

# Student Experiences on a Short Internship Program

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## Abstract

University students in Japan generally have few opportunities to use their English outside the classroom setting and it is helpful for universities to promote programs which offer intercultural contact. Taking part in overseas work experience placements or homestay programs helps students to develop intercultural competence (Yashima, 2009, 2010, 2011). Working as an intern at an academic conference in Japan may offer an affordable and accessible setting for students to have an intercultural contact experience and use their English in a professional environment. This 'life application' of English may serve to increase motivation (Brophy, 1999; Stockwell, 2011). This paper explores the impact of participating in a two-day conference intern program on six Japanese university students, using interview data. The findings indicate that the program had a positive impact, with students developing skills and dispositions necessary for success in an international work setting. A number of recommendations are made to improve the program.

## Introduction

Academic conferences in Japan are frequently held on university campuses, offering the students of the host institution an opportunity to work as conference interns. Since the *lingua franca* at many conferences is English, with some delegates traveling from overseas to present, these students have the chance to finally put to real use the English language skills that they have been developing since junior high school. For Japanese students this kind of experience can be quite powerful, as students generally have few opportunities to interact in English outside of the classroom and many have never traveled abroad. This lack of exposure to 'real' English can lead to demotivation and jaded learners, and short work placements of this nature have the potential to boost students' morale and increase their confidence in dealing with people in an international context. There has been little study of L2 work placements of this short duration, and this paper sets out to explore how a brief intern placement impacts on participating students, and how to prepare students for such programs so that they can derive maximum value from the experience.

One recent study has examined the effects of a conference intern program on the motivation

levels of Japanese university students. Stockwell (2011) interviewed students who served as interns at an international conference and found the students developed “an increase in motivation to continue their studies of a foreign language as well as a willingness to volunteer with other projects.” Using Brophy’s (1999) value framework of motivation, Stockwell argues that the conference provides a *life application* of the students’ English skills, which makes the event an authentic and motivating learning experience. Having the opportunity to use English outside of the classroom context makes students notice that their English classes are equipping them with a useful life skill, and this awareness can help sustain motivation over the students’ college years.

Yashima (2011) stresses that “teaching a foreign language entails inviting learners to go out of the four walls of the classroom, in real life or through the imagination, into the world of the target language communities.” The conference internship allows students to participate, for a short time, in an English speaking community, providing an intercultural contact experience. Yashima (2009) has investigated the effects of short-term intercultural contact experiences (including overseas homestays and volunteer work) on Japanese students and found a range of benefits, including the development of *international posture*, which she defines as a “tendency to see oneself as connected to the international community, have concerns for international affairs and possess a readiness to interact with people other than Japanese” (p. 146). International posture is associated with increased willingness to communicate in the students’ second language (L2WTC), a greater tendency to initiate communication in the L2, and the generation of possible and ideal selves who use English well, which serve as an incentive for further language learning (Yashima, 2009, pp. 147-8). In her study of the effects of a 2-3 week international volunteer work program in which Japanese EFL students worked alongside volunteers from four to ten other countries, using English as the common language, Yashima (2010) found that students made gains in intercultural competence, and reported reduced anxiety and shyness and an increased sense of self-efficacy as well as willingness to participate in similar activities in the future. These results show the value of these kinds of short programs. However, it is important to bear in mind that the program Yashima investigates meets the ideal conditions for international contact, in that the placement takes place abroad, and there is equal status between the participants (all the volunteers from various countries are students and speak English as a *lingua franca*). In a conference intern program the students remain in Japan and contact is between student interns and conference participants (an unequal staff-to-customer relationship) and between student interns and teachers who volunteer to work on the conference planning committee, which is essentially a co-worker relationship, but with some inequalities since there are considerable gaps in age, experience, and status between the students and teachers. In this sense a conference intern

