]
- B. Find useful [            ]
- C. Not like [            ]
- D. Not find useful [            ]

- a. chat
- b. activity
- c. basketball
- d. café
- e. game
- f. magazine/comic book
- g. event
- h. other [            ]

3. How often do you come to the E3?

- a. First time
- b. 2-5 times so far
- c. 1-2 times/month
- d. 1-2 times/week
- e. 3-4 times /week
- f. Almost everyday

4. About how many hours do you usually spend at the E3 a day?

- a. less than an hour
- b. 1~2 hours
- c. 2~3 hours
- d. more than 3 hours

5. Concerning what you have achieved by going to the E3, please circle the most apt response below.

4: Strongly agree 3: Agree somewhat 2: Disagree somewhat 1: Strongly disagree

- A) After coming to the E3, do you feel more comfortable being around and speaking with native English speakers than you did in the past? 4 3 2 1
- B) Has coming to the E3 made you more aware of the importance of learning English? 4 3 2 1
- C) Are you more confident in your English speaking skills after visiting the E3? 4 3 2 1
- D) Do you feel your ability to communicate in English has improved because of your coming to the E3? 4 3 2 1
- E) Has coming to the E3 improved your knowledge and awareness of overseas cultures, customs, and the way of thinking of native English speakers? 4 3 2 1
- F) Do you think the E3 has given you more opportunities to have first hand experience in the English language? 4 3 2 1
- G) Has coming to the E3 made you more interested in overseas experiences such as studying abroad? 4 3 2 1
- H) Are you confident that you will be able to communicate effectively in a restaurant in a foreign country? 4 3 2 1
- I) Have you ever effectively used what you learned in your English class at the E3? 4 3 2 1
- J) Please let us know if the E3 has helped you in any other way. 4 3 2 1

Please feel free to express your opinions or suggestions to the E3 in the box below.

[Ex: Please tell us your favorite activity]