

# Innovations in Integrating Language Assistants: Inter-Collaborative Learning

Fumie Kato

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Fumie Kato, The University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 9201 University City Blvd, Charlotte, NC 28223, USA. E-mail: [fkato@uncc.edu](mailto:fkato@uncc.edu)

A language assistant (LA) program was introduced into a university-level Japanese program. The LAs in this program consisted of Japanese study abroad students, that is English as a second language students, coming to study from Japanese universities for either one semester or one academic year, as well as American learners returning from a one-year academic study abroad program in Japan. In the southeastern region of the United States, the Japanese language is not yet considered a major foreign language, thus few opportunities exist for American learners to connect with native speakers of Japanese. The LA program endeavors to ease this limitation. It has been extremely beneficial for our American learners to have opportunities to communicate regularly with Japanese study abroad students in the classrooms. Furthermore, it was found tremendously valuable for Japanese study abroad students and greatly helpful for the instructors as well. This paper describes the procedures and examines the effectiveness of introducing an LA program into Japanese language classes. To analyze the program, questionnaires were distributed to LAs ( $N=20$ ); five department instructors wrote comments concerning the program; and five Japanese language learners submitted reflection papers. Analyses of the qualitative data indicate that the LA program has many advantages for everyone participating.

**Keywords:** language assistant, teaching practicum, study abroad students, Japanese as a foreign language

## Innovations in Integrating Language Assistants: Inter-Collaborative Learning

While there is much research indicating the importance of interacting with native speakers of a target language when learning a language (Ellis, 1985; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992), providing such opportunities to speak and listen to develop their oral and aural abilities (Blake, 2008; Towndrow & Vallance, 2004) can often be difficult. This is particularly true in learning a foreign language rather than in learning a second language<sup>1</sup> because there are few occasions for JFL learners to meet with Japanese natives, especially in the southeastern region of the United States, and little opportunity to utilize their target language in their daily lives. Scarcella and Oxford (1992) pointed out that speaking with others who have more linguistic resources than the learners, such as native speakers, is imperative to develop the target language. In order to create opportunities to meet with native

speakers and to solve the problem, a language assistant (henceforth, “LA”) program was introduced into the Japanese as a foreign language (henceforth, “JFL”) program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (henceforth, “UNC Charlotte”). Japanese students coming to the United States to study abroad from Japanese universities were recruited to attend Japanese language classes as LAs and to communicate regularly with JFL learners. The LA program provides both the JFL learners and the Japanese study abroad students with meaningful interactions to improve their interpersonal language abilities, thus enhancing the language learning of both the JFL learners and the Japanese LAs, who usually come to UNC Charlotte to learn English.

While it might seem obvious that JFL learners would benefit from greatly from having Japanese university students regularly attended their Japanese language classes, some may question whether the Japanese LAs benefit from participating in the program as well. The majority of LAs in UNC Charlotte classes do not intend to be teachers, nor do they have any interest in Japanese language education. In addition, most of them have little to no knowledge of teaching

<sup>1</sup> A foreign language is a language originally from other country and is not spoken in the native country of the person, whereas a second language is not the native language of the speaker, but is used by the locals.

methodologies. However, the course developed for the LA program was designed as a teaching practicum and entitled thusly. One reason for this was to provide LAs with two opportunities to teach a practicum during the semester so that they could learn how to teach Japanese to American students. Furthermore, the activities incorporated into the program were not only designed to assist JFL learners, but also for the LAs to learn teaching methods. Without activities like the teaching practicums incorporated into the course, LAs may not have enough motivation to observe and learn how to teach during the class hours. However, since all of the LAs are required to teach two practicums in their classes, their attitude toward attending and actively participating during all of the classes became more serious.

This study reports how all of the participants involved in the program (i.e., LAs, JFL learners, and instructors) benefited from the LA program. Special attention was given to the LAs' perception of the program. To research the benefits of the program, surveys were distributed to the LAs to collect their opinions, and they were asked to write reflection papers at the end of the semester on their experiences. Five Japanese Program instructors' views on the program were solicited and five advanced JFL learners whose classes participated in the LA program wrote papers on their impressions of the process involved in learning Japanese as assisted by an LA. Through analyzing the qualitative data collected by the three kinds of the participants, the results show what specific advantages were found. This study also shows the procedures of how an LA program was introduced and the methods of how it was implemented into Japanese language classes at a southeastern United States university.