program does not offer ideal conditions for developing intercultural competencies. Moreover, conference intern programs are typically much shorter, lasting from half a day to four full days. Yashima's (2010) study shows that contact experiences of less than a week have a smaller impact; students who had pre-existing overseas experience lasting over a week had higher scores in all areas of intercultural competence than those who had shorter placements, but those who had some experience, even very short, had higher scores than those without any. Clearly, we cannot expect a brief conference intern program to have as strong an effect on students as an overseas placement, but we can expect some change. If we consider the costs and logistics involved in participating in an overseas program, the conference intern program is by comparison both accessible and affordable. It offers students a chance to immerse themselves in a primarily English speaking working environment among supportive people for a few days, providing experiences and memories which should help students develop as intercultural communicators and make it easier for students to imagine themselves in the future, interacting in the 'real world' in English.

One of the strengths of the conference intern program is that it allows students to use their developing English in a professional context. There is a considerable body of research on workplace learning and learning in work experience placements, particularly longer, professional placements, which offers some useful background when considering the kinds of skills and competencies students may need and try to develop on a short internship. Tennant and McMullen (2009) point out that most workplace learning is 'informal' and that people learn from engaging in challenging tasks, and from working alongside others, being mentored, supervised or coached, or supported informally by their peers. They may also learn more formally from explicit training or manuals. They list the processes embedded in workplace learning:

formal study, listening, observing, reflecting, practicing and refining skills, trial and error, problem solving, getting information and asking questions, developing a relationship with a wider network of knowledge resource people, and giving and receiving feedback. (p. 22)

They argue that when we prepare students for work and work placements, teachers need to make sure that students understand how learning takes place in the work setting. Teachers need to help students "develop the capacity to learn from their experiences" (p. 246) and encourage learners to identify and seek out learning opportunities and be proactive in volunteering for more varied and demanding tasks.

**Table 1: What is being learned in the workplace? Adapted from Tennant and McMullen (2009, p. 243, following Eraut (2004))**

<b>What is being learned in the workplace?</b>	
Awareness and understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Other people: colleagues, customers, managers</li> </ul>
Personal development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building and sustaining relationships</li> <li>• Disposition to consult and work with others</li> <li>• Disposition to learn and improve one's practice</li> </ul>
Accessing relevant knowledge and expertise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to learn from experiences</li> </ul>
Teamwork	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative work</li> <li>• Facilitating social relations</li> <li>• Joint planning and problem solving</li> </ul>
Role performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritization</li> <li>• Coping with unexpected problems</li> </ul>
Academic knowledge and skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using knowledge resources: human, paper-based, electronic</li> </ul>
Decision making and problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• When to seek expert help</li> <li>• Dealing with complexity</li> </ul>

Tennant and McMullen have also developed typology of skills, capabilities and dispositions which can be developed over the course of a work experience placement, based on the work of Eraut (2004). Their extensive list is more suited to an extended placement, but I have identified and selected a number of items relevant to a short L2 work placement, such as a conference intern program (see table 1). This table shows the scope and range of skills and dispositions that students can work on in their short internship. Along with the benefits related to language learning motivation and confidence discussed above, a conference intern program offers opportunities for growth and development in other ways which will support the students in their future career roles.

This study aims to explore a conference internship from the students' perspective, gaining insights into the kinds of learning taking place and how teachers and coordinators might best assist students to make the most out of such an experience.

## **Background to the Study**

### **How the Study Began**

Several years ago, I accepted the voluntary role of intern coordinator at a small conference

held at the Chiba campus of the university I work at as a full time instructor. I recruited, trained, and managed a team of twelve interns. At the end of the two-day conference the students were given envelopes with a pre-agreed sum to cover their expenses and we had a brief closing celebration. I did not ask students to provide any formal written feedback, but it was evident from the students' shining eyes and smiles that they had enjoyed working at the conference, and felt it worthwhile. Over the two days, I had observed students developing new friendships and using their English. The students comments in conversation both during and after the conference told me that they had felt challenged, but had also coped with these challenges, and felt proud of that fact. Most importantly, students asked for the opportunity to take part in future conference programs, and their friends, who had not participated, also approached me to ask to be given this opportunity. Clearly, students were talking about their experiences in a positive way. This success encouraged me to take on the role of intern coordinator at a number of small conferences.

