

# Multilingual Immersion and Cross-cultural Competence: A Portrait of Users and Activities in Kansai University Mi-room

Brian Murray

(Kansai University, Division of Promotion of Educational Development)

**Keywords** EMI科目, イマーション/GTA program, Mi-room

## 1. Introduction

Leading international universities are increasingly considering internationalization as a strategically important issue 池田、ベラルガ(2018). As Kansai University proactively expands its internationalization practices with projects such as Collaborative Online Interactive Learning (COIL), Global FD (Faculty Development) training, and the innovative EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) courses offered in the KUGF (Kansai University Global Frontier) program, the Mi-room (multilingual-immersion room) is another of these pioneering projects, this one focusing on fostering bilingualism, multilingualism and cross-cultural competence in an on-site multilingual-immersion environment.

## 2. The Multilingual-immersion Room (Mi-Room)

The multilingual-immersion room (Mi-room) was established in Kansai University in 2015 with the following objectives: 1) to create an on-campus multilingual immersion environment to satisfy the language needs of contemporary students 2) to provide an environment conducive to encourage autonomous language learning 3) to provide a welcoming environment to foster and support students' language learning efforts 4) to improve students' cross-

cultural competency enabling them to become globally capable citizens.

The Mi-room environment is made up of a COIL-capable classroom, a glass-walled session room, and a main, open area. The classroom is used for some GTA English-language sessions and KUGF program COIL sessions. The session room is the main location of EMI-GTA sessions and some GTA English-language sessions. The main area hosts the GTA non-English sessions, allowing those who have an interest but are hesitant to join to participate passively from the self-study area. Special events are generally held in the open area, and are usually held when there are no Non-English sessions scheduled.

English-language books and DVDs are available for students to use freely while in the Mi-room. There are also study-abroad books, standardized test-taking reference materials such as TOEFL, TOEIC and IELTS preparatory materials and sample tests. Additionally, past-students' testimonials of study-abroad experiences are available, to encourage and motivate prospective study-abroad students, and give them a more realistic image of what to expect if they participate in such exchange programs. Laptop computers are free to borrow while in the Mi-room, and students are free to use the study-space for self-study or private language exchange.

A global commons area, where Japanese students are free to interact with and communicate with international students, is open to all. For many international students, this is their base while on campus, offering a safe, comfortable place amid a sometimes-challenging campus life. There are other services not part of the GTA program, such as writing workshops, counseling, and professional services offered for study-abroad and career advice, some of these offered in co-operation with the international department.

### 3. Global Teaching Assistant (GTA) Program

The Global Teaching Assistant (GTA) program is a 10-week program hosting language sessions, EMI sessions, and special events promoting cross-cultural understanding. It is staffed by international students specially selected and placed in charge of sessions based on a balance between the needs of the Mi-room and the GTAs individual skills and talents. It is hoped that since it is a peer-instructed program, the power balance in class discourse is distributed between all students more equally than in regular lectures. First introduced in 2017, it was updated in 2018 to incorporate evaluation and certification mechanisms, aimed at improving quality of GTA instruction, curriculum creation, session content quality, and with the hope that certifying the GTAs experience can become useful in their future careers.

#### GTA Sessions

Broadly speaking, there are four types of sessions offered in the GTA program: English-language sessions,

EMI sessions, non-English Language-sessions, and special events.

#### A) English-language Sessions

These are sessions focused on specific aspects of language learning. Some sessions offered in 2018 were: Elementary Presentation Techniques, Pronunciation Clinic, Elementary Writing Techniques, English Discussion, and Lunchtime English Discussion.

#### B) EMI sessions

The Mi-room's EMI sessions are designed so the syllabus is organized around content, not grammar (Thornbury, 2017). Sessions that were held in 2018 were: the "English Through" series such as Drama and Theater, Music, Film, Anime, Cultures, Sports, and the more advanced-level sessions of Current Affairs and News Talk. Content was decided in the beginning of the semester and was developed by the students as part of their GTA training.

#### C) Non-English Language Sessions

The primary function is to expose students to new languages cultures and different ways of thinking. The beginner sessions were focused on basic writing and conversational phrases while learning about culture and customs, and intermediate sessions were intended for students with a solid foundation in the language to improve students' various language skills. Examples of languages taught in 2018 were: Vietnamese, Czech, Thai, German, Dutch, