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Teaching Assistant Programs Utilizing International Students in Japanese Universities

Christopher G. HASWELL

Abstract:

This paper focuses on an under-investigated group of international students in Japan, those who make up the cadre of university teaching assistants. Using data gathered from interviews with international students working as teaching assistants at two Japanese universities and teachers in a language program using teaching assistant programs, this research project intends to build a clearer picture of how internationalization in university operates in classrooms. Using qualitative data analysis, this paper concludes that international students in the role of teaching assistants have the potential to gain a great deal from the experience, but that from the perspective of possible benefits for students and teachers, they remain an underutilized resource.

Key Words: *university, internationalization, teaching assistants*

1. Introduction

The act of bringing foreign educators, students, and techniques into the Japanese university system has its roots well over one hundred years ago, before many other more developed countries had begun to take the same route; Japanese educators knew, or felt they knew, the future of their education efforts would require an infusion of talent from abroad (Hansen, 2019). While this continued to a greater or lesser extent in the post-war period, the process has been accelerated in more recent times by the Global 30 initiative, running from 2008 to 2013, and the Top Global University program, beginning in 2014 and set to expire in 2024. These have focused on the core goals of increasing the number of international students and faculty on Japanese university campuses, increasing the emphasis upon English as a medium of instruction, and building and strengthening ties between Japanese universities and institutions around the world.

One of the metrics of internationalization, the number of international students studying in Japan, has arguably been the most visible effect of Japan's efforts in this field. The number of international students in Japan has been growing, for the most part, steadily, with noticeable spurts of sudden growth, one of which is currently being experienced as the Global 30 target date of 2020 for 300,000 international students approaches. The current number stands at 298,980 (Japanese Association of Student Services Overseas, 2018). To put this number in context, the number was around 140,000 in 2010 and only about 65,000 in 2000 (Japanese Association of Student Services Overseas, 2018). However, the number of students entering the country has not led to a commensurate increase in the number of Japanese students

studying abroad, which has remained relatively constant at around 30,000 (35,000 in 2017; 32,000 in 2012; 29,000 in 2007) (United Nations, 2018). Although showing increases, they have not been as dramatic as with the international student population. Cost and safety concerns have been stated as reasons for this weak growth in internationally-mobile Japanese university students, but another great concern is language (Ishikawa, 2017; Jenkins, 2007).

Teaching assistants occupy a sociolinguistic space in Japanese universities that puts them at the intersection of several concurrent interests: national policy is driving for more extensive international student recruitment; universities are being required to offer more of their courses in English; university students are preparing to enter a professional world where English is of growing importance. There exists an important bridging role to be played by teaching assistants, one that, while perceptible, is under-researched and therefore being inefficiently supported. Increased competition from other nations' universities in Asia, most notably China (Times Higher Education, 2019), which has two universities in the top five (Tsinghua University at 1 and Peking University at 5) while Japan only has one in the top ten (Tokyo University at 8), highlights the immediacy of the issue; there is a need for immediate action to halt and potentially reverse the slide in global competitiveness.

Policies relating to internationalization are ostensibly set by government agencies, such as the Ministry of Education, Sport, Science, and Technology (MEXT) in Japan, with the intent of improving the educational experiences of the students under their purview. However, by the time the policies are enacted in institutions and individual classrooms, they have been interpreted by so many stakeholders in the system their rationale can have been diffused to the point of becoming unrecognizable – students and teachers may know what is happening, but they may not always know why. The project reported in this paper, therefore, begins from the bottom up, investigating teaching assistants and their relationship to the programs within which they work. Teaching assistants were selected as the focus of this research as they exist in a position which complements the available teaching personnel with a student from the same university recruited specifically to fulfill a role requested by MEXT. They are the embodiment of government policy and university reputation boosting-motivated activities. As such, they are a prime but under-researched population.