Through experience, I developed an approach to the intern coordinator role. First, I would talk about the conference and the intern program to higher-level classes, conveying my excitement and enthusiasm. Many students at the university have low levels of English, mostly false beginner or low elementary. These students would be overwhelmed and unable to cope with the intern role, so I focused only on my strongest groups, urging them to volunteer. I then waited for students to approach me about taking part. It is important that students self-select, since the act of volunteering shows the students have a level of WTC and intercultural competence which will help them carry out the role. I make sure at each conference that there are some students (usually third or fourth years) who have intern experience, and some who are new to this work (often freshmen). Thus, I ensure that experienced students can support and mentor the inexperienced students, and that the inexperienced freshmen will gain experience and can serve as mentors at future conferences. It is hoped that this will create good conditions for near peer role modeling to occur (Murphey, 1995, 1998; Murphey & Arao, 2001). When I have a team of volunteers, I provide the students with basic information about the conference and the intern program, including practical information such as what to wear and bring. A few days before the conference, I give the students more information about their specific roles. Depending on the conference, roles might include cloakroom assistant, guide (giving directions to the site in the street or at the station), timekeeper (alerting presenters to the minutes remaining towards the end of the presentation, and providing basic technical support); registration clerk (taking money or giving out conference badges), refreshments manager (serving tea, laying out snacks, or selling lunch tickets), and personal assistant to the conference manager. Students are given the opportunity to

engage in a variety of roles throughout the conference, where possible. Interns are also required to help set up and clear up after the conference, which often involves moving furniture. I have found it helpful to provide stock phrases for these roles, for students to memorize. Students may use basic and pragmatically inappropriate language without this support. I have attended conferences where the student intern on the registration desk has greeted me with: 'Name, please?' or 'Have you paid?' To avoid this scenario, I supply students with a script, such as: 'Hello! Welcome to [conference name] ! How are you today? Could I have your name so I can find your conference badge for you?' Students practice the script with me until it is memorized. They are encouraged to move away from the script as necessary, and in practice they often do so, but I believe that providing some set phrases helps them to pay attention to the pragmatic aspects of their discourse, and also serves as a prop which offers a sense of security if the student feels nervous about their role. At this time, students are also introduced to, or given the names of other participating students, and the contact details of the teachers working on the conference team. Students are asked to put this information in their cell phones so that they can easily contact team members. Students are provided with a schedule indicating their roles, work times, and break times and the schedule is explained. There is time for questions and answers. Students are asked to wear a uniform (usually jeans and a T shirt) to make them easy to identify and to create a sense of belonging to a team. At the conference, students are provided with name badges which show their intern role, to facilitate interaction with attendees and conference team members. During the conference, I make myself available to the interns, checking they are comfortable in their work, offering praise and encouragement. The students are thanked at the end of each day and the end of the conference, and when possible they are gathered together for this purpose, to create a sense of celebration and closure. In the following class, the students are publicly thanked for their role. The conferences have run smoothly, and the interns have at each conference been praised for their part in making the conferences a success.

Increasingly, I have felt curious about how much English the students use in practice, and what kind of experience they have as interns. I wanted to find out what kinds of encounters the students have and how they reflect on and learn from these incidents. Whilst the preparation I provide for the conference seems adequate, I have wondered if there is something else I could be doing to help students gain more from their experience. From these feelings of curiosity I decided to carry out research into the next conference intern program so that the students' voices could be heard.

### **The Conference Intern Program**

The conference setting for this study is a small international language teaching conference aimed at university educators held at the university's Tokyo campus. There were around 200 attendees. The conference budget allowed for a fixed sum of money to be paid to six interns to cover their expenses. Four inexperienced and two experienced interns were recruited through word of mouth, with several teachers advertising this opportunity in their higher level classes. However, more students contacted me hoping to participate. These students were given the option of volunteering informally without being paid, and three took up this offer. Thus, there were nine interns working in total, three of them working without any remuneration. Hot lunches were provided for all nine interns.