### A Brief History of LAs at UNC Charlotte

For the first time in the 2016 spring semester, the JAPN 3400 "Teaching Practicum" course was offered as part of the Japanese language curriculum. Prior to this, students could register for an "Independent Study" course in which they could function as LAs. At that time, there were not enough LAs to provide student assistants for all Japanese language classes, so LAs were generally offered for classes at the elementary and intermediate levels. However, since that time, over the past two decades, the Japanese government has encouraged Japanese university students to participate in study abroad programs. During this period, university exchange partnerships proliferated. Consequently, the numbers of Japanese students studying abroad at UNC Charlotte has been gradually increasing, creating a larger pool of potential LAs. At this point, a need to create a course to train LAs arose,

and we began to offer a new course called "Teaching Practicum."

In the early 2000s, as mentioned above, there were not many American study abroad students coming back from Japan, and so only a small number of advanced Japanese language learners could work as LAs. Unlike the LA program in the past, currently LAs are assigned to almost all Japanese language classes. In 2016, the UNC Charlotte Japanese Program was gratified that a total of 30 Japanese university students had come to UNC Charlotte as study abroad students. In addition, the number of American students studying abroad in Japan has also been growing, with returnees having been immersed in Japanese for one academic year, and some of these returning students became interested in being LAs after returning. With these numbers, we became able to provide two LAs for every language class, each with approximately 20 students enrolled. Although Japanese language learners may still have few opportunities to communicate with Japanese natives outside the classroom or in their community, with the addition of two LAs per class, students are given more opportunities to interact with Japanese native speakers or speakers with more linguistic resources in their classes or socially after class.

### The Roles of LAs

The length of a teaching practicum is generally one week (Willard-Holt, 2001), three weeks (Ozek, 2009; Sakai, 1995), or two months (Sahin, 2008), and the purpose is usually to learn teaching methods through actual teaching in order to earn a teacher's license or to receive credit for becoming a teacher in the future. For example, in the United States, many universities have a system under which students can assist instructors with classes to aid learners in laboratory classes or generally help the teacher. Undergraduate students in this system are referred to as teaching assistants (henceforth, "TAs"), and graduate students are labeled graduate teaching assistants (henceforth, "GTAs"). Both TAs and GTAs are paid per hour and their tasks often include preparing classes, grading student tests or quizzes, teaching classes under the supervision of the instructor, or answering students' questions (Kost, 2008; Murray, 1996). However, the LAs in the Japanese Program at UNC Charlotte are different in a number of ways.

First, the eligibility and primary task of LAs are different. To be eligible to be an LA, participants must be Japanese study abroad students, returnees from studying abroad in Japan for one academic year, or advanced learners who are interested in being an LA. The Japanese Program currently offers six kinds of standard Japanese language classes: elementary Japanese I and II, intermediate Japanese I and II, and

upper intermediate Japanese I and II. LAs are assigned to one of these classes and attend the class three times per week with the learners in those classes. As it is the first time for most LAs to teach Japanese using English as the instructional language, their primary task is to learn the methods of teaching Japanese in the United States.

Second, the roles the LAs serve in the classrooms are somewhat different from standard TAs and GTAs, and include: 1) partnering with the instructor to demonstrate dialogues in Japanese, 2) supervising learners in pair or group work activities, 3) proctoring chapter tests, 4) delivering and collecting papers for class quizzes, and 5) collecting and checking homework assignments. Furthermore, LAs teach a whole class under the guidance of the instructor twice per semester, once in the first half of the semester, and once in the second half. Another important difference in duties is that while TAs and GTAs often assist instructors by marking tests and grading their scores, LAs are forbidden from doing so, as they are often similar in age to the students and study together every class, and thus it is easy for them to become friends. Additionally, although TAs and GTAs are usually paid per hour, LAs do not receive money, but instead receive credit hours for fulfilling their tasks.

