

## Reinvestigating the Experiences of Teachers and Their Teaching Assistants at Internationalized Japanese Universities

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# Reinvestigating the Experiences of Teachers and Their Teaching Assistants at Internationalized Japanese Universities

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## **Abstract:**

This paper reports the findings of a follow-up project to a study investigating university programs in Japan which utilize international students as teaching assistants (TAs). It included both the TAs and teachers from these programs. The previous study upon which this project was based concluded that while there were both professional and personal benefits to undertaking the role of TA, programs utilizing international students as TAs had yet to attain all the potential advantages of these students' employment. By informing the participants of this project of the earlier findings, the intent was to clarify and elucidate the original conclusions. Interviews with 31 international student TAs from Kyushu University and Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) and 17 teachers from APU were transcribed and analyzed for similarities in the comments. The results suggest the programs at the two universities are providing important personal and professional experience for the TAs, but the program could be further expanded to assist the goals of both the university and the TAs themselves.

**Key Words:** *university, internationalization, teaching assistants*

## **1. Introduction**

This paper is the follow-up to an earlier work (Haswell, 2019), presenting the experiences and opinions of international students employed as teaching assistants (TAs) at two universities in Japan. The previous paper concluded the programs were giving the international students opportunities to improve their professional, personal, and interpersonal skills. However, it was also felt they were underutilized relative to their potential (as described by the teachers in the program). I concluded that the programs using international students could be improved by asking the students and teachers in the program about observed obstacles and recommendations for their mitigation or removal.

Against this background, I re-contacted the teaching assistants and teachers who were participants in the first stage of this study and asked if they would be interested in assisting with a follow-up study. Many agreed, and more TAs were invited to join. In this follow-up study, participants were presented with the conclusions from the first study and asked to comment on whether these findings were consistent with the TAs and teachers' actual experiences. In doing so, I was able to verify the findings and also receive valuable feedback from those working in the programs on a daily basis.

## 2. Research Background

It would not be in the best interests of this paper or any potential readers to repeat this section from the first paper; as this paper shares the same rationale, there is little to add. However, there are some principles which should be restated for the purpose of positioning this report clearly. The original motivation for this research project was the lack of research on the topic of TAs in Japan. This gap in the field led to a pilot study of former international student TAs from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) (Haswell, 2017) and the more recent, more in-depth study at both APU and Kyushu University (KU) (Haswell, 2019). While the concept of international teaching assistants (ITAs) has received academic attention in North America (Bengu, 2009; Fletcher-LaRocco, 2011; Gorsuch, 2002), little has been done in Asia. The increasing mobility of tertiary-level students globally, Asian students particularly given their relatively high level of mobility (United Nations, 2019), brings with it the need to address issues of linguistic and cultural interaction on university campuses in Japan – as a net recipient of university students (United Nations, 2019), Japan is clearly a desirable location for university students in Asia. Based on my experience as a TA coordinator at APU dealing with predominantly non-Japanese participants, the investigation was a helpful first step towards using the human resources available on most campuses in Japan more effectively to address the challenge of student population integration and harmonious intercultural exchanges.

When beginning this project, the lack of published research in the field was a challenge. The most analogous field of research was that of Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) and team teachers (TTs) in Asia, and the investigations of Japanese English Teachers (JETs) in Japan (Kachi & Choon-hwa, 2001; Miyazato, 2009; Tajino & Smith, 2015; Tajino & Tajino, 2000) and English Program in Korea (EPIK) assistants (Carless, 2006; Tanghe, 2013). The overarching finding in these studies was the importance of communication between the teachers and assistants to make the roles, responsibilities, and relative positions of all program participants clear before classes began, while the courses were in progress, and in debriefings after the course. My pilot investigation in 2017 had similar findings, as did the main study conducted in the following year (Haswell, 2019). This second study also found a great number of positive experiences and take-aways from the program, such as professional skills, increased intercultural communication opportunities, and benefits such as the simple fact of undertaking relatively well-paid and convenient employment in a foreign country.

