

# Personal and Professional Development for International Students as TAs in Japanese Universities

Christopher G. Haswell<sup>1</sup>

---

## Abstract

The internationalization of tertiary education is a process that is continuing around the globe, ever deepening in complexity. Connected to this evolving situation is the question of how best to integrate the students who are brought together on internationalized campuses by these efforts. This paper reports the findings of an investigation of former international student teaching assistants at a highly internationalized university in Japan and considers the various personal and professional benefits they felt they acquired. Using testimony from interviews with nine former teaching assistants, and using a grounded theory approach to analyze and identify common themes in the participants' reported experiences, this report concludes that the hiring of international students as teaching assistants has the potential to benefit the individuals included in such a program and the institutions who recruit them.

**Key terms:** international university students, teaching assistants, internationalized university education

## 1. Introduction

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 tools 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. On an international university campus, when the students who are selected to undertake the TA role are often drawn from the international student population, this collective potential grows, as do the number of domains within which their efforts intersect: these TAs find themselves in positions not only between the teachers and the students, but also assisting with their respective university's broader mission of increasing the amount of on-campus internationalization and the production of globalized human resources. While this is not always the intent of a TA program, the hiring and utilization policies in practice can have this effect. For these reasons, TA programs should be investigated for the purpose of calibrating them as closely as possible to the university's aims.

The objective of this paper is to define the role of a TA as it is undertaken in Japanese universities and to investigate the development experienced by international students working as TAs. This paper reports a research study conducted at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU), one of the most highly internationalized universities in Japan. This study asked the following

---

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor, Kyushu University, Japan.

Email: haswell@f1c.kyushu-u.ac.jp

research questions: "How are international student teaching assistants (TAs) affected by their time in the TA program?"; "Do such programs have a positive effect on university internationalization?" Reported here are the findings from interviews with former international students who had participated in the TA program at Ritsumeikan APU during their university undergraduate education.

## **2. The role of international Teaching Assistants**

TAs recruited from the international student population in Japan are not the same as so-called International Teaching Assistants (ITAs). ITAs are graduate students employed as part of their course of study in US, European, or Australian universities to teach part of their affiliated undergraduate courses. The roles for TAs in Asian contexts are generally more limited than those where ITAs are used as teachers (Bengu, 2009; Gorsuch, 2003; Fletcher-LaRocco, 2011); TAs in Japanese contexts can be reduced to the position of taking notes of attendance and setting up classroom equipment for the teacher. One of my interview participants described the basic requirements of the job: "As a teaching assistant, we are supposed to take charge of taking attendance, prepare, distribute and collect materials, being proctor during test time and other similar tasks." Another interviewee commented, "It can be really stupid, boring tasks like give out attendance sheets and wiping the blackboard." In this paper, therefore, the term 'international TA' will be used to differentiate from the acronym 'ITA,' which is taken to refer to a separate category of instructor rarely, if ever, found in Japanese universities.

The role of TA as it is understood in the Japanese university context, with one or more students directly assisting with the teacher's work in the classroom, is not one that has been well researched. The closest teacher/assistant relationships to receive significant academic attention in Asia are assistant English teacher (AETs) programs, such as the JET program in Japan and the EPIK program in South Korea. These programs match young university graduates from English-using countries with teaching districts in the respective countries with the intention that these AETs support the efforts of the teacher to undertake effective communicative language teaching in their classrooms. Both programs are intended to give the primary teacher of the class assistance with what may be unfamiliar procedures or methodologies for this teacher and more time to focus on the learning outcomes and administration of their classes. The main difference between these two programs is that although the EPIK program requires applicants to have "a teaching license in your home country" (English Program In Korea, n.d.), the JET program only requires an undergraduate degree to be eligible. However, both programs envisage similar roles for their candidates, roles that are closely related to those held by TAs.

Teaching assistants are assistant teachers; the only question is how much responsibility they are given in the classroom. Research involving AETs in the JET or EPIK programs provides useful examples of the extent to which assistant teachers are employed in contexts similar to those in undergraduate language courses and what problems these programs can face. Started in 1987, the JET program was undertaken to counteract negative perceptions of Japan during the economically

prosperous 'bubble economy years,' where little was known about the country by non-Japanese speakers beyond its position as a serious economic rival (Miyazato, 2009, p.37). According to the official website of the JET program:

[The Program aims] primarily to promote grass-roots internationalisation at the local level, the JET Program invites young college graduates from around the world to participate in international exchange work and be involved in foreign language education ... We hope that all people involved in the JET Program, both the participants and the local people they live and work with, will build an international network and become successful in today's global society (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, n.d.).

Employees in the role of TA in both Japan and South Korea can be classed as being in programs that promote so-called 'team-teaching' (TT), where the lead teacher is assisted in their EFL classes by a younger, less experienced, professional participant. The most oft-cited work in the field of team-teaching in Japan is that of Tajino and Tajino (2000), where the participants in the Japanese JET program are described as "young college graduates with little or no teaching experience" (p.4). For a successful class, Tajino and Tajino concluded that "cooperation between the two teachers at various stages is a prerequisite" with "lesson plans, in the classroom (providing input, giving practice, etc.), and in evaluation after classes" being essential. The overall outcome of a well-organized team-teaching program was a concept Tajino and Tajino termed 'team-learning' (p.9), which they defined as encouraging "all the participants, teachers as well as students, to interact with one another by creating more opportunities for them to exchange ideas or cultural values and learn from other 'team members' ". In all, Tajino and Tajino concluded that better-organized courses would mean "the students can (1) obtain more opportunities to use the language as a means of communication, (2) learn more about diverse intercultural values and (3) foster a positive attitude towards communicating with native speakers of language." Clearly, a well-organized program has great potential benefits.

The Tajino and Tajino study was followed by that of Kachi & Choon-hwa (2001). This study concluded, however, that the rationale of the program and the methods of its implementation were often disconnected. The problems highlighted by Kachi and Choon-hwa included, "gaps between [Japanese teacher's] perceived problems in TT and the objectives of the JET program that the program organisers recognise, to teachers' lack of time to prepare for team teaching lessons, to problems based on everyday teaching practices." Another serious issue was related to teacher face-saving, which could also be considered to be an act of 'learning-avoidance' regarding the self-actualization opportunities referred to by Tajino and Tajino: "JTEs avoid, consciously or unconsciously, conversing with ALTs in English in front of the students. We tentatively attribute this to the fact that many Japanese teachers are concerned with their lack of oral English fluency, which they think might make them lose credibility as English teachers" (Kachi & Choo-hwa, 2001, p.8).

The finding of a lack of adequate communication in TT has been reported elsewhere. As Carless's investigation of the EPIK pointed out, if "unenthusiastic partners are forced to teach together, problems are likely to arise" (2006, p. 344). In addition, the situation in classes where the teacher decides that directives from MEXT regarding use of certain methodologies and AETs can be ignored is succinctly outlined by Carless: "The need for detailed planning can, of course, be circumvented if either partner dominates the lesson with their counterpart as spectator, disciplinarian or human tape recorder, but in that case the presence of two teachers is not being exploited and is arguably a waste of resources" (2006, p. 344). If the program is calibrated correctly, it has the potential for a smooth, mutually beneficial approach to the teaching of the language. AETs and TAs have linguistic as well as cultural value. However, for TAs to provide adequate and organizational support for both teachers and students, clear communication of aims, expectations, and opportunities for feedback are required.

### **3. Research project – a case of accelerated internationalization**

This paper reports on an investigation of the employment of teaching assistants at Ritsumeikan APU. Ritsumeikan APU is part of the Top Global University Project (TGUP) as a member of the Group B funding group (MEXT, 2014). This group, labeled the "Global Traction Type" group, was expected to be "innovative universities that lead the internationalization of Japanese society, based on continuous improvement of their current efforts" (MEXT, 2014, para. 2). Ritsumeikan APU is an international university with 45% of its students coming from outside the country, mostly from Asia. For a university to be considered 'internationally-focused', it needs to have made the recruitment of international students as a priority to produce an international environment on its campus (Foskett, 2010). Ritsumeikan APU requires students to take the number of language credits required by MEXT, and in addition to this take a further 20 credits in EMI classes, that is, major-subject classes taught in English. This means that fully one-third of the students' requirements for completion of their university courses required the use of English, despite none of the students being language majors. This commitment to EMI and the maintenance of a dual language policy confirms this university is focused on bringing a sizable international student population onto its campus. Such an approach gives international students first-hand experience of living and working in Japan and provides domestic students with the experience of living and working with young people from other countries.

### **4. Methodology**

In total, nine former APU TAs participated in Skype interviews after responding positively to a request for participation in a short online survey. All participants were former English program TAs, employed to assist with the administration of large classes by noting attendance, logging student participation, and working directly with students to complete classroom tasks, such as pair or group discussions. They were all undergraduate students at the time of their employment as TAs, and they were working part-time while taking their own classes at APU. The participants were contacted by

email and given the questions in advance and asked to consider them before Skype contact. The questions sent to the former TAs were:

1. How would you describe the role of a TA to someone else? Would you recommend this job to a friend?
2. Do you consider a TA to be a job you would advertise as a skill? For example, would you add this as a qualification to your CV or include it in an online profile (e.g., LinkedIn)?
3. Do you think TAs should be expected to do more in class? If so, what do you think could be done to help TAs become an integrated part of the teaching in university classrooms?
4. Did working as a TA assist with your integration into the Japanese university life?

Interviews were transcribed and, following a grounded theory approach of memoing and tagging qualitative data for repeated or synonymous words, these testimonies were analyzed for patterns, i.e., reported experiences and opinions shared by the participants.

## **5. Findings**

The interviewees gave responses that were related to both personal and professional development: they commented on their own experiences on campus and how these experiences had affected their lives on campus; they spoke about skills they had acquired or added to their resumes based on their working experience as TAs.

### **5.1 Describing the role of TA**

The comments in reply to the questions “How would you describe the role of a TA to someone else? Would you recommend this job to a friend?” reflected experiences that gave a positive impression of the role of a TA. All the respondents said they would recommend the job, some giving very positive responses:

[It is] one of the most respected jobs on campus, I tell people. (Interviewee 1)

It's a very good job. You get the experience of something beyond washing plates and waiting tables. (Interviewee 2)

I really enjoyed doing the class. I was in a class related to my field, and I liked to hear who the professor talked in the class. I was not only like a TA but also a student as well. (Interviewee 3)

If the TA has some plans to focus on teaching, I think it would be very helpful for them. (Interviewee 8)

There were comments that suggested some TAs would recommend the position only after careful consideration:

If I recommend it to somebody, it will only be to people who I think have the potential and the skills to do it and who will be committed to getting the most out of it. Not everybody looks at it the same way. (Interviewee 4)

Emotionally, I feel like some students may not need much more than academic support. I think as freshman students I think when they first started they had no-one. You can give them some advice or help them make friends. I would recommend to a friend, and I did. (Interviewee 7)

If I wasn't competent, I might not have enjoyed it. It can make you feel a little be stupid, just sitting there. You sometimes don't know the expectations. I would recommend it because it puts you in different situations. (Interviewee 9)

As mentioned in the examples above, the former students who had participated as TAs would recommend it as a job, although it may depend on their opinion of the person to whom they are recommending the position. The comment "you sometimes don't know the expectations" gives the impression that the role of TA may be best suited to confident, self-motivated individuals who can approach the class teacher to directly request guidance or decide their in-class tasks independent of direction.

## **5.2 Advertising the skill of being a TA**

The responses to the next two questions garnered responses that reflected the interviewees' opinions of the professional aspects of a TA's role in the classroom. When asked the question "Do you consider TA to be a job that you would advertise as a skill?" all the interviewees said that they would advertise it:

When you are a fresh undergrad, it makes your profile look a bit nicer. (Interviewee 1)

Yes, I would definitely advertise the job as a skill. It's because I believe the job has taught me many useful skills which are necessary for my future career. (Interviewee 5)

Absolutely, because when we graduate from university, we don't have hard skills yet, so writing TA as experience is a way to show the employers that we have soft skills, we can work with other people and the bosses. (Interviewee 6)

Being a TA helped me with my confidence. I had problems with public speaking, so being a TA could help me in that sense. (Interviewee 7)

I learned to interact with Japanese, which can help in my professional career. It helped me to understand more about Japanese, and deal with their characteristics.  
(Interviewee 8)

You can show that you have a certain kind of experience. I think I learned many things, such as how to talk to students, how to approach difficult situations, how to tell students they are about to fail the course without further demotivating them, or if you see there has been plagiarism, how do you start a conversation like that? (Interviewee 9)

It can be seen from these responses that, especially immediately after graduation, the interviewees believed their experience as TAs set them apart from other students who had completed their university course. To them, it had enriched their image in the eyes of future employers.

### **5.3 The expectations for TAs in class**

In response to the question “Do you think that TAs should be expected to do more in class?” the interviewees were mostly positive about the potential for an expanded role for TAs at APU. This may appear to have been a leading question but was not intended to elicit only positive responses from the participants.

I feel that a TA can do a little bit more, especially during English lessons. Sometimes you are just standing there, passing the mic around and taking attendance. (Interviewee 1)

TAs are something beyond people who print the papers for you. It's an important part, but as a system, I think that all professor should maximize their resources, and become an expert in that area. It's a good idea that the university advises the lecturers to use TAs.  
(Interviewee 2)

It depends on the professors; some TAs have to ask the office for two TAs. If I had more time, I could do not only the technical jobs and tasks; I could do something more academic. I could assist him with research in the field. (Interviewee 3)

I think TAs also should be given more authority to speak up and have occasional feedback session or more like meeting with the teacher about class and students. Beside 90 minutes of each period, it would be helpful if TAs are given materials of class at the beginning of the week or the month so that they can have some preparation. Also, I believe teacher and TAs should communicate more so that they can support each other effectively. (Interviewee 5)

I strongly agree to have more of a role in class, as they can have better discussions and working together, tasks together, it will make the experience for the students and the TAs richer. (Interviewee 7)

Those who did not think TAs should be called upon to do more than is already being requested said the following:

Already enough. I have assisted 4 English classes and 2 or 3 language classes, and most of them were pretty similar. The TA is not just helping the technical processes like handing papers, but also the teachers are asking us for ideas for activities for helping the students, and understanding the student way. (Interviewee 6)

In other words, they believed the current level of effort or input into the running of the class being requested of TAs at APU was already at a sufficient level. One response to this question brought to mind the comments of Kachi and Choon-hwa's 2001 study noted above with respect to face-saving by teachers in classes where they may be asked to use a language in which they are not especially proficient:

If [students] see someone who is not as respected as a teacher or professor, they probably consider that a bad idea, or not the kind of education they want to receive in university. (Interviewee 7)

As a job, the former TAs found their roles gave them opportunities to learn new skills. In university education, the focus cannot only be on the current situation, as the institution is ostensibly preparing their students for a professional career that is a few years, or perhaps months, in their future. For that reason, any professional experience a student can gain may reflect positively in the eyes of a prospective employer and provide both the student and the institution with a benefit, such as a job offer and improved graduate employment rates respectively. At an internationalized institution, especially in the era of 'globalized human resources,' professional experience combining intercultural and foreign language use is particularly valuable. The TA program at Ritsumeikan APU, if correctly attuned to the needs of both the students and the university, could be a source of both professional and institutional benefit.

#### **5.4 TAs and integration into campus life**

The question that allowed the former TAs the most opportunity to speak about the personal effect of their time working as TAs was "Did working as a TA assist with your integration into the Japanese university life?" While responses were mixed, some of the interviewees did remember their time as a TA helping them integrate into the university environment:

Yes, massively. Because Japanese kids have the senior/junior mentality. When you are the TA, even off campus, they want to come and talk to you. (Interviewee 1)

Being in this environment, communication skills are very important. APU is truly an international environment where students are free and encouraged to express their opinion, challenge their ability, learn and try new things. It is also it will be a big waste to not try to work oneself in many areas to learn more. While being a TA, I was able to understand the difficulties of both teacher and students. It helped me to learn how to put myself in others' shoes. It helped to improve my communication skills a lot which turns out to be very helpful now in my workplace. (Interviewee 5)

