



Special Report

Cultural Exchange & Language Development

www.geovisions.org

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Summary

This report looks at the impact of cultural immersion on language development for participants of the U.S. Department of State J1 Visa Summer Work and Travel program. The J1 Summer Work and Travel program is considered to be one of the State Department's most successful examples of public diplomacy efforts. The major goals of this program are cultural exchange, diplomacy, and improving English skills. Much research has been conducted to determine how well the program is achieving its cultural and diplomatic goals. Overall, it has been well documented that the program is experiencing success with its cultural and diplomatic goals. Less research attention has been given to the English goals. One of the issue lies in selecting an appropriate measuring tool to conduct this type of research. This report addresses the issue of measuring the success of participants in honing their English conversation skills through this program. It also looks at what we can learn about the success of meeting these goals and how it can be documented. It analyses data gathered from a small-scale pilot study administered by GeoVisions and iTEP, (International Test of English Proficiency). It draws the following conclusions. The Summer Work & Travel program is an effective way for visiting students to improve their English conversation skills. The position that a student takes at a host employer is not a significant factor in how much language improvement can be attained. Improvements in iTEP English language scores validates Department of State goals that exchange programs have sufficient opportunities for participants to practice speaking English. For the Summer Work Travel program, such practice leads to an increase in English conversational skills.

Introduction

Every year, about 100,000 college and university students from around the world come to the United States on a cultural exchange program that allows them to work in seasonal and temporary jobs.

Considered to be one of the State Department's most successful examples of public diplomacy efforts, the Summer (referring to "summer" in the home country of exchange visitors) Work and Travel Program, brings future leaders from dozens of countries to the US, and sets specific goals for participants, their host employers, and the organizations that recruit and sponsor them on the J-1 Cultural Exchange visa.

In a 2013 Guidance Directive, the Education and Cultural Affairs division of the State Department summarized the major goals of the program.

"The Summer Work Travel program provides foreign college and university students with opportunities to interact with U.S. citizens, practice the English language, experience U.S. culture while sharing their own cultures with Americans they meet, travel in the United States, and work in seasonal or temporary jobs that require minimal training in order to earn funds to help defray their expenses."

The success of the cultural and diplomatic goals of the program have been well documented in many reports and research projects. An analysis by Alliance for International Exchange found that 76% of the exchange visitors reported a positive change in their views of the United States. Program regulations also require that exchange visitors work alongside Americans in jobs that provide them with chances to speak and improve their English.

The English goals for participants to significantly improve their conversational English has been given less research attention. This makes it difficult to determine if and how these goals are being met. One issue lies in selecting an appropriate measuring tool to conduct this type of research.

This report addresses the issue of measuring the success of participants in honing their English conversation skills through this program. It also looks at what we can learn about the success of meeting these goals and how it can be documented.

Methods

New Hampshire-based GeoVisions, one of more than 40 State Department designated sponsors of the Work and Travel Program, teamed up with iTEP, International Test of English Proficiency, to do a two-stage testing pilot project (could be expanded to a larger universe of exchange visitors) to determine the impact of participating in the Work and Travel Program on English conversation skills. iTEP is a globally-recognized exam that measures conversation skills in a stand-alone test, or as an element of tests that measure grammar, reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The iTEP Conversation exam is a thirty-minute internet-based, on-demand test with modules that measure vocabulary, verbal fluency, decision-making, reading aloud, and other skill sets essential to conversational ability. Some of the typical tasks involved in the iTEP exam include introducing him/herself and talking about friends and family, answering questions about a photo appearing on the computer screen, offering a personal opinion about a topic, and answering short questions about an informal, everyday situation.

Test-takers' responses are captured on audio files online, and graded by trained English as a Second Language certified teachers who follow a standardized rubric to ensure fairness and consistency of grading.

One hundred university-aged students from South America (seven countries) took part in the first round of tests prior to participating in the winter intake of the Work and Travel Program. These students were bound for ski and warm weather resorts throughout the United States.

After the work portion of their program, the students had an opportunity to travel throughout the United States before returning to classes at their home country institutions. After the students returned home, they were invited to take the iTEP exam a second time to determine whether they had made progress in their English conversational skills.

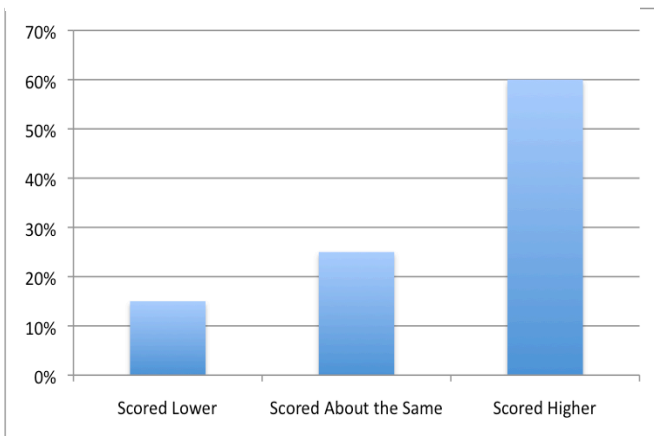
20% of the students opted to participate in the second round of exams, and these 20 students were representative of the original group of students who took the exam. The original group was chosen at random from students participating in the broader work and travel program.