## 3. Methodology

The research methodology of this stage of the project was reported previously in the 2019 paper. In brief, the first research stage had established findings in four comment categories: Professional positives, Personal positives, Obstructions, and Recommendations. Utilizing a grounded theory approach, with the early collection of large amounts of data while performing simultaneous analysis and theory construction, the first stage involved the recording, transcribing, and analyzing of testimony from 30 TAs and 17 teachers in programs utilizing international students as TAs. All interviewees were paid a small honorarium to thank them for their attendance. After being asked a series of questions about their experience as a TA or as a teacher working with TAs, the participants' testimonies were ordered and tagged using qualitative

analysis software to create a series of quantifiable sub-codes from which the most commonly used themes of speech could be identified.

The stage of the project being reported in this paper re-invited the participants from the first stage to join an interview and allowed other eligible participants to join i.e teachers from the APU English language programs and international students from both APU and KU who worked or had experience working as a teaching assistant. The participants were shown the most commonly identified responses to the previous round of interviews under the four main themes, and asked if they agreed with the findings, as well as if they could further elucidate their opinions on the topic in relation to the findings.

My intention for beginning with a presentation of the findings of the original stage (Haswell, 2019) was two-fold: I wanted to check if my conclusions had been correct; I wanted to deepen the quality of the data being collected in this project. A grounded theory approach should always intend to increase the depth of data being collected, along with checking the formed theories from earlier stages of the research (Thomson, 2011). The overall intent was to provide a clear picture of how international students were employed as TAs, how being a TA affected them, and what could be learned to improve all TA programs in the future.

The participants were shown the same results from the first stage of the project, divided into ‘Personal positives’, ‘Professional positives’, ‘Obstacles’ and ‘Recommendations’ with the top five (or top four in the case of ‘Professional positives’, as there were only four sub-codes) presented in alphabetical, not popularity, rank order. Participants were informed of this ordering to avoid any belief that the top-listed code was automatically the most popular.

As described previously, the interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and the transcribed testimonies imported into the qualitative data analysis software, Max QDA. This software allows for sections of text to be tagged as to their main theme, and these tags to be collated as a list. This process was repeated for the interviewed teachers. Through repeated combining of similar codes, the system could be systematically reduced to the point where the most common codes can be identified and ranked.

#### **4. Findings**

The findings presented here are from the two populations of teaching assistants, at KU and APU, and the teachers from APU. In total, I interviewed 31 teaching assistants, 18 from KU and 13 from APU. Recruitment for the second stage of this project was more difficult than the first time, with only about half of the previously interviewed TAs returning for the second stage, meaning I had to supplement their numbers with new participants. I also interviewed 17 teachers from the APU Language Center who had experience working with TAs in their classes.

Unlike the first stage of the project, when I was using the transcripts to produce a code system that would demonstrate patterns in the data in order to classify the comments, at this stage I already knew which four categories comments would fall into: professional benefits, personal benefits, obstacles, and recommendations. The coding of the testimony for this second stage of the project was to investigate which of these categories would attract the most interest in terms of volume of comments and to see if any other categories of comments emerged from the analysis.

Presented here are the counts of the comments relating to the different categories and a concurrent discussion of their relevance. As this is a follow-up stage of the project, this arrangement provided the best method of elucidating the findings of a large amount of compiled data.

#### 4.1 Teaching Assistants

The first note that could be made as point of analysis was the number of codes and sub-codes created from the overall testimony of both populations. There were 323 instances of comments being tagged for the KU TAs compared to 208 for the APU TAs. When adjusted for the difference in the number of TAs interviewed, this gap narrows to 323 compared with 279 (this adjusted figure was rounded to the nearest whole number). From this, we can say the KU TAs were more likely to give information that was tagged as a unique comment. The raw numbers, however, do not give us much information about how these comments were distributed.

The initial analysis shown as the number of comments related to each of the four categories (see Table 1) gives us a useful position from which to begin the analysis.