The project upon which this paper is based addresses the existence of a gap, in the Japanese context, between the utilizable resources made available to institutions and educators and the implementation for the purposes set forth in education policy: teachers and universities have access to tools of more effective internationalization yet consistently fail to use them or may be using them incorrectly. This shortfall between potential outcome and observable outcome occurs because these agents of internationalization are not seen as such in the regular Japanese university context. This paper intends to elucidate this opportunity and the real-world benefits it offers. It is the hope that by explaining issues related to the increasing use of international students in teaching roles on university campuses, its roots, and current appearance, these resources will be put into more productive use for the purpose of improving the progress of all stakeholders.

2. Research Background

2.1 Analogous positions to the role of teaching assistant in the Japanese context

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. Since 1987, Japan has recruited recent college graduates from English-speaking countries to work as assistant language teachers (ALTs) in the Japanese English Teacher (JET) program (Hood, 2001; McConnell, 2000). These ALTs have worked in secondary education to support the efforts of the principle language teacher and other projects aimed at increasing the English language proficiency of Japanese school children. Similar projects are being undertaken in Korea (English Program in Korea – EPIK) and Hong Kong (Native English Teaching program – NET). These programs operate in ostensibly the same way. However, EPIK requires applicants to have a teaching qualification and some experience. Although not precisely the same role, the manner in which ALTs and international TAs arrive in Japan and the ways they are utilized in connection with language proficiency do have some similarities. Both ALTs and TAs come to Japan for the purposes of joining an educational context. For those TAs employed in language programs, they are selected on their proficiency in the English language, just as ALTs are employed from English-speaking countries. Finally, the ALTs often have very little input into the contents of the course, just as TAs are not necessarily viewed as being a teacher in their context – both assist and augment the already determined contents of the language lessons.

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.

Given the time and resources placed into programs to import recent graduates into their education programs, a lot of interest has been taken in these assistant teacher programs. Prior research in the area of team-teaching (TT) in Japan has focused on the JET program (Miyazato, 2009; Tajino & Smith, 2015), or team-teaching and the native-speaking English teacher / non-native-speaking English teacher (NET / NNET) dichotomy (Kawamura, 2013; Miyazato, 2009; Tajino & Tajino, 2000). The findings of this research are relevant to the role of a TA as they address the in-class and curriculum-related aspects of teacher support. The findings suggest that there are considerable potential benefits, but that lack of adequate training, in and out of class, and ill-defined roles have caused the perceived, potential and actual outcomes of TA and TT programs to become disconnected (Carless, 2006; Gladman, 2009; Ishikura, 2015; Kachi & Choon-hwa, 2001). The conclusions of these studies were that without adequate communication between program stakeholders, very little development could be expected. These problems remain in Japanese schools, with Steel and Zhang (2016) pointing out the continued underperformance of Japanese students in English, owing in part to a lack of training in how best to utilize team-teaching resources. In Tanghe's in-depth 2013 study of the teaching relationships between EPIK participants and language class teachers concluded, the stresses of team-teaching interactions are exacerbated by differences in power, language, and respect expectations and realities – teaching with another person in an assistant role in your class

clearly requires more effort from the teacher in order to utilize their educational input effectively.

2.2 Questions from previous investigations

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). When investigating students, domestic and international students at an international university in Japan were more likely to make negative comments about Asian performance varieties of English when compared to domestic students studying in less internationalized universities, citing the experience of interacting with non-native users of the language at the international university. Teachers at the same university reported opportunities for students to become more confident internationalized students, and gain professional opportunities based on this experience. However, the feeling was that the university could do more to promote interaction between students. These findings point towards a general trend of the experiences of people in a language program utilizing teaching assistants being positive but with caveats.

The question being investigated in this stage of the project regards the experiences of international students as teaching assistants at two universities in Japan. The intent was to find any similarities in the experiences of these two groups of students to derive methods of recruiting, training and using teaching assistants in international university contexts to maximize the potential benefits for all parties involved. The study included 17 TAs from Kyushu University and 13 from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU). Kyushu University is a large public university in the south of Japan, a member of the 13 Group A universities in the Super Global University Project, aiming to be in the world’s top 100 by the end of the project’s funding period in the early 2020s. Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific is a Group B university in the same project, with their project aim to be examples of internationalizing universities for others to follow, with the university promising to conduct ‘trailblazing’ activities in the pursuit of broader internationalization. The university already has one of the largest international student populations by percentage and diversity. Both universities have above-average sized international student populations, but Ritsumeikan APU is by far the more internationalized, with 50% of its students coming from outside Japan.