Yes, because I got the chance to interact with Japanese students who are learning to speak English. So it helped me to learn about Japanese and also to converse and understand in English. (Interviewee 8)

In Japan specifically, I think there is a certain Japanese work ethics, they have their own expectations, to know in the hierarchy how you are supposed to behave. It gives you a glimpse of what it's like to work in the Japanese system. (Interviewee 9)

However, there were those interviewees who felt working as TAs did not have an effect on their lives in APU:

I worked primarily with English classes, including Japanese students, I didn't like classes where there was no initiative. (Interviewee 2)

No. The reason is APU is a bilingual university, and since I did not know Japanese, my classes were in English with Japanese and international students. (Interviewee 3)

Not really, because, I was first a TA in my last year, so I think I had already adapted very well to Japanese university life. (Interviewee 6)

For me, not so much, because I started later on ... integration to Japanese university life comes before working as a TA. (Interviewee 7)

The responses to this question suggest that, unlike the professional aspects of the position, the personal gains from their time as TAs are affected by their time at APU as a TA. The general opinion of the professional and personal effect that working as a TA had on the participants in my study can be summed up in this statement:

Being a TA is ... a learning experience, because you are trying to meet the teacher's expectation and the students' expectation, so you have to work on several skills at the same time. Also, it's a way to understand culture, how to approach Japanese students, especially those who are not exposed to the international environment. (Interviewee 9)

## 6. Comment & Recommendations

The participants in this research project were positive about their time as TAs at APU. Despite some inconsistencies in their experiences, it can be concluded that these former students received a recognizable professional benefit from the work experience and some personal benefits as well.

The first recommendation, based on the opinions of two former TAs who disagreed that their time in the program had assisted their integration into the student population, is connected to the timing of students' entry into the program. TA programs connected with the international students and EMI courses should be started as early as possible to maximize the possibilities for students to be assisted in their on-campus acculturation. While it is not always possible for first semester students to become TAs, nor is it always advisable given the time constraints on such freshman students, earlier admission to the program gives students the opportunity to maximize this benefit of the program. Employing international students as TAs also assists with addressing what Bradford (2016) describes as 'physical and conceptual isolation' from the other student population that can occur if the integration of the students into the university is not actively addressed by the Ritsumeikan APU administration itself.

Another recommendation that is suggested by the findings is for the role of TA to be more widely publicized early in the academic careers of international students. A problem highlighted in earlier studies and the interviews was that of classroom teacher commitment to the TT or TA program. Comments regarding the range of responsibilities required of TAs were connected to the enthusiasm of the professor; and therefore, the quality of the experience of the TA was related to the confidence the professor had in the TA. Also, finding work experience in Japan can be difficult for international students due to language, culture, and other barriers to entry. Therefore, a comfortable work experience adds both experience and a small degree of qualification to help fill a resume. Universities should actively promote the benefits of having an experienced and motivated TA in class, and participation by professors should be encouraged by universities with high numbers of international students. This would maximize both the potential gains from the program and the number of students engaged in being TAs.

It is important to make clear the limitations that will restrict opportunities for universities to make wide-ranging changes to teaching assistant programs. Program budgets may not allow for wide-scale recruitment operations, thereby constraining how much time can be put into efforts to find the best candidates for the program. If universities cannot guarantee the quality of candidates, they reduce the potential benefits that all stakeholders in the program can receive. Also, hiring TAs too early in their university terms could limit the educational and social experience they can use in a classroom. After all, in their early months at university, these students are still learning

to be students themselves. While the hiring of international students as TAs is highly encouraged, universities should also be warned to carefully define the scope of the program, its intended beneficiaries, and the methods they should follow to achieve the successes they seek.