Before the conference, students were given information about their roles and their schedules. The new interns were given this information face-to-face, and helped to memorize key phrases for their role. Experienced interns were given information via email. At the conference the interns were given badges with the students' first names printed on them. The students were monitored and supported during the conference and thanked for their role.

For the purpose of this study, the six paid interns were interviewed after the conference.

### **The Participants**

Four of the participants are second years students, two male ('H' and 'T') and two female ('A' and 'R'), aged 19-21, and doing conference intern work for the first time. These students are all on the ALPS (Academic English and Professional Skills) program, which is a special three year course for strong learners of English, with only 20 places available per year and a competitive selection process. 'H' speaks Chinese as his first language and the rest are native speakers of Japanese. Their current English level is low-to-mid intermediate (IELTS 4.0-4.5). These students were involved with helping to set up the conference on the Saturday morning, doing mostly manual work such as moving tables or stuffing bags with printed materials. Their primary role for the rest of the conference was timekeeping during presentations. They were also expected to help clear the site at the end of the conference, and to assist with various other jobs during the day, such as setting out coffee and snacks.

Two of the students are currently in their fourth year at the university. Both are male. One of the students ('HD') is not on the ALPS program, but takes a seminar class in English and will be writing his graduation thesis in English. 'HD' has served as an intern at several conferences.

He helped with set-up and clear-up, and his main role was timekeeping. The other student ('Y') is on the ALPS program and has a range of intercultural contact experiences including home-stays, study abroad programs, an overseas internship, and conference internships in Japan. He has an IELTS score of 7.0 and aims to undertake postgraduate studies overseas. He worked selling lunch tickets and organizing the logistics of collecting lunches from a local restaurant and distributing them. Since I had to leave the conference early on the second day, 'Y' served as intern coordinator in my absence.

## **Method**

### **Research Questions**

This study aims to explore the following research questions:

- What impact does the internship have on the students?
- What is the conference experience like from the students' perspective?
- What can intern coordinators do to improve the intern program so that students get more out of it?

The purpose of the study is to give a voice to the student interns. It is hoped that the findings will allow institutions to become aware of the kind of learning experiences which take place on a conference intern program, and help teachers and coordinators, including myself, improve our practice as we prepare students for these kinds of experiences.

### **Data Collection**

The main source of data was interviews with the six paid interns. I used a semi-structured interview format, with a prepared list of questions asked in a relaxed, conversational style which allowed students to speak freely and digress and bring other topics to the table. The questions were organized into three sets. The first group asked students to think back to before the conference and included questions such as: 'Why did you join this conference program?' and 'What did you expect before you came?' The second set asked students to think back to the conference itself and recall details and experiences. The students were asked questions such as: 'What was the most memorable interaction you had at the conference?' and 'What problems did you experience?' The final set invited students to reflect back more critically on the experience from their current viewpoint and included: 'What advice do you have for someone doing this kind of internship in the future?' and 'How could the intern be program be improved?'



I also took field notes, recording any incidents and observations which seemed significant and either confirmed or challenged my approach to the role of intern coordinator. I was aware throughout the conference and the data collection process that there was some tension between my role as class teacher, my role as intern coordinator, and my role as researcher. Each of these roles requires a slightly different relationship with the students, which made it at times difficult to be completely authentic. There were times when I was unsure whether to participate and help, or to observe the interns. It was necessary to take a critical stance on my own practice, whilst continuing to perform the role. Ultimately, one of the aims of this study is to improve my practice as a teacher and intern coordinator, so it was necessary to be honest and open to noticing weaknesses in the program, and be ready to make changes.

### **Interview Procedure**

The interviews took place within two weeks of the conference. Most took place in the teachers' open plan office or in the adjacent English conversation lounge. One interview was carried out via video call using the Internet application *Skype*. Permission was asked to use a small voice recording device, and when given the session was recorded. Three of the students preferred not to use the device and in those cases notes were made during the session, with more details added from memory when the interview was complete. The interviews were conducted in English with occasional translation of words and phrases into Japanese.

