

# The Necessity of Creating a Teacher Assistant Program A research based on a Japanese University

## ESLクラスにおけるT.A. プログラム導入の必要性

— 環太平洋大学の調査を基に —

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**Abstract** : 近年、大学においてティーチングアシスタント (TA) は大きな役割を果たしていると言われる。この研究はESL (第二言語としての英語) クラスで大学生によるTAプログラムを作り、先生の指導の元で英語が苦手な学生のサポートを行い、クラスへの積極性の変化を調べた。また、教師を目指すTAに関しては一足早い教育現場の実習を体験させ、進路に対する思いも含めて調べた。対象となったTAは全員海外留学経験者で英語レベルが高いものである。サポートを受けた学生とTAにアンケート調査やインタビューを通して本稿で結果を明らかにする。

**Keywords** : Teacher Assistance, Associate Teacher, English Second Language, Professional Development

### I. Introduction

#### The Background of Teacher Assistance at International Pacific University

The participants in this study are Teacher Assistants (TA's) from the International department that is part of faculty of education for future generations. The sophomore students joining in have spent their freshman year in the New Zealand campus of IPU called International Pacific College (IPC). The practice of students developing experience can be made through practical training as a Teacher's Assistant (TA). TA's in some cases can be paid employees of universities and the responsibilities can vary. Even still, the area of training and development for students has been identified as being a less than positive aspect of career advancement. Guyton & McIntyre (1990 p. 514) point out the whole process is a "medieval apprenticeship" and is a struggle that is "fundamentally flawed", due to student teachers being thrown into the deep end without the skills to cope with the challenges. Agreeing

to this Britzman, (2003, p. 221) acknowledges the issue of teacher training as a contentious issue and supports university custodians need to be supportive in the progress of students becoming professional educators. Providing IPU returnee students with an opportunity to share their English skills to freshmen gives them an opportunity to practice teaching skills. Many of the TA's are interested in becoming teachers in the future, yet have had few opportunities to hone their communicative talents via the classroom in a position of educator. Lortie (1975) insists students can gain insight into teaching through practically getting involved, even if it was through a small role. The "apprenticeship of observation", or being in a role of assisting without taking on the main teaching role can assist in underlying issues the professional faces. Despite the role of TA, pre-service teachers could gain practical knowledge while supporting schoolmates.

Chickering & Gamson, (1987) proposed communication guidelines for incorporating good practice in undergraduate education is without doubt

a fundamental component. It is important for clear and prompt communication between mentor and mentee in the university setting. Naturally, following good education principles is an ongoing process and having clear communication involves cooperation. Having teachers and students on social networking sites can provide the medium for communication outside of the classroom. In a group message, all members are informed on times, questionnaires or changes which are made. This information also provide a storage space for curricular or syllabus information. Within the classroom, TA's need to get involved in the teaching process as an aide. At times they may be required to present grammar and vocabulary, translate, or provide demonstrations as well as participate in the role of aiding the Associate Teacher (AT) in any way they like. This course of action establishes hands on experience also known as active learning. From here, the TA can be given feedback or in turn they can asked questions to the AT. They should be inquiring into pedagogical issues, so as to build on their current knowledge of classroom skills. In this tutoring role, they are not responsible for administration duties or expected to handle any issues of discipline, so behavioral management is not essential in their role; yet, they will need to cooperate with students who are more or less peers. Unlike many tutoring roles in universities there is no contract. In many TA roles, the lecture presents information and in a separate class, the TA tutors explains the meaning in a question and answer session, At IPU, the role is to aid the teacher in a voluntary non-funded role. There are not assessment tasks for the TA and they are under no legal obligation to perform at a standard of teaching. The lecturer who agrees to take on the mentor role is responsible for the TA needs. Likewise, they should be caring, thoughtful and pay attention to the professional development of the trainee in their apprenticeship to teaching (Ambrosetti & Dekkers, 2010; Le Cornu, 2005).

Roles and Responsibilities of the TA are as follows:

1. Aide the teacher in classroom practice

2. Provide translation and interpret English into Japanese
3. Be punctual on time to class as well as attend at least 9 out of 15 classes
4. Show initiative and ask students if they need help
5. Complete an evaluation sheet to the Associate Teacher on 3rd, 8th and 15th week
6. Provide an opinions pre and post class in a debriefing session with the Associate Teacher
7. Follow all the rules and regulations of the schools standards of classroom etiquette.
8. Show high levels of enthusiasm and general interest in the activities and language drills.