**Table 1: Overall counts of comments**

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

From the raw numbers, there are some early impressions: Kyushu University TAs were more likely to comment on the professional aspects of the job; there was little to no difference between the two populations with regard to personal comments or recommendations; TAs from KU were more likely to comment about obstacles they observed within the program. One could conclude that KU TAs viewed the role as more of an introduction into their professional careers, and therefore were more likely to recognize obstacles for both themselves and the program as a whole.

When the numbers are broken down by each type of comment, more conclusions can be drawn. The first category of sub-codes was for comments related to the 'Professional' prompts (Table 2).

**Table 2: Professional related comments**

Sub-code	Total count	KU	APU (adjusted)
<i>Future employment</i>	69	47	22 (30)
<i>Current job</i>	41	32	9 (12)
<i>Language</i>	21	10	11 (15)
<i>Training</i>	2	0	2 ( 3)

As we can see, the KU students were more likely to give comments related to both future and current employment, but the APU TAs were more likely to note their use of English in classes as part of their role as a TA, and to comment on their training as a TA. Among both populations, comments regarding the connection between their current role and their future employment were the most common. Comments in

this category included ‘Learn teaching skills’, ‘Become a teacher/professor’ and ‘Looks good to an employer’. When the top five sub-codes in this category are broken down, the difference can be observed more clearly (Table 2a).

**Table 2a: Sub-codes in ‘Professional / Future Employment’**

Sub-code	Total count	KU	APU (adjusted)
<i>Learn teaching skills</i>	20	15	5 (7)
<i>Become a teacher / professor</i>	15	9	6 (8)
<i>Looks good to an employer</i>	8	5	3 (4)
<i>Learn academic skills</i>	7	6	1 (1)
<i>Would write on CV</i>	7	5	2 (3)

While there was little difference in the number of comments regarding becoming a teacher or professor in the future, it was the KU TAs who were much more likely to specifically make note of the skills they were learning in their roles. As will become clearer in the ‘Future Directions’ section of this paper, this fact bodes well for the future of the TA program at KU: if the current group of TAs are expressing an interest in being a more active part of their courses, then any change of circumstance where this would be possible is a positive for them, their supervisors, and the institution.

Of the other noted Professional sub codes, there was very little difference between the two groups, aside from ‘Learn academic skills’. This difference can be attributed to the recruitment practices at KU, where TAs often work in their field exclusively; APU TAs, with the university’s smaller size and different recruitment practices, have little choice in the English language program to work with students from different callings within the university: there are only two faculties at APU, compared to thirteen at KU, APU TAs would not automatically be in an unfamiliar course setting.

When the TAs made comments about the job they were doing currently, they remained very close to the prompts they were given on the prepared sheet. The three most commonly used sub-codes were ‘Earning money’, ‘Not difficult’ and ‘Convenient’.

**Table 2b: Sub-codes relating to current job**

Sub-code	Total count	KU	APU (adjusted)
<i>Earning money</i>	17	14	3 (4)
<i>Not difficult</i>	13	11	2 (3)
<i>Convenient</i>	9	5	4 (5)

There was no difference between the two populations when discussing the convenience of the job. However, KU TAs were much more likely to comment on the first two sub-codes, mentioning earning money and the lack of difficulty in their tasks more often than APU TAs. Here the difference between the integration of the TAs from KU can be observed: they are not as integral to the language program as those from APU, a point observed in the higher likelihood of APU TAs mentioning ‘Language’ as a professional skill (See Table 2).

It is also likely the KU TAs are used less frequently and in less taxing roles than the APU TAs. When viewed in light of the ‘Professional’ tagged comments, I would suggest this underutilization is leading to a

frustration of the intention among TAs to learn professional skills, and their lack of opportunity to exercise them.

