

THE NECESSITY OF A PRE-ACADEMIC PROGRAM IN JAPAN

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Introduction

Internationalization is currently one of the most trendy words in Japan today, and the many definitions of the word have been widely discussed in various public arenas, and in particular, the mass media. Now that Japan has shown its economic success to the world, the next goal for the nation should be its recognition as an influential country, both politically and socially. To maintain the momentum of internationalization, Japan is now engaging itself in the education of an international multilingual work force.

Japanese youth today are showing a keen interest in studying abroad as never before. One of the reasons for the increasing interest is the influence that the trend towards internationalization is having on this age group and their parents. The number of Japanese youth who are studying abroad has been rising rapidly over the last five years. Over 58,000 Japanese students were studying in the United States in 1989, up 36% from 1988. (Including ESL students; 200,000. The Asahi Newspaper, February 6, 1990.)

Until only 15 years ago, a very limited number of people sought education abroad. Nowadays, the opportunity to study abroad is appealing to a wide variety of people and not only to students in high school or university. Many young working women are attracted to the opportunities that can be opened up with training acquired at a foreign university. A variety of skills necessary for the international marketplace, skills that are international in scope, in addition to gaining proficiency in English, make foreign institutions, and American institutions in

particular, very attractive to an increasing number of Japanese people. Often, these young women office workers feel limited by the opportunities afforded them at Japanese companies, and they may have even experienced direct prejudice. As many of these women feel more and more constricted, they will swell the ranks of those who seek education abroad. (How to Succeed in Studying Abroad, 1990.)

Another reason for the increasing numbers studying abroad is the favorable appreciation of the yen against the dollar during the last few years. A student attending a private university in Tokyo, for example, would have education expenses of approximately 2,500,000 yen per annum. In comparison, tuition and living costs in America at a state university are considerably less. (The Asahi Newspaper, February 6, 1990.)

A further reason is the changing attitudes of Japanese management about young people who have studied or travelled abroad. In the past, it was extremely difficult for these people to be accepted by large companies because they were considered to be lacking in the all important group consciousness. However, with the expansion of Japanese business interests in overseas markets, companies have come to realize that international experience is an important, and in many cases, necessary asset. (How to Succeed in Studying Abroad, 1990.)

Japanese students are welcome in foreign universities, but in addition to the language problem, two other areas of concern must be dealt with. The first is that Japanese students have an invariable tendency to group together in their own small cliques and to shun assimilation with other students, both American and foreign. Close interaction with foreign instructors overtime will help to break down the barriers between Japanese students and students in America. (Tomizawa, 1990.)

The second, more serious problem, is that these students often embark upon a course of study without clearly defined objectives. The main stated purpose for going to America, in many cases, is ostensibly to master English, but often the results are that the students fail to graduate or even to complete their course work. It is evident that those

Japanese who intend to study abroad must think more carefully and seriously about their goals and objectives. For these students to successfully pursue their goals and objectives, it is essential that they become more familiar with the academic system, both its demands and requirements, of the country where the prospective student would like to study. Unfortunately, the type of study skills that most Japanese have learned are ill-suited for the type of learning they will encounter in a foreign university.

This proposal discusses a possible curriculum design for a program of studies which will fully prepare the student for study abroad. The program will be called the "Pre-Academic Program," and it will integrate five classes for a comprehensive preparation for foreign university admittance and successful study: reading, writing, listening and speaking, study skills, and a TOEFL class. This paper will focus on American universities and colleges in particular because they are capable and flexible in accomodating the Japanese student, and because American universities are the universities of choice of Japanese who go abroad to study.

The Myth of the TOEFL Scores.