3. Study

3.1 Grounded theory approach

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). Theory production is not, however, always the intended or even possible outcome: “most grounded theory researchers have aimed to develop rich conceptual analyses of lived experience and social worlds instead of intending to create substantive or formal theory” (Charmaz, 1996, p.48). The framework of

grounded theory can best be described thusly:

(1) explicate basic (generic) processes in the data; (2) analyse a substantive field or problem, (3) make sense of human behavior; (4) provide flexible, yet durable, analyses that other researchers can refine or update; and (5) have potential for greater generalizability (for example, when conducted at multiple sites) than other qualitative works. (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, from Charmaz, 1996, p.48)

The aim of grounded theory is not to prove or disprove a hypothesis but to investigate, report, and aim to explain what has been covered. This can cause a lack of definite direction in the early sections of projects. As Corbin (2016) highlights, “one major point about qualitative research in this manner is that at the beginning of the analysis, the researcher doesn’t know with any certainty the degree of significance of early concepts” (p.44). The emphasis, therefore, is to begin gathering data from the very early stages of the research project. This is not unlike other qualitative methodologies, as “the key to qualitative research and, in particular, grounded theory is to generate enough data so that the illuminate patterns, concepts, categories, properties, and dimensions of the given phenomena can emerge” (Thomson, 2011, p.46). Grounded theory, however, does not begin with a conceptualization of the field being investigated, and can start with a broad question. The question which began this stage of the project was, “What are the effects of utilizing international students as teaching assistants in Japanese universities?”

Grounded theory was also best suited for this project from the beginning as it was not clear from the outset what facilities or populations would be available to me in the research project timeframe. The approach allowed me to begin collecting data from the population of students available to me at Kyushu University and expand the locations as they became available. Soon after the start of the project, I was able to secure Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) as a research location and begin data collection at that location shortly after Kyushu University.

The interview data, individual lines of transcribed text, were coded using the software Max QDA in three sessions: first, the data was coded individually as an entire data set; the two populations were then separated to allow for differences in the codes to be investigated; finally, the separated documents were reanalyzed used the established code system to recheck the veracity of the coding procedure – at this stage, single-use codes were either combined with similar codes or eliminated.

3.2 Study approach

Students were recruited for interviews either by contact from me or through contact with the TA coordinator at APU. They could also invite their associates who were international students working as teaching assistants, meaning that with each round of interviews, the number of students who were aware of the project grew and recruitment became easier. 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?

All participants in the project were asked for their permission for the interview to be audio recorded,

received assurances of their anonymity, and paid a small honorarium reflecting their time taken to be part of the project. In total, 30 TAs were interviewed, 17 from Kyushu University and 13 from Ritsumeikan APU. Of these 30 participants, 11 of the Kyushu University students had worked as in-class TAs, compared with all participants, 11 had worked as research assistants (only one from APU), and 10 of the Kyushu University students had worked in the Kyushu University Self-Access Learning Center (SALC). The majority of Kyushu University students (13/17) had gained their position through direct communication from a teacher or program director without the requirement for a formal interview, whereas the majority of APU students had been recommended by their English teacher for the position (8/13) and then been interviewed before being offered the job.

4. Findings

Given below are the categories of responses and tables displaying the number of tagged associated comments. Numbers for the two universities are given, with an adjusted figure provided for the Ritsumeikan APU respondents to balance the disparity in the number of participants.

4.1 Student findings

There were four main categories of tags from the interviews with TAs: positives, skills, obstacles, and recommendations.