Finally, LAs differ from TAs and GTAs in that they are given tasks to complete outside of the class hours. One such task is an “LA session” that must be held twice per semester. During LA sessions, LAs are required to meet individually with all of the learners in the class that they are in charge of for 15 minutes each. In the session, LAs ask questions that include grammar points that they studied in previous classes to review and practice. These sessions are carried out face to face in Japanese. After finishing with the review, learners may ask questions on the grammatical points and then they are allowed to converse freely on any topic. Japanese study abroad students may speak about their own university in Japan or Japanese pop culture. Returnees may speak about their experience in a study abroad program in Japan. LAs in these sessions are required to keep a brief record of each session conducted with each learner, and these records, including students’ attendance information, are submitted as a report to their instructor. Another task that LAs must attend to outside of the classroom is to attend Japanese Program events, such as speech contests or “Year-End Presentations.” LAs must cooperate with the instructor and assist the learners who are participating. For example, LAs help students who participate in the speech contest by giving them pointers and helping them improve their speech outside of regular class hours. The Japanese Program held Year-End Presentations at the end of each year and it is their biggest event. Most students attend and

do several performances, e.g., perform plays based on Japanese folktales, parts of Japanese movies or skits, give cooking demonstrations, or sing Japanese songs. LAs are encouraged to help students in their classes by performing with them in their presentations for this exciting event.

This paper hopes to address the participants’ views on the LA program by analyzing the answers of survey questions and post-program reflection papers to answer the following research question:

How useful, beneficial, and practical is the LA program for the three parties involved, i.e., instructors, American students, and LAs in their respective positions?

### **Evaluations of the LA Program**

Data collected from the LAs in the fall semester 2016 were analyzed to evaluate the LA program. There were 20 LAs registered for the “Teaching Practicum” course at the time, consisting of 15 Japanese study abroad students and 5 returnees from study abroad programs in Japan. As the author was in charge of this course, the author recruited Japanese study abroad students from exchange partner universities by sending e-mails and advertising the course to all of the expected Japanese study abroad students in August 2016. All of the Japanese study abroad students and returnees who registered for the Teaching Practicum class were assigned to a Japanese language class, attended an orientation, and had a meeting with their instructors before commencing their duties as LAs. In the fall semester of 2016, 12 Japanese language classes were offered. Two LAs were assigned to the eight language classes with over 20 students enrolled, and one LA each was assigned to the four language classes with fewer than 19 students enrolled. All of the LAs responded to the questionnaire ( $N=20$ ) for the purpose of evaluating the LA program and submitted their reflection papers ( $N=20$ ).

The outcomes of the qualitative analysis of the LA surveys and reflection papers are reported first. Next, descriptions of the instructors’ impressions are detailed. Finally, opinions collected from the American students’ reflection papers are described.

### **Reflections from the LAs**

This section reports the LAs’ perception of the LA program, as per their answers to questionnaires and what was written in their reflection papers.

### **Outcomes of the Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was distributed after the students finished the first half of the semester. At

this stage, as all of the LAs had experienced both the LA session and one teaching practicum, questions regarding the LA session and the teaching practicum were also included. The questionnaire consisted of five Likert-type questions (strongly agree 5 to strongly disagree 1) asking about the course as a whole. Table 1 shows the statements regarding the LA program and their responses.

Many LAs (85%) responded that the course was just as they expected and that American learners' attitudes in the class were excellent. Additionally, 80% reported through the questionnaire that they were able to make friends through the LA program. One issue of concern in this program was that the LAs may feel they are given too many homework assignments for grading, but only 15% of LAs agreed with this issue.

Although a total of 12 statements regarding the LA session were included in the questionnaire, only specific sets of data leading to a general conclusion or indicating noteworthy issues were focused on this

section. Respondents were asked to select all of the statements with which they agreed. Table 2 shows the results of the LAs' perceptions of the LA session and the number of respondents.

Table 2 shows that the LAs generally viewed the LA session activities favorably. Many LAs (75%) enjoyed the LA sessions and reported that they could get to know the students in their classes better than before (75%). Over one half of the LAs responded that it became easier for them to conduct the class activities after their first LA session and were looking forward to the second LA session. As there are always a few students who do not attend the LA sessions every semester, instructors frequently warn students if they do not come to the LA session, they will lose points. However, less than one third of American learners did not heed the instructors' warning. It is necessary to emphasize this issue with their students repeatedly. Although there was some concern that the LAs would dislike the LA sessions because of the amount of time