In Japan, many private language schools are better at catering to the demands of many Japanese who want and desire to study abroad than are Japanese high schools or universities. Many of these private language schools offer courses specifically created to help the student gain admission into foreign universities. Many focus primarily on the TOEFL to help their students pass this exam, and their advertising campaigns often guarantee improvement of TOEFL, but for other standardized tests as well, such as the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test), the ACT (American College Test), the GMAT (Graduate Management Aptitude Test), and the GRE (Graduate Record Exam). Even private education companies from America have begun to take interest in this potentially lucrative market in Japan; the Princeton Review is a case in point.

In the past, American universities were heavily dependent on TOEFL scores submitted by prospective applicants to determine eligibility and as a predictor of future academic performance. Many universities now realize that the TOEFL is not a very good measure of the students ability to handle English at the university level or of the ability to do well academically when instruction is in English. (Yule and Hoffman, 1990.) As a result, many universities now require SAT or ACT scores be submitted in addition to TOEFL scores. (Tomizawa, 1990.)

Over the past five years, several American universities have opened branch campuses in Japan. Students can study basic subjects along with their study of English, so that their transfer to an American university is less precipitous. Some or all of the class credits earned at these schools can be transferred to the same school or other schools in America after 2 years of study. Even so, many students fail to achieve the necessary level required for successful study when they transfer to the main campus in the U.S. (The Nikkei, December 4, 1990.) This approach by the American universities operating in Japan suggests that they are going beyond simple TOEFL preparation. Consequently, the program should center around integrated classes, with TOEFL preparation as a supplement to that program.

American University Application and Admission Procedures.

Since the application and admission procedure is quite different in America, Japanese students will have to research this aspect of the American university system thoroughly before applying for admission.

Japanese universities use an entrance examination to determine whether or not a student can matriculate. American universities, on the other hand, judge a students eligibility by weighing several factors. One factor is the submitted standardized test (SAT primarily for the western states, and the ACT primarily for middle America and the eastern

states, and this is often given a weight of about 20% of the total evaluation. The high school GPA (grade point average) and letters of recommendation are given about 40%. The remainder is based on a variety of other personal attributes such as participation in student clubs, extra-curricular activities, awards, achievements, etc. The student must become thoroughly acquainted with these application requirements.

Unlike Japanese universities, which are supervised by the Ministry of Education, most universities and colleges in America have their own admission procedures. Consequently, general guidance will have only limited benefits because students will have to work individually on the different aspects of the admission process of each college or university.

In addition, the choice of majors should be made carefully and decisively, so that the student does not blindly wander the academic pathways looking for meaning to their studies. However, a student can change their major if they need to do so. Unlike Japanese universities, students do not enter a particular department at the beginning of their university career. Consequently, it is possible for the student to change majors, or even to have two majors. It is important to remember that this academic flexibility should not be abused by Japanese students who have not decided from the outset what they want to study.

Due to the differences in the educational systems of the two countries, students will have to become more aware of some of these fundamental differences and make the right, informed choices.

The Opinions of Studying Abroad.

The various options confronting the potential foreign university student can make the prospect of deciding a foreboding task. The primary question of this section that the prospective students must ask themselves is what kind of school they should attend (and indirectly, for how long). For the majority, there are basically three types of schools.

1. A Two Year College.

There are two types of junior colleges in the U.S. The first type is directed toward transferring to a four year college at the end of two years. Students study general education requirement courses that are basically liberal art courses. The credits earned at these institutions are transferred to the four year institution. The second type of junior college is one which offers technical and professional courses. Completion of a degree program at these institutions takes one to two years. Degrees awarded from junior colleges are the AA (Associate of Arts), the AS (Associate of Science), and the AAS (Associate of Applied Science).

2. A Four Year College or University.

A student may apply for direct admission straight out of high school and study at an American college or university for four years. It is also possible for a Japanese student to transfer from a Japanese junior college or university, and this is done quite often. In such cases, the student's GPA at college or university, and maybe even high school, will be considered. The degrees awarded by four year college and universities are the BA (Bachelor of Arts) and the BS (Bachelor of Science).