4.1.1 Positive points of the program

Comments deemed to be positive were divided into two sections of codes, those that were ‘job-related’ and those that were ‘personal.’ The largest number of comments tagged as ‘positive’ was deemed to be ‘personal,’ with only 28% of positively tagged comments being deemed ‘job-related.’ The most common ‘job-related’ positives were that the job was ‘not difficult,’ that they could ‘earn money,’ that having done the job ‘looks good to an employer,’ or that working on campus was ‘convenient.’ The most common comments tagged as ‘personal’ were those related to ‘intercultural exchange,’ ‘speaking,’ and ‘speaking in English,’ three versions of how the TAs expressed their opportunities to communicate actively. The fourth most common tag was ‘psychological,’ which meant the comment had been related to positive emotions such as ‘happiness,’ ‘enjoyment’ or ‘fun.’

The Kyushu University students were more likely to consider the effect that having fulfilled the role of TA would have on their future employment prospects (see Table 1). All the participants from both universities responded they would include the job on a CV, but all the comments which positively

Table 1 – TA Positives (Job-related)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Not difficult	7	5 (6.5)
Money	6	6 (7.8)
Looks good to an employer	7	0 (0.0)
Convenient	3	3 (3.9)

referenced the job of teaching assistant giving a good appearance to a future prospective employer came from Kyushu University students. This suggested the students from the higher-ranked university had a more professional inclination when deciding to take up the position of teaching assistant.

Table 2 – TA Positives (Personal)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Cultural exchange	16	8 (10.4)
Speaking	11	5 (6.5)
Speaking in English	9	6 (7.8)
Psychological	9	5 (6.5)
Meet people / new friends	4	4 (5.2)
Speaking confidence (TA)	5	2 (2.6)
Speaking confidence (SS)	4	2 (2.6)
Meeting students again	0	3 (3.9)
Role model	0	2 (2.6)

With regard to the comments tagged as ‘personal’ (see Table 2), there was not a noticeable difference between the two populations. The comments tagged as ‘personal’ positives were most likely to be made related to communication, as the two most often used tags in this section were ‘intercultural communication’ or ‘speaking,’ the former being more common among Kyushu University TAs and the latter being more common among the APU TAs. The participants from both universities were equally likely to comment on ‘speaking in English’ and make comments tagged as ‘psychological,’ comments about positive emotions related to the program.

4.1.2 Skills learned in the program

Skills learned on the program were divided into three categories, ‘professional,’ ‘personal,’ and ‘interpersonal’ skills. Professional skills were the most commonly referenced (see Table 3), with the top three being ‘teaching,’ ‘professional work experience,’ and ‘using English’ or ‘speaking.’ ‘Interpersonal’ skills were the second most commonly referenced, with ‘communication with teachers and students,’ ‘working with Japanese students,’ and ‘using English to communicate’ being the most common. ‘Personal’ skills were the least commonly referenced, with ‘discipline,’ ‘confidence’ and ‘responsibility’ being the most common.

Table 3 – Skill (Professional)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Teaching	17	15 (19.5)
Professional Work Exp.	14	11 (14.3)
Speaking/Interaction	6	10 (13.0)
English (Pro)	6	8 (10.4)
Leadership	0	5 (6.5)
Inform teacher	1	2 (2.6)

Between the two populations, there was very little difference between the two universities with regard to Professional and Interpersonal skills. This remained true when the two most popular ‘professional’ tags relating to ‘teaching’ skills and ‘professional work experience’ were separated into the two groups. The largest difference between the two groups was related to the third most common tag, that of ‘speaking and interaction.’ This was deemed as different from the personal communication tags of a similar type (see above) as they were related to in-class or professional activities. APU TAs were twice as likely as Kyushu University TAs to mention this in relation to professional tasks, a difference that can be attributed to the difference in how they are expected to be used in the classrooms once the comments relating to interpersonal skills is taken into account.