Of the 20 students, two experienced technical difficulties in recording their answers, so the observations that follow represent a group of eighteen non-English speakers who came to the United States to discover American culture, meet new friends, and improve their English language skills.

Data Findings

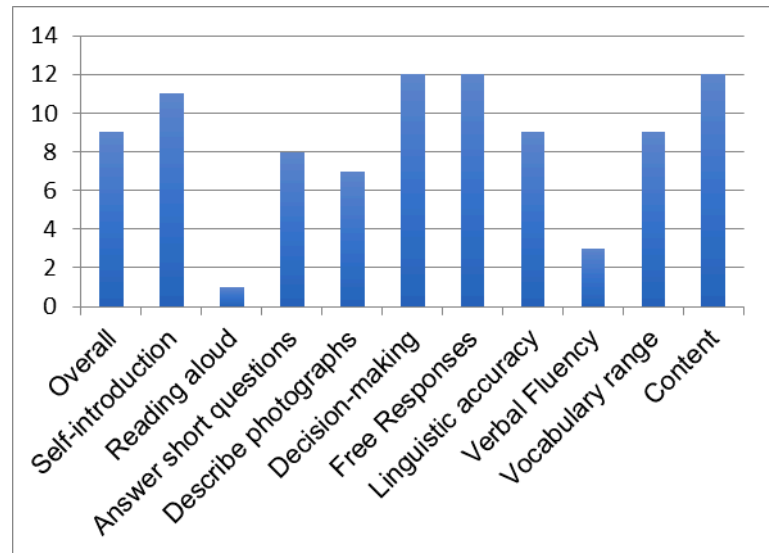
It can be definitely concluded that the students who took both the first and second round of exams improved their English conversation skills, some very significantly. The iTEP exam is scored on a 100-point scale and only one of the eighteen students did not maintain or improve on their score. Improved scores ranges from one point to 17 points with a median gain of 11 points on a median initial score after the first round of exams of 82.5 points, for an average gain of 13% on the conversation scale.

85% of Students scored the Same or Higher on the Second Test



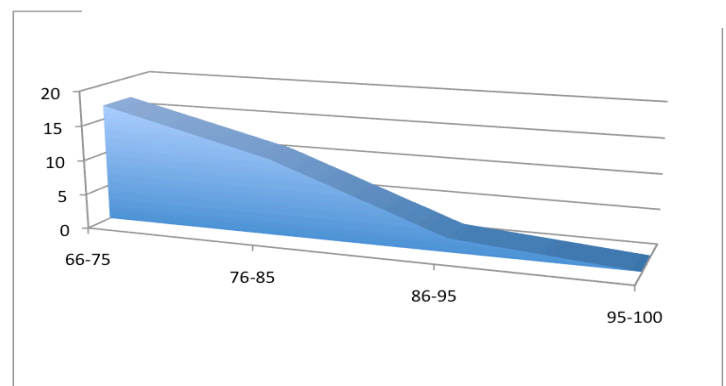
The iTEP exam gives participants an overall score in assessing their skills. It also measures eleven skills essential to conversational competence. The results show that students improved the most in skills requiring analysis and thought processes. The more technical skills, like reading aloud and verbal fluency, skills that would likely improve in more of a classroom setting did not improve as much as the skills like decision-making, conversational content and the ability to craft free responses. Frequent interaction with English speakers, and the necessity of developing more advanced conversational skills, contribute to both skills development and increased confidence to take risks in the course of a conversation.

Relative Improvement Factor by Skill



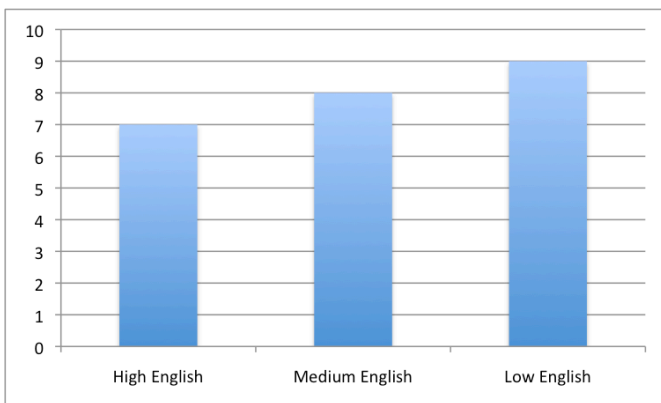
Of the test-takers who took both rounds of exams, their original scores ranged from 69 to 100 points. Was there a group of students who progressed the most? Clearly those that scored in the 90's did not have as much room to grow as those in the 60's and 70's. At the lower end of the scoring spectrum there was the most, and substantial improvement. It was at the higher end of the range where there was little movement, and the significance of a move up or down of a couple points is not all that meaningful.