**Table 3: Personal related comments**

Sub-code	Total count	KU	APU (adjusted)
<i>Connections</i>	37	20	17 (23)
<i>Culture</i>	18	13	5 ( 7)
<i>Psychological</i>	17	8	9 (12)
<i>Course-related</i>	8	5	3 ( 4)
<i>Language</i>	6	4	2 ( 3)

Unlike previous comment categories, those connected to the TAs' personal activities (Table 3) within the programs were much closer between the two populations. The point to note is the TAs were most likely to mention their ability to make connections, with students, teachers, and with other TAs. The comments tagged as 'psychological' were for comments when the TAs said their employment had a psychological effect, made them happy, was fun, or experienced a pleasant mood in class.

**Table 4: Recommendation related comments**

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

When viewing the recommendation-related comments, the APU TAs were more likely to have ideas connected to in-class improvements than the TAs from KU. This can likely be attributed to the manner in which APU TAs are currently used – they are more often part of the classroom activities and therefore more likely to have opinions connected to this area of the program.

**Table 5: Obstacle related comments**

Sub-code	Total count	KU	APU (adjusted)
<i>TA</i>	25	14	11 (15)
<i>Teacher / Professor</i>	14	11	3 ( 4)
<i>Student</i>	14	11	3 ( 4)
<i>Course activities</i>	13	11	2 ( 3)

When reviewing the comments connected to obstacles in the program, those comments connected to TAs were similar. This suggests TAs from both groups had a similar appreciation of their limitations in their role. The differences between the two groups came from comments relating to the activities of others in the program. KU TAs were more likely to make negative comments about the teachers in the course, the students in the class, and the activities they were asked to do. KU TAs were overall more likely to mention an obstacle, with 47 of the 66 comments in this category coming from their interviews. Clearly, there are more observable problems with the program as it stands. As is reported below, however, this has already

been changed.

#### 4.2 Teachers

The duration of experience the teachers reported working with TAs ranged from 6 months, i.e their first semester, to 10 years, meaning the comments represent a large cumulative number of interactions with TAs in the program.

**Table 6: Positives**

Sub-code	Total count
Professional	37
Personal	20

Much like the TAs in their programs, the teachers were more likely to make comments relating to the professional conduct and benefits of being a TA than make comments regarding personal matters. This is understandable as the teacher's only interaction with TAs would be in a professional context.

**Table 6a: Professional-related comments**

Sub-code	Total count
Teaching experience	10
Class dependent	9
Looks better than other work to an employer	8
Relative to other part-time jobs	6
Language ability	4

Of the professional comments, the most common were regarding TAs having direct teaching experience in their classes. As noted in the previous study, given they volunteered their time to be interviewed on the topic of TAs, this sample of teachers are probably more likely to view the role of TA positively and utilize them in their class – the very reason the TAs receive teaching experience is by the positive actions of the teachers. They did note, however, the opportunities for gaining this teaching experience were class dependent, in that teachers could not find ways to utilize TAs in all their courses. Finally, as a professional skill, the teachers mentioned language ability the least, despite APU TAs being more likely to mention this skill than KU TAs. The teachers mentioned it less as they notice it less than the TAs: the teachers focus on improving the language skills of their students not their TAs.

**Table 6b: Personal- related comments**

Sub-code	Total count
Good place to practice speaking	5
Make money and already on campus (convenience)	4
Become better leaders	2
Meet new people	2
Become a better role model	2

Speaking is included here as a personal skill because the comments related to TAs speaking and interacting with students and teachers generally rather than on specific language skills, and this was viewed positively. The next most common comment was on the topic of the job helping them with their lives on campus, both financially and with having a convenient and well-organized lifestyle, not requiring them to travel off campus for employment.

**Table 7: Obstacles**

Sub-code	Total count
Teacher-related	15
TA-related	10
Admin-related	7

According to the teachers, the main obstacles were connected to the personnel in the classroom, the teachers and the TAs, rather than the organization of the program. This was in contrast to the TA comments, which tended to suggest that problems tend to come from the TAs rather than the teachers. This is either self-deprecation among the TAs or their familiarity with the actions of the group leading to a feeling TAs are the most prominent obstacle.

