

From Immersion to Profession: Long-Term English Retention and Career Development of Immersion Education Graduates in Japan

Division of Curriculum Development Ryo KAMBARU

This study investigated the long-term impact of immersion education on the careers and English proficiency of two Japanese graduates through a qualitative cross-case analysis of interviews. The findings reveal that maintaining English proficiency after graduation depends heavily on the individual's post-immersion environment and sustained use of English. These results suggest that while immersion programs provide a solid foundation of second language proficiency, they do not guarantee native-like fluency without continued exposure after graduation. The study also found that the participants tended to pursue domestic higher education and viewed their English proficiency as a valuable professional asset rather than a primary career driver, indicating that an immersion background does not necessarily lead to a career path centered on English. From these findings, this research challenges the common assumption that immersion education automatically leads to lifelong, native-like fluency, highlighting the need for a more balanced perspective on immersion programs and calling for educational practices that cultivate not only language skills but also intercultural competence, while supporting graduates in exploring international career pathways.

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1. Introduction

Immersion education is widely recognized as an effective pedagogical approach for fostering bilingualism and promoting mutual understanding in multilingual societies. Immersion education was first introduced in Canada to ensure linguistic equality between the two official languages, English and French, and to facilitate intergroup communication (Genesee, 1984). In contrast, immersion education has primarily been implemented in Japan as a means to enhance English language proficiency in response to globalization (Komatsu, 2022). These divergent contexts underscore the necessity of examining immersion education

within the Japanese educational context, where its objectives and expected outcomes differ significantly from those in bilingual nations.

Although research on the long-term effects of immersion education in Japan is limited, findings from international studies provide valuable insights into its impact on graduates' career trajectories and linguistic proficiency. Studies on Canadian French immersion graduates have reported declining productive language skills post-graduation, largely due to limited opportunities to use French in professional and social settings (Wesche, 1993; Komatsu, 2022). A similar phenomenon can be observed in Japan, where opportunities to use English outside academic environments remain scarce (Terasawa, 2015), raising concerns about the long-term retention of language skills acquired through immersion programs.

This study examines how immersion education influences the professional trajectories of Japanese immersion program graduates and investigates the extent to which they maintain their English proficiency over time. Through qualitative interviews with the graduates of Japanese immersion programs, this research provides an in-depth analysis and a case study of their post-graduation experiences and the role of immersion education in shaping their careers and linguistic retention. The first section of this paper reviews previous studies on the long-term outcomes of immersion

education, focusing on its influence on career development and second language maintenance. The subsequent sections present the findings from the qualitative interviews and analyze them in relation to previous studies. By situating these findings within broader discussions on immersion education, this study seeks to advance understanding of its long-term impact on both professional development and language retention, thereby offering insights for future educational policy and pedagogical practice.

2. Immersion Graduates' Career Trajectories and Language Retention

Research on the long-term impact of immersion education, particularly regarding graduates' career trajectories and language maintenance, remains limited in Japan. However, international studies offer valuable insights into these areas. Wesche (1993), for example, conducted a longitudinal study on Canadian French immersion graduates, employing self-assessments of language proficiency, language use surveys, and formal proficiency tests during their first and third years of university. Follow-up telephone interviews with selected participants after graduation revealed a significant decline in productive language skills, as many reported infrequent use of French in their professional and personal lives. Similarly, data from Statistics Canada illustrate the challenges of maintaining bilingualism. Although immersion programs have contributed to increasing rates of bilingual proficiency, longitudinal data indicate that only 65% of individuals aged 5-17 who described themselves as bilingual in 2006 continued to do so a decade later outside Quebec (Komatsu, 2022). This attrition is often attributed to the limited integration of the second language into everyday contexts after graduation.