3. A Graduate School.

There is a wide range of graduate programs available in America. Some are separate schools by themselves, and many of these are business schools, law schools, medical schools, etc. But most are associated with a major college or university. Often there are no restrictions in terms of age or the undergraduate work done. However, many of the highly technical fields consider proper undergraduate preparation a necessary prerequisite. Japanese students should also be aware that changing from one graduate field to another is also possible. At this level, usually the GRE is required as part of the application procedure, or a more specific graduate level exam for the field in which they would like to

enter. (The GMAT is usually required for admission to a business school, but not the GRE.) Submission of TOEFL scores is also required in most cases. The degrees awarded at the graduate level are the MA (Master of Art), the MS (Master of Science), at the MBA (Master of Business Administration), the Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy), etc.

The Proposed Curriculum.

The curriculum for the "Pre-Academic Course" would be composed of the following five subjects: reading, writing, speaking and listening, study skills, and a TOEFL preparation class.

1. Reading

The average number of courses taken at an American university is four per each semester, and actual class time participation is about 12 hours a week. When compared to the average for a Japanese university, anywhere from twenty to thirty hours each week, the demands of classroom participation may not seem like a lot to the Japanese student; however, the amount of class preparation that is required is substantial. Japanese students who are not used to rapid and long assignments will encounter many difficulties. (Studying Abroad in America, Guidebook, 1990.)

Since Japanese students are not taught useful reading techniques, they tend to translate sentence by sentence and thereby fail to grasp the main ideas of paragraphs and essays. They tend to read at rates that are two to three times slower than native speakers. The basic goal of the "Pre-Academic Course" in the reading section would be to help the students read faster and more accurately.

The textbooks to be chosen for this program would be designed for the American university or college bound Japanese. The textbooks should be integrated with the other classes in the "Pre-Academic Course." The series of reading texts should be carefully coordinated with the other

texts on theme, vocabulary, grammar structure, and where possible, language function. If each chapter in the reading text reinforces, and is reinforced by, the corresponding chapters in the other texts, then a truly synergistic interaction will be possible, producing the desired results.

The basic reading skills and or exercises should be thoroughly reviewed during each class; skimming, finding topic sentences, using the dictionary, and identifying the central ideas in a passage. These exercises should wean the students from sentence by sentence translation, and move them more toward concept recognition. As these basic skills are continuously inculcated, more advanced skills will be slowly introduced. Skills such as marking inferences, separating fact from opinion, identifying slant or bias, paraphrasing complex ideas, evaluating evidence, finding support for key ideas, distinguishing the general from the specific, comparing arguments, and critical reading.

The following represents, in summary form, the five elements which will constitute the structure of the Reading class:

1. De-emphasizing grammar and the manipulation of language while reading.
2. Encouraging students to think about what they already know about the subject of the readings. It will help the students fill in the gaps in what they understand from the readings, help them predict what the writers will say, and anticipate the contents of the readings.
3. Helping students to focus on general meaning, rather than specific word meaning.
4. Discouraging students from using their dictionaries while reading, except for key words that seriously inhibit their understanding of a text, or for specific dictionary exercises.
5. Timing students regularly as they are reading. Increasing reading speed is an important part of improving reading, preparing for the TOEFL, and handling academic reading material in general.

Reading can be studied more effectively and enjoyably when students use easy material that they can understand and enjoy, instead of being forced to decode and translate texts hopelessly beyond their abilities. (Susser and Robb, 1990.) Therefore, the teachers should choose a list of topics for reading which students find motivating.

2. Writing

At American colleges and universities, students have to write for many different reasons: reporting on laboratory experiments; essay writing; comparing two ideas, theories, or concepts; arguing the causes and solutions of problems; describing or reporting on projects; synthesizing ideas on a given subject; etc. In all of these writing situations, the students must use a standardized writing format, and every student is expected to write clearly and concisely with good grammar and spelling.

There are basically two main formats for writing in the American university system. The first is not widely used, and it is called the paragraph style. The second is more widely used for compositions, term papers, research papers, and so on, and it is called the essay format.