Table 4 – Skill (Interpersonal)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Communication with Ss and T	26	25 (32.5)
Work with Japanese	8	7 (9.1)
English	9	4 (5.2)
World Englishes	5	3 (3.9)
Cooperation	2	4 (5.2)

When analyzing the tags for ‘interpersonal’ skills (see Table 4), APU TAs were more likely than Kyushu University students to cite ‘communication with students and teachers’ as a skill they had improved. There was little difference between the two groups regarding comments for ‘working with Japanese people,’ ‘world Englishes,’ meaning they experienced different varieties of English spoken by teachers or students or ‘cooperation.’ APU participants were more likely to make comments relating to Personal skills (see Table 5), in particular, those of ‘confidence’ and ‘responsibility.’ This is likely related to the fact that TAs in APU, when they are used as an assistant teacher, have more classroom responsibilities and therefore can feel they have undertaken more personal growth thanks to their time in the program. However, there was little difference between the two populations with regard to the incidence of ‘discipline,’ ‘patience,’ or ‘trustworthy’ tags, all three related to their own experience in class.

Table 5 – Skill (Personal)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Discipline	3	4 (5.2)
Confidence	3	4 (5.2)
Responsibility	2	3 (3.9)
Patience	1	4 (5.2)
Trustworthy	1	2 (2.6)
Punctuality	1	2 (2.6)

4.1.3 Obstacles to the effective operation of the program

Although there were more positive comments than any that could be considered negative (a total of 352 positive comments to 49 negative), there were issues which could be the cause of concern for anyone

considering joining the universities' respective programs. The 'obstacles' category of tags was renamed from 'negatives' (as opposed to the 'positives' discussed above) as 'negative' did not accurately reflect the contents of the comments included in the category. This is to say that while the 'positive' points were indeed positive comments about the program, the comments included in the 'obstacles' section were general comments about what was preventing the programs operating more effectively rather than being complaints; they often led directly to recommendations about how the program could be improved. The types of obstacles were sub-divided into three categories, 'teacher-related,' 'TA-related,' and 'personal.'

Table 6 – Obstacles (Teacher-related)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Teacher	4	7 (9.1)
Differences between teachers	2	8 (10.4)

The most common tags were 'teacher-related' (see Table 6), and these occurred far more often in among the APU TAs. The most common of this pair was 'teacher,' meaning the TA felt the teacher did not do enough to help them complete their role in class. 'Differences between teachers' related to the feeling among some TAs that the range of attitudes towards the use of TAs between teachers prevented them from adequately preparing for the class as they did not know what to expect. In addition, if teachers are not considering the role of the TA when preparing their classes, they are missing an opportunity to bring a second voice into their language teaching.

The second most common tags were 'personal' (see Table 7), which occurred most far often for Kyushu University students. These were feelings of personal inadequacy when performing their role in class. Kyushu University students also had a higher incidence of 'program-related' obstacles (see Table 8). Given the greater number of interactions noted between APU TAs and APU teachers in their TA program, the likelihood of difficulties would necessarily increase. While not suggesting the use of TAs should be standardized, there is a felt need for the issue of consistent, well-communicated use in class to be addressed.

Table 7 – Obstacles (Personal issues)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Communication problems	7	2 (2.6)
Shyness	4	2 (2.6)

Table 8 – Obstacles (Program-related)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Didn't enjoy TA tasks	5	1 (1.3)
Not enough skill needed	5	0
Waste of time	2	0

4.1.4 Recommendations to improve the program

There were four sections of recommendations from the perspective of TAs of how to improve the TA programs: 'range of tasks,' 'communication,' 'training,' and 'recruitment.' While both populations had similar

thoughts about the tasks, they were asked to undertake (see Table 9), how they were recruited, and their subsequent training, the majority of the comments regarding ‘communication’ came from the APU TAs (see Table 10). The main concern was that often TAs are not used at all, but that this is not communicated well to them, if at all, by their class teacher. These were the ‘teacher and scope’ and ‘change class tasks’ tags, and these were often related to wanting to know how they would be used prior to class, and with which teachers they would be paired.