A similar pattern may be observed in Japan, where English use outside formal educational settings has remained stagnant for years (Terasawa, 2015). While immersion programs aim to cultivate high levels of English proficiency, questions persist regarding the sustainability of these skills post-graduation. Despite the growing number of immersion schools in Japan, previous studies primarily focus on students currently enrolled in these programs, and research on graduates remains scarce. Inoue and Imai (2020) investigated students currently enrolled at Gunma

Kokusai Academy and found high levels of satisfaction with immersion education. However, their study also highlighted diverse career aspirations among students, ranging from professions that leverage English proficiency to fields unrelated to English, such as pharmacy or sound engineering. Additionally, students enrolled in International Baccalaureate (IB) courses demonstrated a tendency to prioritize university admissions within Japan based on IB recognition, rather than exclusively seeking English-speaking institutions abroad. While these findings do not address the long-term influence of immersion education on career outcomes or language retention after formal schooling, they indicate that immersion education does not necessarily lead to a career orientation toward working or living abroad.

Given the relatively recent establishment of immersion programs in Japan, such as those at Gunma Kokusai Academy and Kato Gakuen, longitudinal research on graduates remains largely absent. However, understanding the long-term implications of immersion education, including how graduates retain their English proficiency and utilize their language skills in professional settings, is essential for assessing its overall effectiveness of immersion education. While previous studies predominantly examine linguistic proficiency and attitudes toward language learning during schooling, evaluating how these experiences translate into sustained language competence and career success is equally critical.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multiple-case study design to investigate the long-term impact of immersion education on graduates' career trajectories and English language retention. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2014). The case study method allows for an in-depth, holistic analysis of a small number of participants, enabling a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences and the intricate factors that shape them. Moreover, by analyzing two distinct cases, this multiple-case study design facilitates a cross-case analysis, which enhances the robustness of the findings and allows for the identification of patterns and themes observed across multiple cases.

A. Data Collection

The primary data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with two graduates of an immersion program in Japan. The participants, a flight attendant and a medical doctor, were selected to represent different professional contexts, allowing for a comparative analysis of how immersion education is utilized across varied career paths.

Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to complete a questionnaire incorporating a Likert scale to assess their frequency of English use, perceived changes in English proficiency since high school graduation, and anticipated future language use. This preliminary data served as a foundation for the subsequent in-depth interviews, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of the factors influencing English language retention and professional application. The interview protocol included five key thematic areas: (1) current English usage in daily life and professional settings, (2) self-assessed changes in English proficiency over time, (3) the role of English in post-secondary education, (4) the impact of immersion education on career development, and (5) future prospects for English use.

The interviews were conducted in Japanese to allow participants to express their experiences, perceptions, and feelings in their native language without linguistic constraints. The interviews were conducted in a flexible, dialogic manner to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. Participants were asked to describe specific instances of English use in their professional and personal lives, reflect on factors contributing to the maintenance or decline of their English proficiency, and evaluate the relevance of their immersion education to their career development. The collected data were transcribed to identify patterns and individual variations in participants' linguistic and professional trajectories. For the purpose of ensuring confidentiality, all participants are referred to by pseudonyms in the analysis.

B. Data Analysis

The transcribed interview data were analyzed using a coding and thematic approach, beginning with a within-case analysis for each participant. This approach involved a detailed, narrative description of each individual's trajectories, coding the data into meaningful units to capture

their unique experiences with English language use and retention. Following the individual case analyses, a cross-case analysis was conducted. This process involved a systematic comparison of the findings from both cases to identify commonalities, differences, and emerging themes. By comparing the participants' experiences, this study was able to draw broader conclusions about the long-term challenges of language maintenance and the influences of immersion education experiences on their career trajectories, providing a deeper understanding of the post-graduation experiences of immersion students in a Japanese context.

4. Findings and Analysis

This section presents a detailed analysis of the two participants' post-graduation experiences, providing an in-depth understanding of how immersion education influenced their career trajectories and language maintenance.