I began the interviews by explaining the purpose of the research and obtaining informed consent to use the data. The students seemed comfortable talking about the conference and keen to have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and share their stories and ideas.

### **Data Analysis**

After the recorded interviews were finished I listened to the recordings and made extensive notes, transcribing significant comments. I reviewed the notes from all six interviews along with the field notes. When looking at the data, I focused on areas that surprised me, since this indicates an aspect of the internship that I had not considered, and perhaps an area where the preparation or training may not have been adequate. I also paid attention to common themes.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Using English**

For all the interns, the main motive for participating in the conference program was to use their English and experience intercultural contact. Before the conference, the students anticipated

that they would have opportunities to speak English and mix with other competent speakers of English. In the roles the students were assigned, and in their break times, there were many opportunities, yet some students had more English language encounters than others. One of the experienced volunteers, 'H', spoke to 30-35 foreigners, and one of the new interns, 'T', estimated that he had interacted with 20 non-Japanese in English. The other students had spoken to only a few non-Japanese conference participants and staff, giving ten as the most likely number. For a two day conference, this seems a little disappointing. However, I was surprised to discover the high number of English language encounters the students had had with Japanese speakers of English attending the conference; three students reported two to four of these interactions, and 'A' recalled ten. The students were impressed and inspired by these encounters with fluent, confident Japanese speakers of English:

*There was a Japanese woman who spoke to us in English and her English was so perfect. She thanked us for the work. It was so impressing. We felt like we've got to study hard.*  
(‘Y’)

This was a rare experience for the students, as most Japanese faculty at their own institution generally use Japanese as the medium of instruction even for English language classes, and do not often converse in English with the students. The students had expected to meet and speak to ‘native speakers’ of English, and instead found a community where native and non-native speakers were using English as a *lingua franca*, which increased the interns’ awareness of the role of English as an international language as well as providing the students with role models.

The students were satisfied with the amount of English speaking encounters they created at the conference, and they used English in a variety of ways. The interview data indicates that English was used transactionally and informatively with conference participants, and for essential communication with co-workers, as well as for making small talk:

*Mostly I talked about curry because I was the curry man. I gave directions to the vending machines and the toilets. While I was on the registration desk I asked [the registration staff] about my job, what I was supposed to do and I asked them for help. I [also] talked to a teacher who is an Australian guy from Melbourne, where I studied abroad, so we had something in common. It was really nice to talk to him and he was really excited to talk to me because I studied in his hometown.* (‘Y’)

It was clear from the interviews that the students enjoyed using their English, and meeting different people.

The field notes record that students were observed with 'crib sheets' or memory cards which they had made, with the key phrases they had been supplied with prior to the conference written on them, stored in the back of their transparent name badge holders for easy access and reference. The new interns reported using these phrases, which indicates that this aspect of their preparation was useful and worth doing.

In addition to using English in spoken interactions, the students were aware that the internship provided them with large amounts of English exposure and listening practice. 'A' felt pleased that she had been able to follow 'high speed English.' The students were not able to understand everything they heard, but relished the challenge of trying to follow the general flow and enjoyed being surrounded by English.

### **Making Contacts**

One of the aims of the conference is for the students to build relationships and networks, and to provide a setting where students can learn from peers or near peers, and this aspect of the conference featured heavily in the students' accounts. The interns were stimulated by the opportunity to meet new people:

*Usually we speak with our teacher or class students but I speak with 'Y,' a very high level English speaker, and the other university teachers, very interesting people, many people we can meet. ('R')*

Students made good use of these contact opportunities. 'HD' used the conference to carry out research for his graduation thesis, distributing a questionnaire and receiving 100 responses back from conference participants. The younger students just beginning their three year ALPS program took this chance to find out more from their *senpai* about the second and third year of the program, and school in general, asking 'many' questions ('R' and 'A'). The younger students were very impressed by the older students, describing them as 'very kind' ('R'), and 'high quality' ('A') and able to speak English to a 'very high level' ('R'). The senior students clearly served as near peer role models for the younger students:

*The senpai have a lot of experience to do intern[sic]. Their English is very smooth. I*

*want to be like them. I want to speak more smoothly.* ('T')

Most of these students were meeting their seniors for the first time, and this meeting may be the start of a supportive relationship; the older students reported a favorable impression of the younger interns, noting their politeness, and mentioning that following the conference the second year students 'greeted' and 'remembered' ('Y') the older students.

Something I did not anticipate when managing the internship program was the particular difficulties that might be faced by an intern speaking Japanese as an L2. One of the students confessed that he had avoided contact with his *senpai* because of a lack of confidence in his Japanese ability. In fact, the older students would have been comfortable and more than willing to communicate exclusively in English, but the student was not aware of this, and the opportunity to communicate and benefit from this interaction was lost. 'A' and 'R' suggested that it would be helpful to build contacts between student interns before the conference, providing email addresses and perhaps arranging a meeting, so that students could really develop these supportive relationships.

Another area for improvement which emerged from the interview data was that the younger students do not have adequate networking skills. None of the second years exchanged contact details with anyone at the conference; they did not even ask for the email addresses of the senior students. One of the two experienced interns did not give out or obtain contact details at this conference, although had acquired 'a lot' of business cards at a previous internship at a bigger conference, and followed that exchange up with emails. The other experienced intern managed to connect with a number of people through the social networking site *Facebook*, bringing his iPad to the conference. Students need more training, and interns would benefit from explicit guidance and goal setting in this area.

### **Developing Intercultural Competence**

There were signs in the data that students were developing in terms of intercultural competence, in particular their willingness to communicate (WTC). In the field notes I record that 'R', although my student and a frequent user of the university's English conversation lounge, had never initiated any kind of interaction with me until she approached me to volunteer for the internship. During the conference, she approached me again to initiate conversation. Another member of the conference team happened to share the same family name as I, and had joked with the student that he was a family relation. 'R' then approached me to confirm whether this was the

truth. Though these are small incidents, they indicate the beginnings of a change away from passivity and reticence towards confidence. In her reflections in the interview 'R' shows a positive attitude to the program and an awareness of how to demonstrate openness and readiness to communicate with new people in English:

*[This is a] very interesting program, so maybe more people can challenge this program. [You can] speak and many people contact, introduce. You can very [sic] communication and say, 'Hello' and they say, 'Hello' and make eye contact. [There are] two days, [the] first time we met [sic], [the] second time we say hello. You had better greet so many people. ('R')*

This tendency to initiate interaction in English is associated with intercultural competence (Yashima, 2009).

Students also began to develop a new English-speaking professional identity. Students became aware that they were not perceived as students 'practicing' speaking English, but as members of a conference team, providing a service in English. 'A' commented: 'People think we are not students, we are staff.' The conference role helps students to identify themselves as a *user* of English (rather than a *student* of English). This may help the students envision future ideal selves who use English well and fluently, which Yashima (2009, 2011) also associates with intercultural competence.

### **Experiencing Emotions**

In preparing the students for the internship I had focused mainly on their practical and linguistic needs, but the interview data shows that what students also required was emotional preparation. The students revealed that they had been apprehensive about the conference, expecting a formal, 'strict' atmosphere ('R'). Students admitted feeling nervous ('T') and that they had been surprised when joining their first conference at how relaxed and casual the conference team and participants were, and how easy it was to communicate with them ('HD' and 'R'). The students were evidently suffering from considerable anxiety. One of the new interns ('A') advised that for future conferences, intern coordinators should: 'Tell the interns that people are friendly so that they are not frightened.' MacIntyre (1998) argues that language anxiety is a specific kind of anxiety, and that anxiety arousal causes cognitive disruption, which causes students to have difficulty taking in and producing language, affecting communication, confidence and, ultimately, motivation. Students need reassurance, and perhaps be helped to learn breathing or relaxation

techniques. Experienced interns may be able to offer this kind of reassurance and support to new interns prior to the conference. Considering the advice he would give to future interns, 'H' stated:

*Just relax, don't think too much [...] Speak is better because the presenter will remember you or someone else will know you are here. If you only raise up this [timekeeping] card it is boring to yourself, boring work, so relax and try to relax and do some conversation with foreigners.*

The students seemed aware that their emotional state would affect their performance and their experience, and this factor needs to be addressed when preparing new interns for their role.