If the textbooks from the other classes are integrated with the writing texts, the writing class should naturally follow the reading class, building upon a foundation already in place. This would allow the student the opportunity to develop some ideas on a particular topic in the reading class, then reinforce these ideas in the writing class. Brainstorming, individual outlining, and draft writing would be necessary components of this class in order to help the students on their way towards mastery of written English. The organization of academic essays in the direct manner of the American approach is not too unlike that of the Japanese academic system.

Three basic areas of expository writing will be emphasized in the "Pre-Academic Program." The first would be paragraph organization,

emphasizing structure, coherence, cohesion, unity, and completeness. Because of the lack of training in this area, Japanese students employ Japanese rhetoric when they write in English. This phenomena is not limited to the elementary level. The notion of “contrastive rhetoric” comes from Kaplan’s seminal work, in which he investigated the structural differences of the expository paragraph between English and other languages. Specifically, he found that English paragraphs have a linear structure, whereas those in Oriental languages have a circular structure. (Oi and Sato, 1990.) This is therefore one of the major reasons that Japanese students have considerable difficulties in writing term papers successfully.

The second area of expository writing would cover paragraph transitions within an essay, instructing the students on smooth and logically coherent transitions from one idea to the next. The third and final part would teach rhetorical patterns such as process, classification, comparison and contrast, and exemplification.

3. Listening and speaking.

Both listening and speaking are probably the two most difficult aspects of English for Japanese students, even though they may have had six or more years of English instruction. Japanese students are often in a state of shock after just one class at the university level in America because the style of teaching is often very different from the one they are used to. Japanese university classes are monologues, and the student is a passive learner; however, the dialogue-like interaction of American university is terribly strange to the uninitiated student.

Japanese students also have problems with the speed and content of lectures given at American universities. Often, the language used is not daily conversational English, and usually contains many technical terminologies. With the lack of high-level language proficiency, many Japanese students tend to be withdrawn in situations calling for

discussion; especially, when Japanese students find themselves in front of eloquent American students.

Listening and speaking have been separated here for the sake of clarity, but in truth they are inseparable; the "Pre-Academic Course" Listening and speaking class would combine these two together into one class.

The goals for improving listening are multiple. The first, is to improve the general listening skills of the Japanese students in an academic setting. Second, is helping the students learn how to extract the main points and supporting details from a lecture or discussion. Third, is to introduce to the students note-taking in English to improve their aural comprehension abilities.

The materials to be used in the listening sessions are recorded passages will reflect natural university lectures, discussions, counseling sessions, etc. The tapes will reflect natural sounding English, the kind that might actually be heard in a real classroom situation.

As the Japanese student will quickly discover, discussion and participation in a group is one of the essential parts of the American educational system, and students must become familiar with this in order to succeed. The correctness of the students' opinion is not considered as important as the participation. The Japanese proverb "Silence is golden," cannot be effective in a system predicated on the concept of higher education as a forum of discussion.

The primary goal of the speaking class would be to give the students opportunities to express themselves in English and to encourage the sharing of ideas and opinions on the topics provided. This can be facilitated by providing many out-of-the-classroom projects that the students can report on, being required to give an oral presentation of their activities.

Teachers should emphasize the following points in the listening and speaking class. First, encourage the students to discuss what they know about the topic of listening before they hear the tape. At this point,

the instructor can fill in the missing vocabulary, expressions, etc. Second, de-emphasize grammar and language manipulation during the listening portion of the class. Finally, the teachers should help the students focus on the general meaning and content of the listening material. By doing so, the students will discover that they are able to understand more than they think they are capable, and they will be less bothered by unfamiliar vocabulary.