A. Within-Case Analysis

Participant 1: Masami (Flight Attendant)

Masami's case illustrates the gap between a high-level English education and its application in a domestic professional environment. Her experience indicates that while immersion education provides a linguistic foundation, it does not guarantee a career path that fully utilizes those skills, nor does it automatically ensure the long-term maintenance of English proficiency. The categories and codes developed are presented as follows:

Category: English Use in a Professional Context

Code: Infrequent Workplace English Use

Finding: Masami feels that her professional English use is infrequent. She said "90% of my conversations at work are in Japanese," and her job as a flight attendant "doesn't really require a lot of English use." This point shows that even in a field with international connections, the day-to-day work environment may not be conducive to maintaining high levels of English proficiency.

Code: A Lack of Reluctance in Contrast to Her Colleagues

Finding: Masami noted that because of her background,

she has “no reluctance” to use English in her job, providing her with a comparative advantage over her colleagues who often have a “sense of dislike” toward using English. This finding suggests that immersion education instills confidence and a low psychological barrier to using English in professional settings.

Category: Post-Graduation Environment and Language Retention

Code: The Importance of Post-Graduation Opportunities

Finding: The trajectory of her English skills was heavily influenced by her environment after graduation. She felt her speaking ability “improved the most” during her study abroad experience, when she had a concentrated period of use. However, she observed that her college life was similar to high school in that she spoke Japanese with her peers, and there was “no pressure to speak English” during class activities. This point shows that the maintenance and growth of English skills are contingent on post-immersion environments and personal effort, rather than being guaranteed solely by the initial immersion experience.

Code: Contrast with English Submersion Abroad

Finding: Masami noted that in Japan, she has “many opportunities to speak Japanese” with her family and friends. This experience stands in contrast to her study abroad experience, where “everything was in English.” This point highlights that a complete immersive environment is not achieved through immersion education in a Japanese context, making it difficult to reach or maintain high-level English proficiency.

Code: Uneven Skill Maintenance

Finding: While she perceives her speaking has improved and her listening and reading skills have been maintained, her writing skills “deteriorated” due to a lack of use. This highlights that immersion education’s benefits are not universally sustained across all skills.

Category: Educational Pathways and Career Alignment

Code: Choosing a Domestic University

Finding: Although Masami considered studying abroad for a liberal arts education, she finally chose a domestic

university. She cited the high cost and her lack of a firm career path as reasons for this decision. This finding indicates that for immersion graduates, the option of attending an overseas university is not always the preferred or most practical choice.

Code: A Sense of Underutilization of Experiences in Immersion Schools in Career

Finding: Masami acknowledged that she is not in a role that fully utilizes her immersion education. While her job requires some English, it does not fully leverage the proficiency she has acquired.

Participant 2: Saori (Medical Doctor)

Saori’s case demonstrates how immersion education, while establishing a strong foundation, may not be fully leveraged in a domestic professional career, leading to challenges in skill maintenance over time. Her experience reveals that a lack of active English use results in skill deterioration, and that her career path was not directly determined by her immersion background. The categories and codes developed are presented as follows:

Category: English Use in a Professional Context

Code: Selective Use in Specialized Contexts

Finding: Saori uses English in her work, but it is primarily for specialized tasks like “reading academic papers,” presenting at conferences, and interacting with “international students.” While she has opportunities to read scientific papers, she states that speaking is her most infrequent use of the language. This point suggests that for some careers, the maintenance of productive skills is more challenging than receptive skills.

Code: A Sense of Underutilization in Career

Finding: Saori felt that her immersion experience was “not utilized as much” as she would have liked in her career, and that it felt like she was “piling up a completely different thing.” She also expressed the sentiment that she “wishes she could have found a job where she could utilize it more.”

Code: A Lack of Resistance in Using English

Finding: Saori noted that her immersion education instilled a sense of confidence, providing her with “less resistance” when reading English academic papers and

giving presentations in English. This point suggests that while her professional English use is limited, the immersion education experience gave her a psychological advantage over others who may find such tasks challenging.

Category: Post-Graduation English Use and Language Retention

Code: Decline of Speaking Proficiency

Finding: Saori's overall English proficiency has "slightly declined" since high school. She feels that her speaking ability "has deteriorated the most" because she has limited opportunities to speak English. This point illustrates that even with a strong foundation from immersion education, a lack of consistent, active use will lead to a decline in language skills over time.