Teacher-related comments revolved around the actions or inactions of teachers who had not volunteered to be interviewed. It was felt the TA program was a positive for the department, but not enough teachers availed themselves of all the opportunities the TAs provide to improve the quality of their language classes (see below for the comments about TA activities in class). The TAs, however, received some criticism for not being in the right frame of mind to be effective assistants.

**Table 8: Recommendations**

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

When the discussion turned to recommendations, by far the largest category was TA-related and the smallest was Teacher-related, despite the largest obstacle being identified as the teachers rather than the TAs. The reason for this can be identified by the comment, made by five different teachers, that any recommendation would have to depend on the teacher: as it stood, teachers could choose not to participate in the program or ignore or modify directions as to who TAs were to be used; TAs, on the other hand, would be subject to any changes implemented in the program as they were the assistant to, and therefore in a lower position relative to, the teacher.

The acknowledgement of this imbalance in the power dynamic attends to an issue at the core of the effective use of TAs in any program: the teachers recognize it is their responsibility to effectively integrate them into their classrooms, but are often unwilling or, perhaps worse, unable to do so. Given the shift from teacher related problems to TA related recommendations, I suggest the teachers who volunteered to be part of this project are taking it upon themselves, as teachers positive about the program, to assist the TAs

through issues the TAs are personally having with their roles in the classroom. I would take this as positive sign, teachers taking their own role as mentor seriously.

While the TAs stayed close to the original prompts with their responses, the teachers felt more comfortable adding to the range of comments. The most common by far were comments about what TAs actually did in their classes.

**Table 9: TA Activities**

Sub-code	Total count
Teaching tasks	45
Non-teaching tasks	13
Non-class tasks	2

The teachers were much more likely than the TAs to discuss what the TAs actually did in class, and these comments could be sub-divided into teaching, “non-teaching”, and “non-class tasks”. Of these categories, teaching tasks was by far the most commonly used code. The most often-reported TA class task was to use their experiences, either studying abroad or learning English, to assist the students or provide an example of a real-life manifestation of a lesson topic. This could be done as a front-of-class introduction or when working with or interviewing students.

Some examples of the TAs’ classroom activities were given by the teachers in the interviews: making a pair with the students or otherwise being involved in the students’ tasks; modeling the tasks for the students with the teacher; and giving students information about their home country as a counterpoint to what is being done in Japan or in the situation being demonstrated by the textbook. These suggested activities were consistent even amongst the less experienced teachers, suggesting these were recommended to them by more experienced teachers. It is interesting to note the lack of such activities mentioned by the KU TAs, despite their higher incidences of mentioning professional skills being developed in their experience as a TA – the KU TAs did not equate EFL-related activities to professionally-applicable skills.

In total, there were 18 comments in which the teachers did not agree with certain conclusions or took issue with what they saw as the possible interpretations of the conclusions. They were rarely outright disagreements and usually took the form of a clarification of the meaning.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Overview

This stage of the project took some time to gain momentum, but once the TAs and teachers were first recruited, it moved forward smoothly and productively. The findings presented here support the findings of the first stage of this project, suggesting those findings were correctly analyzed. This stage of the project was successful in further elucidating what made the programs successful, where they could be improved, and how those improvements could be manifested.

When combined with the earlier findings, the findings from this two-stage study is helpful to understand both the practicalities of using international students as TAs and the potential difficulties. As with

previous studies, my aim has been to identify issues and intended to allow observers to mitigate these issues before they emerge, making the experience of people in these situations to have a more positive experience from the earliest stage possible.

## 5.2 Suggestions

### 5.2.1 Theory / Approach

Based on the combined results of these two stages of the project, the first change that should be made is how the TA program is marketed to the TAs and to the teachers in the programs. Even where TAs are seen as an integral part of the language program, as in the case of APU, they are still underutilized. By making the use of a TA optional, the program is not emphasizing the potential of these assistants.

Those with the responsibility for administrating the program or prompting students to apply should be people who believe in the personal and professional benefits of working as a TA. It is hoped this paper can be of assistance in promoting this kind of approach. Interviewers for the position should note the importance of informing candidates of their responsibilities as well as potential improvements they can make to their academic and professional careers in their role as a teaching assistant.