### **Enjoying Presentations**

The results of the study showed that the conference presentations were a major source of learning for most of the students. This surprised me, as I expected that much of the content would be too advanced for the students to follow. In fact, students who were timekeeping at the back of the presentation rooms reported that they were often invited to participate by asking questions or joining in a group or pairwork activity. The interns reported that they understood as much as eighty percent of the presentations they watched ('Y') and that the presentations were 'fun, memorable' ('HD') and 'fantastic' ('A'). Students appreciated the opportunity to participate, and this became one of the highlights of the conference for some of them. The students demonstrated that they could not only follow the presentations, but relate the content to their own educational context and experiences:

*I can remember some parts of the presentation. I forgot the name but he is talking about like before we do in the [university's conversation] lounge, and the winner can get some movie tickets or Disneyland tickets just like that. They are thinking about how to make children enjoy some place like the lounge. They want to put them together to communicate in English like that ... They are thinking, they still don't have good idea and one Japanese teacher did that, like what we did, and she says it is good but there's still a problem, still always talking in Japanese but they like to join this... ('H')*

The students also indicated that they relied on 'key words' ('H') and the presentation slides to support their listening, and used dictionaries to help understand the presentations. The students also indicated that when making smalltalk with conference participants at break times, the presentations were often the topic of conversation. These findings show that even intermediate

level students can engage with the academic content of presentations, and that they value opportunities to participate in the discussion.

### **Encountering Problems**

As intern coordinator I have always aimed to make the conferences as problem-free as possible, but the interview data indicated that problem situations were often a rich opportunity for learning. 'Y' practiced flexibility when responding to changes in plans:

*[On the] second day I was kind of in charge of the interns so I gave them instructions like what to do and I managed them like who will be doing this and this. Well, I thought I planned well but the situation is ever changing and we had to do according to the situation.*

'T' learned to manage a problem situation by finding assistance, and trusting in the abilities of one of his peers: 'I couldn't hear foreigners English so I needed help to translate, so I asked another intern.' It is important that the students did not panic and found a way to cope.

Problem situations also forced the students to be aware of the socio-pragmatic aspects of English. One common difficulty was that presenters continued to present after the 'Stop' sign was shown. Students felt acutely aware that they needed to find a tactful way of managing this situation:

*The presenters don't stop on time so I think if I stop him it's not good so I just can wait. I did nothing, just waiting. Or if, if, if I join that conversation I will say that, but not just say that, say, 'There is still another presenter.' Not just say, 'Stop!' A more kind way.*  
(H')

On this occasion, some of the students did not find the language they needed, and the site chair stepped in to bring the presentations to a close. Yet the fact that the students became aware of the need to find appropriate language to handle this kind of awkward situation is itself a learning step.

When students reflected on problems they were able to identify language and communication problems. 'Y' detailed a problem he encountered in his role of managing the distribution of food from a local restaurant for lunch, and the waste disposal, which involved taking the waste back

to the restaurant:

*There was rubbish bags and I kept them for the second day when we collected rubbish from the curry, but someone used them for different rubbish so I had to get other bags. I should have told the people at the registration desk because I left the bags at the registration desk.*

‘Y’ was able to identify an opportunity for communication which would have helped him carry out his role more smoothly. This reflection shows an engagement with the conference intern experience as a learning process.