Table 1  
*LAs' Perceptions of the Course (N=20)*

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Course content was just as I expected.	7	10	3	0	0
There were too many HW assignments I needed to check.	0	3	9	7	1
Students' attitudes in my class were excellent.	13	4	1	1	0
I think I could assist my instructor as an LA.	0	9	9	2	0
I had many American friends due to being an LA.	2	14	3	1	0

Table 2  
*LAs' Perception on "LA Session" (N=20)*

LA Session	No.	%
There were a few students who didn't appear at the appointment time.	6	30%
I enjoyed speaking with students one-to-one.	15	75%
I know students much better than before.	14	70%
I could do activities much easier after an LA session.	10	50%
I do not like the LA sessions due to their being held outside class hours.	0	0%
I am looking forward to the second LA session.	10	50%

Table 3.1  
*Reflection on Teaching Practicum (N=20)*

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I was really nervous.	9	6	1	3	1
I could teach well.	0	3	9	8	0
I did not have good time management.	1	2	7	10	0
I am looking forward the second one.	3	10	6	1	0
It was really difficult.	4	5	5	6	0
I could speak loudly enough.	2	10	5	2	1
It was a really good experience.	15	4	1	0	0

Table 3.2  
Regarding Teaching Practicum (N =20)

Statements	No.	%
I had done a teaching practicum before.	3	15%
I borrowed a lesson plan from my instructor.	17	85%
I made the lesson plan by myself.	5	25%
I received instruction on the teaching practicum from my instructor in advance.	13	65%
I received feedback from my instructor.	16	80%

required outside of class hours, fortunately, no LAs reported having such feelings.

In terms of the questions regarding a teaching practicum, seven Likert-type questions (strongly agree 5 to strongly disagree 1) and five multiple choice questions were included. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 show the results of LAs' perception of the teaching practicum.

In general, most of the LAs also viewed the classroom teaching practicums favorably. Approximately two thirds of the LAs were looking forward to their second teaching practicum and 30% responded neutrally, with only one LA not viewing the classroom teaching practicum favorably. This LA wrote in her comments that she was terribly nervous about teaching in front of others, could not speak in a loud voice, and could not teach well. She also commented that she did not have any confidence in her ability to teach because of her poor English ability so she did not find the teaching practicum to be an enjoyable activity. However, in her reflection paper from the end of the semester, she reported having made lesson plans by herself for her second teaching practicum and even though she felt nervous at the beginning of the class, her nervousness gradually disappeared because she was familiar with the students in her class from seeing them several times a week and could enjoy the second half of her second teaching experience. Ultimately, she commented in her reflection paper that she had "an amazing experience" through this activity. All of the LAs, except the one who reported being neutral to the teaching practicum, agreed that the first teaching practicum turned out to be a wonderful experience. The LA who did not note the experience as being positive reported that he was not nervous, could teach well, had good time management, did not think it was difficult, and was looking forward to the second one.

Table 3.2 reveals that two-thirds of the LAs received instruction on the teaching practicum beforehand and many of the LAs received feedback from their instructors afterwards, indicating that not all of the LAs received instruction before or feedback after the teaching practicum. There is a need to ask instructors to pay attention to this issue, i.e., giving instruction before and feedback after the activity.

**Outcomes of the Reflection Paper.** All of the LAs (N=20) submitted their reflection papers with

the assigned title, "What I learned through being an LA" at the end of the semester. Their reflections were analyzed through conceptually clustered matrix analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1944), and in total 104 opinions (87 general opinions, 11 opinions about teaching practicum, and 6 opinions about the LA session) were extracted.

**General Opinions.** In total 87 general opinions extracted were categorized into 16 kinds of similar general opinions that were given by at least two respondents. The 16 kinds of general opinions were further categorized into four sub-categories: 1) personal experience, 2) Japanese class, 3) students in the class, and 4) other. Table 4.1 shows the 16 kinds of contents of general opinions and the numbers of responses.

Table 4.1 shows several merits of this program. In this section, only reflections that over five students mentioned were highlighted. Most of the LAs' perceptions on the program (80%) were very positive and they expressed their pleasure that it was a wonderful and an amazing experience, with representative comments such as, "I had a priceless experience because teaching Japanese to Americans at the university could not have happened for me without having a teaching license or technique," "It was a precious asset in my life," and "It was the most amazing experience so far." Although many found it difficult to teach a class (45%), over one-third of the LAs noted that it was their first experience to do so, and that it taught them a lot. One-quarter of the LAs also reported in their reflection papers that being an LA was a worthwhile and fantastic experience. In line with this, 40% of the LAs wrote that they wanted to "use the experience gained through being an LA in their future."