## **II . Research Aims**

Through appraisal of the Teacher Assistant design and approach of the program teachers will be able to ascertain the need to maintain the TA program at IPU. As this venture is at the beginning stages, reflection on what way to structure the practice is essential. Besides the program, the actual vocational experience for both the student, TA and AT needs to be clearly defined to ensure the roles and responsibilities of all members are met. As for the tutoring experience principles and methods of facilitating English language activities can galvanize the foundations of education practice for sophomores, junior and in the future senior students. Additionally, the motivation of the students in first year will be assessed in order to evaluate whether TA's increase the engagement levels in ESL classes. The participation of T.A.s in class can provide experience to those willing to be a teacher as well as show their students an image of language learning that teachers can't provide. That image can help to motivate those students who find English as a non favorite subject.

## **III . Methodology**

The following points in a questionnaire were created in order to get quantitative data. This includes

questions about English studies and also about the participation of the TA's in their classes.

1. The classes targeted in this study included English compulsory classes for 1st and 2nd year students. Approximately 20 students per class. These Classes develops conversational and general English skills and included both Native and non-native teachers.
2. Both Education and Physical Education faculties participated.
3. Two Questionnaires for Students (11 questions) were produced.
4. Questionnaires were collected from 12 classes =242 (Students), TA's (14)
5. Survey date: July, 2014.

#### IV. Results and Analysis

In Figure 1, we can see that half of the students answered they "like" English. However, nearly 20% of students answered they "don't like" English. In the future by increasing the amount of support as well as developing the expertise of the TA's, this figure would most likely decrease and higher interest levels are projected to improve, yet with such high numbers of students with low interest levels, it provides concrete evidence that the English program and AT needs support.

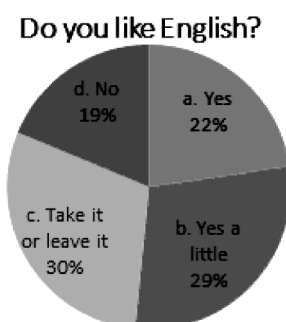


Figure 1

The use of English and the interest for it has been related to traveling abroad. In figure 2 we can see that only a 39% have been exposed to life outside of their own country, supporting the reasoning behind

the low interest levels in learning English.

#### Have you been overseas?

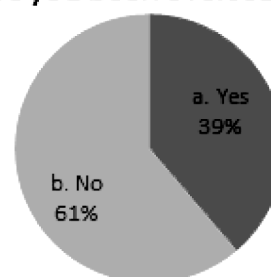


Figure 2

In the questionnaire, students were asked whether they had foreign friends. The answer was less than half said they had. This issue is and continues to be a major obstacle in bring foreign language to the campus. Furthermore as the statistics above points out, 25% of students have never spoken with a foreigner other than their own teachers. Further leading to the results being of low level of interest in English.

#### Have you spoke with a foreigner?

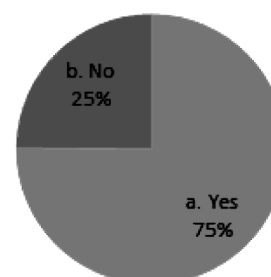


Figure 3

Engaging students in active learning requires the teacher to stock the classroom setting with various materials that can capture the student's attention while promoting understanding of second language. IPU is a relatively new university and has state of the art equipment. These tools for teaching include an overhead projector with access to the internet. All of these machines work efficiently providing AT's and TA's with an agency to catch student's attention. Naturally, part of the TA's role is to learn how to operate the functions of the equipment. In addition to electronics, all students purchased a prescribed textbook for all the foundation classes.

The English Firsthand textbook was selected and utilized 67% of class time, according to TA's. This colorful textbook came with an introduction section that focused on vocabulary building through listening drills, followed by a dialogue exchange in a natural conversation between a two people. This activity was excellent for students to practice paired activities. This was followed by a section of grammar drills and English exercises, which students required help from both the AT and TA to go through. TA's were instrumental in assisting during these exercise drills. The activities included, closed text, correcting grammar and pair work. Finally, the text facilitated real life short stories, so students were able to practice the language learnt during the chapter.

In Figure 5, it shows how much students were supported by TA's. During the class, TA's mainly walk around checking for students who might need assistance. Only 2% of students said that having a TA in class "wasn't necessary" which means that the assistance in class reached almost all students.