### **Reflecting**

In the interviews, the interns were able to reflect in English, demonstrating a willingness and capacity to think deeply. The interns showed awareness of the importance of disposition in the work environment. ‘A’ formulated advice for future interns, emphasizing attitude along with practical tips: ‘Don’t be shy. Look for job actively. Wear comfortable shoes.’ ‘T’ demonstrated a realization that he needs to be more proactive in gaining a variety of experiences. ‘ [I want to do] more activities. I’m shy so I can’t move so much... I need confidence.’ ‘Y’ articulated in more detail the kind of disposition that would enable a student to make the most out of a conference internship:

*I think students who are enthusiastic or passionate should join this intern program. (Those) who are shy or always wait to be asked what to do is not good. Also, this kind of program is very good to speak and make connections with some English teachers, so students who are eager to have this kind of experience should join. (‘Y’)*

The students have identified in their reflections the attitude which Billett (2008) argues is the key to a successful internship:

[...] the very qualities required to be an effective student in higher education — a proactive and agentic learner — are those required for effective professional practice. In essence, the agentic qualities of learners are essential for effective professional practice and rich learning. (p. 51)

The fact that the students have recognized this key factor shows considerable maturity and



awareness on their part.

The quality of the student reflections made me rethink my approach to the internship program. When I recruited and managed teams of student interns for conferences in the past, there was no formal reflection. This is the first time I have carried out individual post-internship interviews, and they were conducted for the purpose of this research project, to gather data to improve the training and management of the student intern team. However, as these interviews progressed, I realized that the interview process itself was offering the students a rich opportunity to reflect and think deeply on their experience and gain insights. I became aware that this time for reflection has been lacking from the conference intern programs I have managed, and is a weakness that needs addressing. I had previously felt that giving students a task relating to the internship might turn a rich, powerful experience into a piece of dull form-filling or time-consuming 'homework.' However, the process of carrying out this research, and the reading this has involved relating to work placements, has raised my awareness of the value of reflection activities for those participating. Henderson and McWilliams (2008) argue that with any kind of work experience students "need to be encouraged to identify and reflect upon the skills that they have acquired" (p. 203). They suggest reflective assessment tasks and field work tasks such as interviews, observations, journals, and self-appraisals. Billett (2008) also emphasizes the need for "sharing and drawing out experiences (i.e. articulating, and comparing — commonalities and distinctiveness)" (pp. 51-2). Whilst some tasks are clearly more suited to a long placement, there is scope for the design of imaginative activities which may help students prepare for, reflect on, and share their conference intern experience, such as a presentation, report, or blog entry. In their feedback, students expressed an interest in linking their classwork with the internship and gaining course credit for their practical experience. Work related to the intern program could be accepted for credit in lieu of another assignment. The findings of this study suggest that students may gain from some structured feedback activities.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study has helped me to reevaluate my approach to coordinating conference intern programs, and given students the opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences.

Overall, the data indicates that the approach I have taken to coordinating the internships is largely successful, with students benefiting from the program. The students benefited in particular from the stock phrases supplied during their basic training, from contact with near peers, from interactions with both native and non-native speakers of English, and from participating in

presentations.

The study highlighted some areas for improvement in terms of preparation for the program. New interns could be provided with an opportunity to meet their *sempai* before the conference, to capitalize on the benefits of this supportive relationship. The students also need emotional preparation for their role, which may involve simple reassurance or, for students with higher needs, anxiety reduction techniques could be considered. Students also need explicit guidance on networking and could be encouraged to set goals for themselves for making contacts. More reflective activities could be built into the program.

The intern program has a positive impact on students, and students feel they benefit from the experience. There are signs that students develop in terms of intercultural competence, which Yashima (2011) argues increases motivation for learning an L2 and sets students apart from those who lack intercultural contact experiences. Through this authentic experience, students become more aware of the kind of disposition and skills which support learning and success in international work settings, and it is clear that students approach the internship with maturity and a focus on self-improvement and growth. One of the more experienced students sums up the benefits of the program in a short comment: 'Every time I join I learn something new which is very exciting.'

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