Another beneficial point of the program reported by one-quarter of the LAs was that getting a chance to observe American students' active attitudes increased their motivation toward their own studies. For example, many noted that American students "ask questions if they are unclear" and "state their opinions in a dignified manner without being afraid of failure." Other LAs noted that American students' attitudes are "serious and enthusiastic toward learning the Japanese language" and are "active to learn not only the Japanese

Table 4.1  
General Opinions on Being an LA (N = 20)

Sections	General Opinions	No.	%
Personal experience	Wonderful experience	16	80%
	Teaching was difficult.	9	45%
	It was my first time to do something like this.	7	35%
	Learned many things	7	35%
	Impressed with students' active attitudes	5	25%
	Being an LA was worthwhile.	5	25%
	Have become confident	2	10%
Japanese class	Enjoyed the Japanese class	6	30%
	Learned Japanese teaching methods	3	15%
	Could have a review of Japanese (Japanese learners n=5)	3	15%
	Noticed the importance of homework assignments	2	10%
Students in the class	Studied actively	6	30%
	Increased American friends	3	15%
	Felt responsibility for the Japanese learners	2	10%
Other	Will use this experience in my future	8	40%
	Discovered new merits of Japan	5	25%

Note: Opinions extracted from over five students are in bold type font.

Table 4.2  
LAs' Perception on the Teaching Practicum (TP) and the LA Session (LAS) (N=20)

	Reflection on the Teaching Practicum and the LA Session	No.	%
TP 1	The Teaching Practicum was difficult and I was nervous.	7	35%
TP 2	The Teaching Practicum was useful.	4	20%
LAS 1	I enjoyed the LA sessions.	4	20%
LAS 2	The LA sessions were useful.	2	10%

language itself, but also Japanese culture." In terms of the Japanese classes they attended, over one-third of the LAs were fond of the Japanese class that they were in charge of, making comments such as "I always looked forward to attending the class." Therefore, when the semester was over, one LA wrote that she "terribly missed the class." As it was the first time for Japanese study abroad students to learn methods for teaching Japanese, one-quarter of the LAs reported discovering new aspects of the Japanese language itself, and noted that being an LA was a catalyst for them to take a fresh look at Japan.

### Reflections on the Teaching Practicum and the LA Sessions

In total, 17 opinions regarding the teaching practicum and LA sessions were extracted (11 on the teaching practicum and 6 on the LA sessions). Table 4.2 shows the titles of their reflections on the teaching practicum and the LA sessions and the numbers of LAs that wrote about the two issues.

As Table 4.2 shows, over one-third of the LAs found

the teaching practicum difficult and said that it made them nervous, writing, "It was much more difficult than I expected," "It was the most tough experience for me since I was really poor at speaking in front of people," and "It was the most challenging activity for me." However, regardless of the difficulty, they also reported that the experience turned out to be very useful and they found they had improved their shortcomings through the activity.

The LAs really enjoyed their LA sessions, with some describing them as "the happiest time." Some of them were impressed with students' attitude of "trying to understand and solve their problems through my explanation in English." They discovered various aspects of the students' personalities during these sessions that they could not observe in the classroom. Twenty percent of LAs wrote that they wanted to have more LA sessions. Two LAs noted that due to having the LA sessions, they had become closer to the students and also found it easier to engage in social interactions with them.

### Reflections from Instructors

Five instructors provided their opinions on the LA program. Overall, they found the program to have many effective features and to have been very helpful because it offered one or two LAs for every class hour. These opinions were categorized into the four sections below.

**Advantages to Having Japanese Study Abroad Students as LAs.** American learners generally do not have opportunities to listen to the Japanese language except from their instructors, but the LA program afforded them another opportunity to speak and listen to the Japanese language. Some students who were nervous to speak with their instructors found it easier to speak with the LA because they were closer in age and it felt more relaxed. Second, students felt what they learned was authentic because they could speak directly with university students from Japan. Third, it was easy for LAs to become aware of problems that students had because they had one-on-one communication with each student during the LA sessions and on other occasions outside of the classroom. Reporting such problems to instructors helped because the instructor could then give a review of the difficult points again in the class or help the troubled student directly. Fourth, as mentioned earlier, the Japanese Program has a “Year-End Presentations” event. The LAs also practice and perform together with the students, so instructors did not have to take on all of the supervision of their performances by themselves. Finally, since Japanese study abroad students created strong friendships with the American students, the American students who plan to visit Japan in the future can maintain contact with their former LAs and have someone to visit abroad.