Table 9 – Recommendations (Range of tasks)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Teacher and scope	1	5 (6.5)
Change class tasks	3	1 (1.3)
International TAs	4	0
Skills	1	1 (1.3)
Learn more about culture	1	1 (1.3)
In class more often	0	2 (2.6)

Table 10 – Recommendations (Communication)

	Kyushu University	APU (adjusted)
Direct communication	3	8 (10.4)
Communication with other TAs	1	1 (1.3)

As noted above, this point related to the problems APU TAs had with teachers, highlighted by the relation between the obstacle tag ‘teacher’ and the recommendation tag ‘communication.’ Relative to the number of tags for other categories identified by the qualitative analysis, recommendation tags were low, with only 41 statements identified as being recommendations compared with 49 for obstacles, 132 for positive, 220 for skills, despite TAs being explicitly asked about recommendations to help improve the programs: the TAs were much more interested in talking about their positive experiences in their respective programs.

4.2 Teacher findings

In total, 17 teachers from the APU language center were interviewed. There were four main sections of findings from the interviews with the teachers: tasks/activities, positives, obstacles, and recommendations. It should be noted here the teachers who were interviewed were those who volunteered, for a small honorarium to recognize their time, to share their experiences and ideas with me. Therefore, it could be concluded that they were teachers with a positive attitude in relation to the use of TAs and therefore, not entirely representative of the teaching population as a whole.

4.2.1 Activities TAs undertook in the program

There were three sections of comments regarding the tasks TAs undertook in the classes: Teaching tasks, non-teaching tasks, and non-class tasks. Unsurprisingly, the most common tasks tagged were those related to ‘teaching,’ with ‘TA-specific tasks’ such as “interviewing student,” “sharing their backgrounds” and “write on the board” being the most commonly tagged type of comment. Other tags were ‘making a

pair,' 'model activities' and even 'lead the class.' 'Non-teaching tasks' included 'Basic administration & attendance' and 'making notes on student performance. Finally, the least common were 'non-class activities,' including 'transcriptions' and 'trialing software.' The total count of task-related comments was 60, meaning each teacher mentioned an average of four different activities.

4.2.2 Positive points of the program

There were two categories of comments regarding what teachers felt were the positive points of the TA program: professional, and personal, of which 'professional' were more common. Of the comments tagged as 'personal,' the most popular were 'leadership,' 'confidence' and 'rapport with students.' Of those tagged as 'professional,' the most common were 'teaching experience' and 'language skills,' very similar to the responses of the TAs when they spoke of the professional skills they had gained or improved.

4.2.3 Obstacles to the effective operation of the program

There were three sections of comments connected to what teachers felt were obstacles to the effective operation of the program: 'teacher-related,' 'TA-related,' and 'administration-related.' Again, the code category title of 'obstacles' was used for this set of tags as they did not always reflect negative aspects but more general points that could be improved and therefore linked to recommendations.

The most commonly noted obstacles were those tagged as 'teacher-related', and much like with the TAs comments, 'differences between teachers' was the most commonly noted related obstacle; the other comments in this category were tagged as 'more work for the teacher', which was an issue only raised by the teachers themselves. It can, therefore, be concluded the teachers were able to recognize, even while considering their personal circumstances in relation to the TAs, that there existed a difference between each other that should be addressed. It might be too much to suggest that those teachers who volunteered to be interviewed were also those most likely to utilize TAs effectively in their classrooms, but it is not an overstatement to say the teachers who participated in the interviews recognized the *value* of TAs as a potential tool to assist their work; they also made note of those teachers who clearly did not share their opinion.

4.2.4 Recommendations to improve the program

There were four sections of comments connected to how teachers felt the TA program at APU could be improved: 'teacher-related,' 'TA-related,' and 'administration-related.' This sub-set of codes proved the most difficult to reduce, for reasons that became clearer as the process of analysis developed. The most commonly referenced category of recommendation from the teachers followed that of the TAs as it was the 'Teacher-related' tags, which proved to be the largest in number. The most common were 'TA-related' followed by 'Admin-related' and, finally, 'Teacher-related.'