Category: Educational and Career Pathways

Code: Career Direction Shaped by Parents

Finding: Saori's career path was heavily influenced by her parents. She noted that since her "parents were doctors, she just went with it." Looking back, she feels she "should have thought about it more," suggesting that her immersion education may have opened up other possibilities that she did not fully explore.

Code: Choosing a Domestic University

Finding: Saori considered studying at an overseas university but ultimately chose a domestic university. She cited the perceived risks and uncertainties of pursuing a medical career abroad as major factors, reflecting her sentiment that the path felt like "too much of an unknown" to her. This finding indicates that for graduates aiming for highly specialized fields, the perceived risks of a non-domestic educational path can influence career decisions.

B. Cross-Case Analysis

Based on the within-case analysis, this section synthesizes findings across both participants to elucidate broader conclusions about the long-term impact of immersion education in a Japanese context.

The Critical Role of Post-Graduation Opportunities

The data consistently show that the maintenance and enhancement of English proficiency are contingent on a graduate's post-immersion environment, particularly the

opportunities for active language use. Masami's speaking skills improved significantly during her study abroad experience, while her writing skills deteriorated due to a lack of use in her current job. Similarly, Saori's speaking skills suffered from a lack of use, while her receptive skills were maintained through her job tasks. These findings indicate that the long-term effectiveness of immersion education is largely shaped by post-graduation experiences.

The Limits of Immersion Education for Attaining Native-Like Proficiency

The cases of both Masami and Saori demonstrate that immersion education alone does not culminate in native-level proficiency. Both participants' experiences in immersion schools included significant opportunities for Japanese language use outside of the classroom, with family, friends, and in daily life. This stands in contrast to Masami's study abroad experience, where she was fully submersed in an English-speaking environment. This point suggests that immersion education in Japan provides a strong foundation but does not guarantee native-level fluency.

English as a Professional Resource rather than a Career Determinant

The career trajectories of both participants reveal that an immersion background does not necessarily lead to a career where English is the primary language of work. While both use English in their jobs, neither is in a position that fully utilizes the breadth of their skills, and both feel that their immersion background could have been better leveraged. This suggests that for some immersion graduates in Japan, English serves not as the main driver of their career choice but as a supplementary professional resource.

Indirect Benefits of Immersion Education

Despite the challenges of maintaining proficiency and the lack of full utilization of their English skills, both participants noted indirect benefits of their immersion education. Saori has "less resistance" to reading academic papers and giving academic presentations in English. Masami has "no reluctance" to use English in her job, providing her with a comparative advantage over her colleagues. These findings indicate that the value of immersion education in a non-English-speaking context lies

not in achieving absolute fluency, but in providing graduates with the confidence and skills to use English as a functional tool in their personal and professional lives.

Domestic Higher Education as a Common Choice

Both Masami and Saori chose to attend a domestic university, citing factors such as high costs and uncertainty regarding career paths in overseas environments. This suggests a pattern among these immersion graduates of prioritizing a domestic educational path, which in turn limits their exposure to a fully immersive English-speaking environment during their higher education.

5. Discussion

Common Overestimations toward Immersion Education

The findings of this study align with prior research on immersion education. The limited maintenance of proficiency due to a lack of post-graduation second language use is consistent with the longitudinal study by Wesche (1993), which similarly revealed a significant decline in French proficiency among immersion graduates in Canada. This trend is further supported by data from Statistics Canada, which illustrates a general tendency of decline in second language proficiency due to the situation where French is not integrated into daily life (Komatsu, 2022).

These findings suggest that the notion that immersion education automatically leads to lifelong, native-level fluency is a common overestimation. The data suggest that, in the absence of consistent and active second language use after graduation, a decline in second language proficiency is a plausible outcome. This point suggests that overemphasizing the attainment of perfect fluency may create misplaced expectations among students and educators. Educators and policymakers should therefore adopt a balanced perspective, clearly articulating both the strengths and limitations of immersion education.