**Advantages Within the Class Hour.** Having an assistant at all times during the class hour produced several benefits. First, the LAs could support the instructors by supervising students, assisting with explanations of exercises, and giving feedback on assignments. For example, while the instructors were explaining the elements of kanji characters, the LAs could write the characters on the blackboard and demonstrate the correct stroke order, or check students’ writing by moving around the class. They could also point out errors written in the students’ notes promptly. Through these activities, the LAs increased student engagement. By taking on various roles to assist the instructors in the class hour, as described in the section “The Roles of LAs,” the instructor could focus on teaching itself and manage the classwork more smoothly.

**Advantages Outside the Class Hour.** The American students received a number of benefits through communicating with Japanese study abroad LAs. For example, they learned and acquired various daily expressions that they couldn’t learn during the class hour. There were also benefits for the instructors outside of the class hours because LAs would check students’ homework assignments, which instructors noted was the greatest assistance they provided. Most classes had many students, so before the LA program was implemented it took a significant amount of time for the instructors to check the homework assignments by themselves. Having the LAs help check homework assignments allowed the instructors to spend more time preparing lessons for class.

**Advantages for Japanese Study Abroad Students.** One common problem for Japanese study abroad students is that they only form groups with Japanese study abroad students and end up communicating less with the local university students, returning to Japan without having made many gains in their English ability (Kato, 2016). The most significant reason for this seems to be the language barrier. However, Japanese study abroad students who became LAs attended a class with American students and had to be active in helping local students in the class. These activities lead them to have more confidence in their ability to communicate with the American university students and to increase the value of their study abroad experience. Furthermore, LAs who were interested in Japanese language education could also learn valuable classroom management skills and teaching methods through the program, which was an added benefit for them.

However, a few issues were raised that should be addressed in the future. For example, there was an LA with low motivation toward their duties, who was inattentive during the class hour, and exhibited behavior unfavorable for an LA. One instructor reported that it is difficult to reprimand or give directions to this LA during or after the class hour because the instructor was too busy responding to their students in the class.

### Opinions from JFL Learners

Five American returnees from studying abroad in Japan became LAs in Fall 2016. These five LAs wrote their impressions toward learning together with the LAs, their process of learning Japanese in the past, and their desire to become an LA in the future based on their learning experiences. According to their responses, they learned many things from their Japanese LAs, understood the Japanese language better, and deepened their knowledge of Japanese

culture by asking questions to their LAs. They also commented that they learned less common Japanese colloquialisms and slang from their LAs.

Students wrote that they admired the American LAs who were advanced language learners or returnees from studying abroad in Japan and noted that the American LAs conversed with their instructors in fluent Japanese and fulfilled their duties satisfactorily. The American LAs advised students about their future prospects for Japanese learning based on their experiences mastering Japanese. Many such students were very impressed with their LA's experiences and many stated that they want to become an LA someday. Furthermore, many reported that they wish to be regarded as a good LA by the students in the class like they admired their own LA. The American LAs said that they would like to encourage students to attend a Japanese study abroad program and also push them to continue learning Japanese until they obtain a Japanese BA degree. One such LA wrote that she wants to be a teacher in the future and she registered for this course to learn teaching methods.

## Discussion

The results of the analyses of the questionnaire and the reflection papers collected from the LAs indicated that the LA experience turned out to be a meaningful and beneficial one in their lives. Most were delighted to attend their Japanese language classes, felt fortunate to be able to make many American friends because of it, and enjoyed the interpersonal communication that was a part of the program. Specifically, the LA sessions were found to be an effective way for Japanese LAs to become closer to the students in their assigned class and this in turn helped LA to work more efficiently. Japanese LAs were also impressed with the American students' learning attitudes, which greatly influenced them to develop a more active learning style. Prior to the study, there were two concerns with this program: 1. Would the LAs accept the LA session task conducted outside of the class hours? 2. Would the burden of correcting students' homework assignments be too great for the LAs? However, neither concern seemed to be an issue when the LAs were surveyed after their duties had finished. Although some LAs reported that the teaching practicum was difficult and made them nervous at first, they found it to be an advantageous and worthwhile experience because they would not have had such an opportunity in Japan or other parts of the United States.