## 7. Conclusion

It can be concluded from the responses that the students who participated in the TA program had rewarding experiences on campus. Of course, students can integrate into the campus community without working as TAs, but as studies of teachers at Ritsumeikan APU discovered (Haswell, 2015, 2017), the benefits of being on an international campus are only experienced or maximized by taking positive advantage of them. The examples given in that study of activities that students could undertake included joining school clubs or events. Being a TA qualifies as a positive activity to take advantage of the university's uniquely internationalized environment and student population. Providing both international and domestic students increased opportunities to integrate and interact positively should be the goal of any university interested in improving the intercultural contact on its campus. The responses to these questions demonstrate that being a TA is an example of positive intercultural contact.

The policy initiatives to further internationalize Japanese universities will continue to evolve and, if past practice is any guide, expand and accelerate. The efforts to encourage more international students to enter Japanese universities, for Japanese university students to use more English in their studies, for the same students to study and work abroad, and for universities to use English for international outreach will all continue to be vital to the long-term viability of Japanese tertiary education. For these reasons, there will always be international students on campus in need of employment and students in classes who will require support. On internationally-oriented campuses, there will also be potential study-abroad candidates who require counseling and universities in need of accurate feedback on the current state of their programs. International students in the role of TAs and educational counselors fulfill roles that can assist in all these aspects. The most important element of all is that international students appear well-motivated for the opportunity.

## Bio Statement

Christopher G. Haswell is an Associate Professor in Kyushu University's Faculty of Languages and Cultures. His research field is sociolinguistics, focusing on how English is used to facilitate Japanese university internationalization. He welcomes inquiries from other researchers in the field: [haswell@fllc.kyushu-u.ac.jp](mailto:haswell@fllc.kyushu-u.ac.jp)

## References

- Bengu, E. (2009). *Adapting to a new role as an international teaching assistant: influence of communicative competence in this adaptation process* (Electronic Thesis). Retrieved November 12th, 2015, from <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>

- Bradford, A. (2016, March). *Fostering global human resources through English-medium instruction*. Paper presented at the 2016 Asia-Pacific Association of International Education Conference, Melbourne, Australia.
- Carless, D. R. (2006). Good practices in team teaching in Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong. *System*, 34, 341-351
- Council of Local Authorities for International Relations. (n.d.). *Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme*. Retrieved April 13, 2015, from <http://jetprogramme.org/en/>
- English Program In Korea. (n.d.). EPIK. Retrieved December 16th, 2015, from <http://www.epik.go.kr/index.do>
- Fletcher-LaRocco, M. J. (2011). *International teaching assistants and the essence of the development of intercultural competence* (Electronic Thesis). Retrieved November 17th, 2015 from <http://digitalcommons.ric.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1040&context=etd>
- Foskett, N. (2010). Global markets, national challenges, local strategies: the challenge of internationalization. In F. Maringe & N. Foskett (Eds.) *A review of globalization and internationalization in higher education: theoretical, strategic and management perspectives (35-50)*. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis
- Gorsuch, G. (2003). The educational cultures of international teaching assistants and U.S. universities. *The Electronic Journal for Teaching English as a Second Language*. Retrieved November 19th, 2015, from <http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume7/ej27/ej27a1/?wscr=>
- Haswell, C. G. (2015). University teaching in the internationalized era. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *JALT2014 Conference Proceedings (20-26)*. Tokyo: JALT.
- Haswell, C. G. (2017). How internationalization policy initiatives affect students and faculty members in Japanese higher education. *Studies in Languages and Cultures*, 38, 59-71
- Kachi, R., & Choon-hwa, L. (2001). *A tandem of native and non-native teachers: voices from Japanese and American teachers in the EFL classroom in Japan*, Paper presented at the Second International Teacher Educators' Conference, University of Minnesota
- MEXT. (September, 2014). *Selection for the FY2014 top global university project*. Retrieved October 17th, 2014 from [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/houdou/26/09/\\_\\_\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/10/07/1352218\\_02.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/26/09/___icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/10/07/1352218_02.pdf)
- Miyazato, K. (2009). Power-sharing between NS and NNS teachers: linguistically powerful AETs vs. culturally powerful JTEs. *JALT Journal*, 31(1). 35-62
- Tajino, A., & Tajino, Y. (2000). Native and non-native: what can they offer? *ELT Journal*, 54(1), 3-11