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Investigating the employment of international students as teaching assistants for the purposes of university internationalization

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This area of sociolinguistics was under-researched, and international student teaching assistants had the opportunity share their opinions and experiences. Based on the findings, I was invited to suggest training methods for teaching assistants to work as 'Teaching Fellows' at Kyushu University.

The result of the study was that international students receive professional and personal benefits from their employment as teaching assistants. Their professional benefits included teaching and academic skills. They were also confident they do more if given the opportunity. These positive opinions and interest in increased responsibilities was timely as Kyushu University instituted a three-tier teaching assistant program with the top tier being given greater responsibility to teach sections of classes. The outcome of this research project is directly informing this program change in the English department.

Sociolinguistics

teaching assistant

There are few students on a university campus with as much potential to affect their institution as those chosen to be teaching assistants (TAs). These students are a tool in the classroom that can be utilized to alleviate some of the burden of administration from the instructor, and at their very best they can facilitate a smoother class by taking on some of the teaching load as well. Teaching assistant is a position that has been under-researched in the Japanese context, leading to the current state of institutional underutilization. However, the potential of analogous populations of culturally qualified individuals is well understood. An important factor is to differentiate international students as TAs from International TAs (ITAs), who are usually graduate students teaching undergraduate seminar courses in US universities. The problems associated with these TAs have been well-researched (Bengu, 2009; Gorsuch, 2003; Fletcher-LaRocco, 2011), but are not analogous with the situation in Japan, where international students assist the course teacher and are not responsible for preparing or leading the class by themselves.

The project outlined in this paper had the overarching research question of " How is the university experience in Japan affected by increasing internationalization?" Previous studies related to this question have looked at the opinions related to the internationalization of domestic and international students (Haswell, 2015; Haswell, 2017a), language teachers in an international university (Haswell, 2017b), and former international student teaching assistants (Haswell, 2017c).

The specific goal of this current project was to investigate the experiences of international students working as TAs in Japan. From my previous research and experiences as a teaching assistant program coordinator at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, I recognized the potential for teaching assistants, in their role of in-class intermediary, to both improve their ability to integrate into the campus population and be an example of a successful and valued student. Also, given the lack of prior investigation, my goal was to provide first-hand testimony from students in the role of TA to provide concrete evidence of what could be done to improve their situation.

Due to the above-noted lack of previous research in the field, this research project adopted a grounded theory approach. Less of a methodology and more of a method of approaching data collection and analysis, the basis of grounded theory is to work from a broad research question, through data collection and concurrent analysis, toward an applicable theory developed from and throughout the research process (Corbin, 2016).

Students were recruited for interviews either by contact from me or through contact

with the TA coordinator at APU. The interviews were conducted on the respective campuses as mutually convenient times and consisted of participants answering the following questions:

- How long have you worked as a TA?
- In what roles have you worked as a TA?
- How were you recruited to be a TA?
- Have you gained anything from your time as a TA?
- Do you have any recommendations to help the TA program improve?

In total, 30 TAs were interviewed, 17 from Kyushu University (KU) and 13 from Ritsumeikan APU. Testimony from these interviews was analyzed using a qualitative research software, MaxQDA. Using this software, single utterances can be tagged with unique labels, and, as the analysis progresses, familiar labels can be combined to create a code system. This system allows the analyzer to recognize patterns in the data, such as similar comments being given by different participants. Given enough testimony, these collapsed tags can then be applied when the same comments are made, and the tags within the system can be tabled by quantity.

The first research stage established findings in four comment categories: Professional positives, Personal positives, Obstructions, and Recommendations, categories which went on to form the basis of the second stage of my study.

Table 1: Recommendation related comments

Sub-code	Total count	KU	APU (adjusted)
In-class	23	9	14 (19)
Program-related	19	12	7 (10)
Communication	18	12	6 (8)
Training	17	10	7 (9)

The categories of recommendations were subdivided into were in-class, program-related, communication, and training (Table 1). The fact they all the recommendations could be collapsed into just four categories was indicative of the similarities between the ideas being expressed. The in-class comments related to how they were utilized by the teacher, and included statements where TAs thought they could or should be asked to do more. The conclusion to my first round of interviews was that the TAs in both universities felt they were gaining more than they were having difficulties in their jobs. They were able to use the employment to learn new skills, but they were not necessarily better able than non-TAs to integrate into the campus: the job wasn't necessarily helping them, but it wasn't hindering them either. I wanted to know more about what these students felt they gained in their role as a TA.