The second most common opinion was that the LAs acknowledged the experience as valuable, regardless of them feeling the amount of duties to be overwhelming

at first. They noted that after overcoming the workload, they gained significant knowledge through the program, and would like to apply what they learned in the future. As such, most reflections written by the LAs were largely positive.

Instructors noted that the program provided their students with exposure to communicating with similar-aged Japanese university students or advanced students. They were of the opinion that the LAs greatly influenced their students, who could receive significant information about Japan and Japanese culture directly from Japanese natives. All of the instructors reported numerous advantages of the LA program, and all were very welcoming of this program. They pointed out huge benefits in assisting students and the instructors within the class hours, and found great merit in the program through the LAs communicating with students outside the class hours. They were particularly positive regarding the Japanese LAs.

However, it should be noted that a few instructors did express some negative attitudes towards some LAs. To help remedy their concerns, in the future, all LAs will be asked if they are eager to perform all of the tasks instructed during the orientation session, held at the very beginning of the semester, after explaining the tasks and duties required of them. Additionally, class rules, expectations, and manners expected of LAs will be explained, e.g., no eating meals or using a cell phones during the class hours and wearing professional clothing. Students who are uncomfortable with the guidelines of the course will be recommended to drop it in the future.

American LAs who had studied Japanese with the LAs in the past and returned from Japan after finishing a study abroad program were thrilled with their preparation for becoming an LA. Most American students were satisfied with the teaching/learning style assisted by the LAs in the when they had studied Japanese previously, so they were eager to become an LA themselves. They tried to mimic the LAs who encouraged them to continue studying Japanese and enhance their motivation of their students to attend a study abroad program. Having the experience of studying Japanese with LAs was found to greatly influence and foster American students' motivation to study Japanese.

## Conclusion

Although it took two decades to set up the LA program, opinions collected and analyzed from the LAs, instructors, and students revealed that it is very beneficial for all those involved. Currently, one course



specifically for LAs has been integrated into our curriculum, and the course has been systematically offered every semester since 2016. However, regardless of the systemization of this program, one instructor (the author) still needs to advertise the program, recruit study abroad students from the exchange partner universities one or two months prior to the beginning of the semester, provide course registration information, assign LAs to certain language classes following their schedule, and provide them with an orientation at the very beginning of the semester to explain what will be required of them. This is not a simple task. However, considering the great advantages for the students, LAs, and instructors, it is a very worthwhile undertaking.

## References

- Blake, R. (2008). *Brave new digital classroom: Technology and foreign language learning*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Ellis, R. (1985). *Understanding second language acquisition*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Kato, F. (2016). Enhancing integrative motivation: The Japanese-American collaborative learning project. *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1-15. doi: [10.1080/2331186X.2016.1142361](https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2016.1142361)
- Kost, C. (2008). Innovations in teaching assistant development: An apprenticeship model. *Foreign Language Annals*, 41(1), 29-68.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. London, UK: SAGE.
- Murray, R. W. (1996). The teaching assistant. *Analytical Chemistry of News & Features*, 68(23), 709A. doi: [10.1021/ac9621332](https://doi.org/10.1021/ac9621332)
- Ozek, Y. (2009). Overseas teaching experience: Student teachers' perspectives of teaching practicum. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences* 1, 2541-2545.
- Sahin, M. (2008). Cross-cultural experience in preservice teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 1777-1790.
- Sakai, Y. (1995). Self evaluation of Mathematics course students and the evaluation by their instructors in practice teaching. Teaching practicum education guidance center. *Research Bulletin*, 19, 1-11.
- Scarcella, R. C., & Oxford, R. L. (1992). *The tapestry of language learning: The individual in the communicative classroom*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Towndrow, P., & Vallance, M. (2004). *Using IT in the language classroom*. Singapore, Singapore: Longman.
- Willard-Holt, C. (2001). The impact of a short-term international field experience on preservice teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 14-25.