Also, in Japan, immersion education is frequently discussed without a clear differentiation from related approaches such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), Content-Based Instruction (CBI), and English-Medium Instruction (EMI) (Yukawa & Butler-Goto, 2021). The integration of English as the medium of

instruction in subject learning has attracted consistent attention in Japan for decades. However, longitudinal empirical studies on immersion education and related pedagogical practices within the Japanese context remain limited. Consequently, expectations surrounding these programs may exceed the available empirical evidence, highlighting the need for rigorous evaluation of immersion education from a scholarly perspective.

Intercultural Differences of Immersion Education and Graduates' Domestic Career Aspirations

The tendency for some immersion graduates to choose careers not centered on English corresponds with the findings of Inoue and Imai (2020). Their study focused on current immersion students in Japan and found out that their career aspirations were diverse, with some aiming for fields where English is not required. The findings of this study extend this by demonstrating the trend in the actual career trajectories of graduates, indicating that immersion education in Japan does not necessarily lead to a career path oriented toward working or living abroad.

This trend may be linked to the different objectives of immersion programs between Canada and Japan. As mentioned in the introduction, Canadian immersion programs were established to promote bilingualism for intergroup communication and social cohesion (Genesee, 1984), while immersion programs in Japan have primarily been introduced to enhance English proficiency for globalization (Komatsu, 2022). This emphasis on language acquisition over intercultural communication may lead graduates to focus more on the practical advantage of English proficiency within Japan rather than seeking professional or cultural challenges abroad. The participants' experiences suggest that the value of their English skills lies in their ability to functionally apply them in Japan, providing a comparative advantage over colleagues.

These findings highlight the importance of not only cultivating language skills but also fostering intercultural understanding, which could encourage graduates to pursue careers that more fully utilize their immersion education in a global context. Strategies to support graduates, such as immersion programs that emphasize intercultural understanding and guidance that encourages consideration of international career pathways, are crucial to ensuring the long-term benefits of these programs.

Directions for Future Research

The primary limitation of this study lies in its small sample size of two participants. Although the findings provide valuable insights, they remain exploratory and cannot be generalized to the wider population of Japanese immersion graduates. Future research should therefore involve larger samples to substantiate and expand upon these preliminary results.

Furthermore, a significant gap remains in understanding the career trajectories of Japanese immersion graduates who choose to work or study abroad. Future research should focus on comparative case studies including individuals who have pursued careers in English-speaking environments. Such analyses would provide crucial insights into the conditions under which English proficiency is both maintained and fully utilized professionally. This research design would enable a more nuanced comparison between graduates who remain in Japan and those who pursue overseas opportunities, contributing to a more comprehensive assessment of the long-term effectiveness of immersion education in Japan.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to elucidate the long-term impact of immersion education on the career trajectories and English language retention of two Japanese immersion program graduates. This study's cross-case analysis reveals five key findings. First, the maintenance and enhancement of English proficiency after graduation heavily depend on the individual's post-immersion environment. Second, immersion education alone is insufficient to achieve native-level fluency without sustained second language exposure. Third, an immersion background does not necessarily determine a career path where English is the primary language of work. Fourth, the participants' career choices suggest that English is often regarded as a valuable tool rather than a defining factor in career decisions. Fifth, despite these challenges, immersion education provides significant indirect benefits, such as reduced psychological barriers to English use and a comparative advantage in domestic professional settings.

These results challenge the common assumption that immersion education automatically produces lifelong, native-like fluency, calling for a more balanced perspective

among educators and policymakers. To maximize the long-term benefits of immersion programs in Japan, it is essential not only to strengthen language skills but also to promote intercultural understanding and guide students toward international career opportunities. Future research should involve larger samples and conduct comparative case studies of graduates who have pursued careers or higher education in English-speaking contexts, in order to more fully assess the long-term effectiveness of immersion education in Japan.

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(Advisor: Professor Yoshifumi SAITO)