The most common 'TA-related' comments were those tagged as 'assist students not the teacher,' 'standardize' and 'TESOL students,' referencing the TESOL course some students choose to take at APU as being a useful method of preparing students to be TAs in language classes. The largest number of comments tagged as 'Admin-related' made reference to 'training' and the largest number of comments tagged as 'Teacher-related' suggested there should be 'Out of class contact' with the TAs to facilitate a better

quality of communication between TAs and teachers.

This being said, the number of recommendations from the teachers was around double that of the TAs. While at first I believed this was due to a tagging problem or a lack of ability to condense the codes system, I realized the breadth of the recommendations was indicative of a significant obstacle to the improved success of TA program mentioned by both TAs and teachers: the difference between the perception of the TA programs by teacher, the commensurate lack of consensus about how TAs should be used in class, resulting in a wide range of suggestions as to how the program might be improved – the teachers did not know exactly what kind of program they were attempting to improve, so their recommendations were broad and difficult to classify.

5. Discussion

Overall, the takeaway from this project has been positive – participants in TA programs receive more from their jobs than I would have imagined. The teachers, too, spoke in encouraging terms about their experience working with TAs and about the effects the TAs had on their ability to encourage their students to meet the lesson goals. Nevertheless, it is important to note the consistent sense of a lack of program optimization throughout the study: teachers note the difficulty in working with TAs who lack sufficient training or motivation to do more than advertised; TAs note the inconsistent manner in which they were utilized by different teachers even within the same courses.

Given the work the teachers have to put into their courses and class management, it is unsurprising that TAs can be sometimes seen as an additional burden rather than as a potential asset. To fully integrate TAs into one's classroom requires an initial mindset that these resources can operate for a personal benefit for the teacher in the classroom and then a professional benefit with the goals of the course.

The main suggestion for improvement in the short and medium-term is an increase in the methods of communication and for there to be a requirement that these channels should be regularly advertised and utilized – communication within the program and between all levels of the program and between stakeholders needs to be improved. However, the program will only be successful in supporting the internationalization goals of the university if these goals are clearly defined, made explicit, and regularly evaluated. The objectives of every TA program are not related to internationalization, but those that are would be best served by a clearer statement of this fact.

Although not the most common recommendation, one of the more striking was the suggestion of a name change, one which would reflect both the aims of the program and the responsibilities being put on the shoulders of those involved. One teacher suggested teaching assistants be renamed “Language Ambassadors,” with reference to the quality of the English being brought into the language classroom – students no longer had a single point of reference, but two or, in some cases, more, when multiple TAs on different teaching days. Throughout a single week of classes, students at APU can have interactions in English with language users from all over the world. A name change would emphasize the potential for language-ability improvements directly related to the TA program.

6. Limitations and future research

This project was limited by the number of participating universities. Although I contacted colleagues at other universities throughout Japan, I was only able to have consistent contact with enough TAs to make the project viable at the two main participating sites. It is my hope to return to this project in the future after gaining further contacts and repeat the methodology to form a comparison study. It will also be interesting to repeat the study at Kyushu University and Ritsumeikan APU to investigate if the changes already underway in these two universities have an effect on the findings.

Another limitation was the ability of this paper to fully present the scope of the project. This paper reports the interview data from AY2017. A follow-up investigation of the participants in this study was conducted in AY2018 and the data from these interviews currently being coded and processed. It is my intention to publish this in the near future, forming a complete report spanning two papers.

7. Conclusion

It is not the aim of all university TA programs is to utilize a growing international student body as part of the objectives of internationalization. However, such an intention would dovetail with the stated and manifest internationalization goals of the institutions and the policy-makers who set these goals. With the pressure growing in Japan to accelerate the internationalization of the student population, coupled with the currently unavoidable relative advantage of international students in English performance over the domestic students, international students are the natural agents for supporting the broader goals of preparing Japanese university students for their future as a globalized human resource. If this current project has proved one thing, it is that the role of the TA should be prioritized more than is currently done, and making clear to staff, teachers, teaching assistants, and students, that TAs are more than assistant teachers – they are cultural and linguistic ambassadors who have the potential to change the environment of Japanese universities in a manner which will have wide-ranging benefits.

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