Improvement by Original Score Range



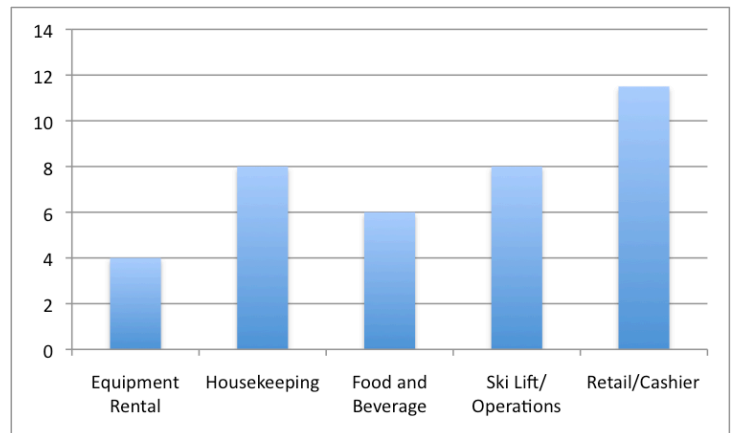
Participants in the study held a variety of jobs, and each of those jobs required a different level of conversation skills. The skills needed by the housekeeper or the prep cook are not the same as the ski lift operator or the cashier. We categorized each job type as to whether it required a high level of English, a medium level, or a low level. Interestingly, the positions that required a lower level of English, and assume a lower frequency of customer contact, yielded similar point gains for participants as those requiring higher levels of English and presumably were more “front-line” in nature. The Work and Travel Program offers an effective experience for conversational skills improvement regardless of what level of English is required, and what the frequency of contact with English speakers may be.

Improvement by English Level required by Job



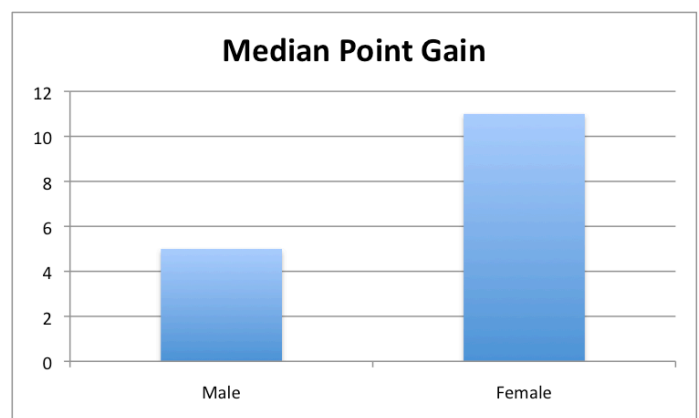
We placed each of the jobs into one of five categories, and we examined the median point improvement in English skills in each of the categories. The conventional wisdom that a housekeeper would not have as much customer contact as, say, a ski lift operator, and thus, not have as many chances to practice English, and thus be less likely to improve English conversation is not upheld by the research. Other factors may influence improvement of conversational skills such as personality and drive of the participant, a topic for perhaps another study at a different time.

English Improvement by Position



Students by gender were fairly evenly spread across job types, so gender was likely not a factor in English Improvement by Position. It is interesting to note though that, in this study, female participants significantly improved their scores compared to male students.

Female Students Improved English Twice as Much as Males



Conclusion

This pilot research project was conducted on a small scale. It concludes the following:

The Summer Work & Travel program is an effective way for visiting students to improve their English conversation skills.

The position that a student takes at a host employer is not a significant factor in how much language improvement can be attained.

Improvements in iTEP English language scores validates Department of State goals that exchange programs have sufficient opportunities for participants to practice speaking English.

For the Summer Work Travel program, such practice leads to an increase in English conversational skills.

The iTEP Conversation exam is a noteworthy measure of these success.

It is advised that further research be conducted with a larger sample size to determine if the trends identified in this study still hold true.

References

GeoVisions is a Summer Work and Travel Program sponsor designated by the US Department of State. *GeoVisions, 16 Market Square, Portsmouth, New Hampshire 03801, www.geovisions.org*

iTEP (International Test of English Proficiency) is the developer of the iTEP Conversation Exam. *iTEP, 22048 Sherman Way, Suite 210, Canoga Park, California 91308, www.iTEPexam.com*

ACADEMIC Language Solutions is the authorized distributor of iTEP suite of English Language tests. *Academic Language Solutions, 63 Whitfield Street, Guilford, CT 06437, www.academiclanguagesolutions.com*