The second research stage included the re-interviewing of the TAs from the first stage

and asking them for their opinions and experiences relating to the four areas of findings: Professional positives, Personal positives, Obstacles, and Recommendations. This was done to first check if my analysis had been correct and, if so, to deepen the overall understanding of these conclusions. The outcome was that the analysis was proved correct and these points were agreed with. What emerged was the TAs were more likely to comment on the professional positives than the personal, and also came with more examples of ways the programs could be improved.

Table 2: Overall counts of comments

Category	Total count	KU	APU (adjusted)
Professional	120	78	42 (58)
Personal	86	50	36 (50)
Recommendations	77	42	35 (48)
Obstacles	66	47	19 (26)

During the second round, there were more comments relating to the professional positives of their time as a TA by both populations, but more so from the Kyushu University students. These tended to be related to their future employment and the skills they learned and practiced in their current employment. The APU TAs were the least likely to mention potential obstacle to their fulfilling experience as a TA, and this appears to have been related to the positive relationships they had with the teachers on the language program.

Personal comments were about as likely to come from both populations (when adjusted for participants). These comments did include some regarding making new friends and contacts on campus, but were mostly connected to positive personal feelings, such as enjoyment, and an improvement in their confidence as a public figure.

This led me to interview APU teachers about their opinions of the use of TAs in their program. The teachers felt that the greatest obstacles were the teachers themselves and the lack of uniformity when it came to utilizing TAs in the classes. Therefore, their new recommendations included ways of including them into their classes. These included:

- Pairing with students or joining small groups
- Teacher proxy in split class work
- Interviewer for short talks
- Model student for class activities
- Role player in short conversations with teacher or students

Table 3: Obstacles

Sub-code	Total count
Teacher-related	15

| TA-related | 10 |
| Admin-related | 7 |

On an interesting note, the teachers seemed to accept the criticism that it is the instructors themselves who cause problems in the program, which tended to be comments about their fellow teachers. It was generally felt that the teachers being interviewed were the ones who knew how to utilize TAs in classrooms best, and their colleagues may be vastly under-utilizing the TAs in other classes. This, combined with the requests for better communication, brought me to the conclusion I should be focusing my future attentions on how teachers approach the hiring and utilization of TAs in both language and content courses.

Table 4: Recommendations

Sub-code	Total count
TA-related	29
Admin-related	15
Teacher-related	13

Finally, although the obstacles were reportedly mainly formed by the teachers, the recommendations were overwhelmingly focused on the actions of the teacher assistants. These teachers felt more could be done to train and prepare students to make more from their employment as TAs. Although students learn professional skills, including teaching skills, during their employment as TAs, this is neither automatic nor something that occurs quickly - more training, earlier and more in a better focused manner, would lead to better outcomes for the TAs and courses. As this was an early recommendation, the APU TA coordinator increased the number of pre- and mid-semester training sessions for TAs and encouraged teachers to attend. This was positively commented on by both teachers and TAs in the second round of interviews at APU

Teaching assistants clearly have an important role to play on campus. They operate in a space between the teacher and the students, and in programs, such as APU where they are integrated into the language program, they become a valued member of the class. The importance of this study was underlined with by the changes in TA policy beginning in September 2019 and the subsequent work to prepare a curriculum for English language lessons beginning in Spring 2021. The change in Kyushu University's policy saw the introduction of a 3-tier system of Basic TAs (BTAs), Advanced TAs (ATAs), and Teaching Fellows (TFs), who will able to teach portions of the course in the stead of the teacher, allowing the teacher to focus on individual student needs, or vice-versa. My upcoming task is developing a system to utilize these TFs in the new 2021 curriculum, a task I was specifically recommended for because of this research project. It is my hope that the goal of improving the experiences of international students working as teaching assistants can be achieved in this new role.

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Implementing an effective teaching assistant program using international students	
ALLT Conference 2018, Dubai	
2018	

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JALT PanSIG National Conference	
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Achieving the aims of internationalization utilizing international teaching assistants

Language in Focus International Conference

2019

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