4. Study Skills

Study skills is a new field to most Japanese students, and it is the most important element of the "Pre-Academic Course." The purpose of the study skills class will be to combine all of the skills that the student has learned in the program, approaching the feeling and atmosphere of a real university. The main points that will be taught in the study skills are: pre-reading skills in reading exercises; prediction skills, paraphrasing, and summarizing in reading and listening exercises; listening for specific words in the listening exercises; documenting papers during writing exercises; test-taking skills in writing exercises; and note-taking skills in both reading and listening exercises.

Note-taking skill is the most important aspect of, as well as the central uniting theme of the study skills class. Success in the note-taking skills will necessarily lead to success in all other areas of the program. There are several direct objectives that can be met by emphasizing note-taking skills in the study skills class. The first is that it can improve the student's aural comprehension because of the need to pay attention in class. Second, it will aid the student in remembering what they have heard or read. Third, efficient and accurate note-taking will make them more accustomed to studying for their exams from their own lecture notes. This system would reward those who pay attention to ideas and concepts rather than the details.

It should be understood that there is a fundamental difference

between note-taking from a written source and note-taking from an oral source. Normally, when students are taking notes from their readings, they feel in control. They can adjust their reading speed, or even reread a difficult passage, so they tend to be inefficient in their note-taking. In addition, they have the luxury of sitting back and slowly digesting the material at their leisure. However, the student will discover that note-taking during a lecture is an entirely new type of experience, and that other skills are required to effectively take notes. Some lecturers read prepared speeches, and these are usually of average difficulty for the student, but most professors speak extemporaneously on subjects that they know well. The style and speed of the lecture can vary widely, presenting the student with less than optimum conditions for note-taking. Further, the student has no control over the speed of the lecture. Most professors do not allow questions during their lectures, so the students cannot slow down or stop to listen to previous sections of the lecture. Students often have to take notes even when they are confused or do not understand, and they must wait until end to ask questions, or to try to comprehend on their own.

Because lecture note-taking is very difficult, most of the exercises will focus around the necessary skills to survive a lecture. First, before going to a lecture, the students should read all of the assigned readings, so that they have an idea of what will be discussed. Any special vocabulary related to the lecture topic should be made familiar. Second, the students should design their own words (shorthand) for efficient note-taking. They should avoid making complete sentences by this method. Third, the students should make a chart of these shorthand words, so that they may be located easily and used with little effort.

To become accomplished note-takers, and to extract all of the important information from a class, the students have to learn the six most important signals of pertinent information (information that the students should take notes on). The first signal is when handouts are given by the professor. The second is when information is written on

the chalkboard. Third, when any information is repeated several times. Fourth, when there are changes in gestures or information. Fifth, when key words are used. This will inform the listener that important information is forthcoming. Finally, when lists of facts or events are given, that this signals important, concisely formulated information.

5. TOEFL Class

The TOEFL class will complete the "Pre-Academic Program" by training the students how to do well on the test. A variety of test-taking strategies will be taught, but most of the necessary skills that are required to successfully take the TOEFL test, skills like reading and listening, are already part of the "Pre-Academic Program." Consequently, this program will put proportionately more emphasis on the other aspects of the program, and less emphasis on the TOEFL test itself. Hopefully, over time, the reputation of the "Pre-Academic Program" will eclipse the TOEFL score itself, as university institutions realize the high level of preparation of the students who graduate from the "Pre-Academic Program."

Conclusion.

The experience of living and studying abroad can greatly change a persons values and attitudes, but in order to develop a truly international outlook, something which is necessary in the increasingly thinking global neighborhood, studying abroad is one of the best ways to achieve this end. Students should not be satisfied with just acquiring the language or the degree. They should become actively involved with local people, using this precious opportunity which they have, in order to deepen the mutual understanding between Japan and the respective foreign country. This is essential for Japan and the world because mistrust and hate is the product of ignorance between people. If tensions or conflicts arise, it will be the personal relations that were developed between average

people and Japanese students that will attenuate these sore spots. Therefore, it is imperative that Japan actively pursue and foster mutual understanding and cooperation among all people.

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