### 5.2.2 Practical

As noted in the section on TA activities, there are many things TAs can do to assist and improve a single class or an entire course. They include, but are not limited to:

- Pairing with students or joining small groups
- Teacher proxy in split class work
- Additional vocalization of class texts
- Culturally-based introduction and explanations
- Interviewer for short talks
- Model student for class activities
- Role player in short conversations with teacher or students
- Intermediary between the students and teacher when feedback is required

None of these activities are strictly limited to language courses, and therefore practical aspects of a TAs role should be a consideration for any course instructor – “how can I get more from my class by combining my efforts with those of a skilled and motivated assistant?” At the very least, communicate the expectations to the TA before the course begins, and remain consistent in your requests for their best efforts. Before anything else, those with the responsibility for leading the course should consider TAs as an integral part of the course and respect them as such.

## 6. Limitations and Future Directions

As alluded to in the earlier paper relating to this project (Haswell, 2019), this study was limited from the beginning by the number of participating locations and therefore the impression given is limited to those two locations. By having an SGU Group A and a Group B university included, it is hoped there is some useful information to be gleaned from this investigation. While the findings may not be generalizable

across all Japanese universities, the trends of benefits and obstacles provide an insight into what programs may be doing right and what may be preventing them from achieving their goals. This current investigation should be treated as the beginning of a longer-term effort to address the lack of research being conducted in this area.

There are, however, positive points to be heralded, although not related directly to the outcomes of this research project. While this paper was being completed, KU was beginning the introduction of a three-tier TA program, beginning with the basic teaching assistants familiar to all, but including content-specific ‘expert’ teaching assistants for programs requiring more assistance an input from a professionally and academically qualified participant, and culminating in ‘teaching fellows’, a classification of teaching assistant similar to the international teaching assistants so common in universities in the United States. This change in the program should provide future opportunities for a fresh investigation of the use of TAs at Kyushu University.

The changes coming into effect at Kyushu University coincide with the publication of this paper. The new TA system will have three categories of teaching assistant, with only the first two giving reference to the role of TA. Basic TAs (BTAs) and Advanced TAs (ATAs) are differentiated by their level of involvement in the class, with the former expected to complete simple administrative tasks, and the latter intended to work with the classroom instructor in a role much more akin to the TAs at APU. The third category are Teaching Fellows (TFs) and are related to the university’s Preparing Future Faculty Program (PFFP). From both the job title and its relation to the PFFP, it is quite clear what this new category of classroom assistant is intended to do: in an era of increased competition to hire the best researchers and academic talent, building an academy-like system for future potential faculty is a forward-thinking, long-term strategy.

## 7. Conclusion

This project comes to an end with a great sense of hope for the future: Kyushu University has implemented a wide-ranging set of changes which, I predict, will improve the teaching environment and on-campus experiences for teachers, students, and teaching assistants alike; APU has already undertaken changes during this project period to their English language teaching assistant program which are proving popular with both the teachers and teaching assistants I interviewed. The rationale for beginning this project all the way back in 2013, was my impression that more could be done with teaching assistants coming to Japan from other countries to raise the level of internationalization – so much time, effort, and money has been spent to recruit students from outside Japan, but not enough was being done to integrate them into the student population and create a truly international con-campus environment. As we approach 2020, the change advocated in both the 2017 and 2019 paper appears to be becoming a reality, at least at KU.

Given the time taken between the start of this project and now, it would be prudent to leave some time to pass for the recently implemented KU reforms to settle and for their outcomes to be realized before reinvestigating this area again. It is hoped that these changes in the KU approach bring about measurable differences in the experiences of all parties involved. Revisiting this area of study will remain a future aim; there are reasons to feel positive about the potential improvements which are about to occur. Once

realized, these reforms could be the blueprint for future programs throughout Japan and beyond: giving more agency to students, international and domestic, to be positive role models of international interaction, will be a great step forward for Japanese universities in the increasingly competitive international university marketplace.

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