**Were you assisted by the T.A.?**

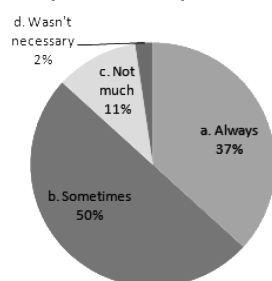


Figure 4

In Figure 6 it shows that 81% of students agree that the assistance was useful. One of the reasons could be the fact that TA's used Japanese language to assist. We can say that this is also related to figure 7 where a 91% answered that the assistance was "clear". Naturally, native English teachers primarily function in English and may use small amounts of Japanese during class.

**Were T.A.'s assistance useful?**

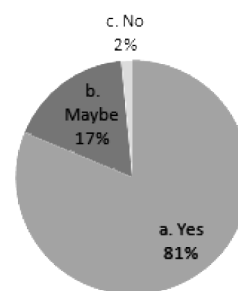


Figure 5

**Were T.A.'s assistance clear?**

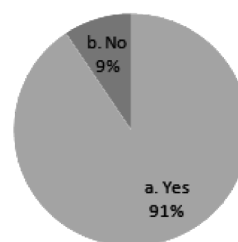


Figure 6

## V. Student Perceptions of TA's and Vice-versa TA's Perceptions of Students

One of the main concerns in English classes is the motivation of students in class. In this research, almost 20% of students recorded they did not like English study and almost 30% would take it or leave it. In this portion of students, it is not uncommon for a few students to sleep during class time. Below is an account of a Facebook post from one TA during an English Conversation class, this message was posted without the Associate Teachers knowledge. The real names of the students have been changed for privacy. Kevin (pseudonym) wrote this first comment below and posted the picture (Picture 1). Clearly, he was annoyed at the level of engagement in the class and this frustration lead to his release of stress through social media.

*"First period.*

*We watched glee (MV) for Music Dictation.*

*Some students, however, felt difficult to catch and slept lol!*

*Well... This is one of the biggest problems for teachers, isn't it?"*

As the students were listening to a music clip, their objective was to filling in missing words exercise. However, some students had no interest and either did not try or were asleep. In the comments under this message, a former student that helped as a TA the previous year, Clive (pseudonym) wrote the following:

*"Wake them up! And maybe wonder what drives them to fall asleep in the first place? It seemed to be a big problem at IPU (maybe Japan?) that I haven't seen in other Universities... hmmm..."*

Clive's comments suggest it was not due to the instructor's methods of teaching, but the problem with low level student engagement was at a national level. Although, Clive was an international student, and in his view this was not the case in high education abroad. Finally, a third comment from Joanne (pseudonym) points out the problem was not only in English classes.

*"You go to ask one of the Japanese students after class but they were all sleeping and obviously had no idea what was going on either!"*

In the final response, Joanne was referring to her own classes at IPU. The level of student motivation throughout the university varies. Yet, for students interested in the subject content the level of motivation has not been seen as a hindrance. Motivated students are often seen to ask questions and get involved in activity. For the 24% of students who answered they like English, it was rare to find members from this group falling asleep. The reasons behind student disengagement may not be covert, young adults often work part time jobs or have busy social lives or belong to sporting clubs. Whatever the reason might be, it is without doubt not due to being uncomfortable. The classrooms are all state of the art architectural designed rooms in the Philosophia, a building plan laid out by Mr. Ando. One of Japan's

leading architects.



Picture 1

On a positive note, most TA's saw encouraging signs from the students as mentioned in a transcript from an interview with them:

TA #1 It was really challenging to explain the meaning of English, because, the language was too difficult for some students. Also, I felt responsible for them not understanding and this experience helped me understand how difficult it is to work as a teacher. TA#2 Even though many of the students couldn't understand a lot of language, many of them asked questions and were happy to check what the meaning was with me.

The feedback from the TA's displays that the TA comprehends the complexities of teaching. Yet, those TA's need to know what level they have in terms of control in class. TA's (they are students also) not understanding their position and acting too strictly in the role of TA can cause some ambiguity. Mortimore and Mortimore (1992) queried the stance of the TA in terms of what behavior is suitable for a student in that role. In more up-to-date research in Scotland, the TA's is called a Classroom Assistant (CAs). Their role has been seen to have taken on responsibility outside of their power. The question here is whether they should discipline or how far should they (CA) control the teaching environment (Schlapp et al, 2001). At IPU, lecturers noticed the TA's telling fellow pupils to wake up or stop talking, which some lecturers found

a little assertive and other lecturers found pleasing.

There are many factors the university lecturer needs to consider when supervising the TA. How effective the experience is for the TA has many transient issues. Therefore, what feedback to provide may not be foreseeable or be able to plan for. Labaree (2004) insists each class has different content with various pedagogical constraints that instructors need to contend with, also, students personalities have effects on how to manage or instruct. Furthermore, even personal issues such as whether the main teacher is in a good mood could effect and or affect the atmosphere in the classroom.

Are you interested on taking classes with T.A.s on it?

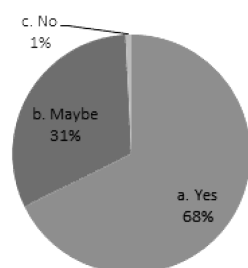


Figure 7

### Negative Views on Teacher Training

In terms of whether supervising TA's has an effect on their professional development Whitehead (1989) suggests the practice is useless and doesn't see the mentor role in a bright way. Bullough & Draper, (2004; Rodgers & Keil, 2006) share a similar view by indicating the supervisor is just looking for mistakes and doesn't provide grounds for confidence building or inner-directedness. The supervisor's role was to just look for mistakes and that would leave the mentee with no means to self analysis or encourage ways to problem solve by themselves (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Zeichner, 2005). In accordance with Lee (2002) and Schlapp et al (2001) they indicate the reason supervisors lack substance in their training is due to the TA not being involved in the planning of lessons as well as not being involved in debriefing sessions post-lesson. This was normally due to time constraints for all involved. Below are responses from AT's in regards to their personal feeling towards

having TA's in class:

Teacher A: *"I think that this system is a great way to use our ESL experienced students in order to create a better learning environment where they and their students learn together"*

Teacher B: *"Some classes have students with totally different English levels, so T.A.s have been a big help to assist those who had trouble at following the class."*

Teacher C: *"I can speak in Japanese when a student doesn't understand the class but I prefer not to. In these cases the T.A.s has been a handy way to communicate with and also to keep the class from using Japanese"* (Bilingual teacher).

Teacher D: *"Having the luxury of a TA or in so classes more than one means I can do small group activities with a TA leading groups. Also, in the case students are having semantic trouble or there's a cultural conundrum then the bilingual student with the same cultural background can provide clearer explanations than the Associate Teacher (myself). The TA system has a long way to go and as an Associate Teacher, I am still trying to find the balance between letting TA's facilitate activities and observing. There may not be a perfect proportion, so it's a matter of treating each TA as an individual at the moment."*

In research into AT's taking on the role as mentor, Walkington, (2004) indicates there was benefits for the teacher taking a mentee under their wing. In this role, they could analyze their own teaching skills while rejuvenating their passion for teaching. Lai, 2005; McGee, (2001) and again Walkington, (2005) concurs pointing out the involvement in training teachers provides the associate teacher with a chance to be more professional and ensure higher work self image. In taking on the role assists in taking the role of educator more seriously.



## VI. Expectations for the Future

In order to make a better program in the future, the authors asked the TA's to reflect on their experience and provide advice for future TA's. Some of them suggested the TA needs to have more hands on teaching with the teaching. Also, it is more beneficial to be friendly with peers, because, it isn't helpful at all if the students feel you think you're better than them.

In order to see the interest of students for future TA's recruitment we asked if they would like to be a TA, in Figure 8 we can see that a 40% were interested on being one in the future. This number might also represent the percentage of students who are engaged into the teacher course of IPU. In the future, it would be beneficial for TA's is be paid employees, with responsibility to perform administration duties, attend regular meetings and prepare and evaluate performances. In this situation, the role would be taken more seriously and the image of the TA would appear to have more respect than they would if they were in the current role.

Will you like to be a T.A. in the future?

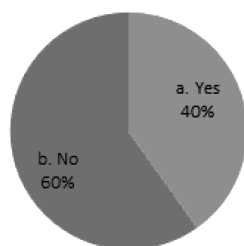


Figure 8

## VII. Conclusion

The T.A. program presented in this research was a pilot project that was supported by the Department of International Education. With assistance from enthusiastic second year students willing to take on the role of aiding the lecturer, English foundation classes are becoming more engaging for participant. With an introductory level of qualitative and quantitative research results indicate TA's can experience personal benefits through

acting in a professional role. Likewise, students can ask questions to fellow Japanese speakers to deeper understand language content. Whereas, many students would find English explanations to be too difficult or are they may lack exposure to communication with foreign teacher. The TA is a likewise peers with bilingual skills to accommodate their needs. Overall, all members of staff, including administration are happy with the project and future lectures will benefit from having pilot programs such as the one started this year to draw from. Although, a lot of previous research is skeptical on the benefits of TA programs in higher education, in the case of IPU's TA program has shown a lot of positive signs to continue working with it and develop it into the English curriculum.

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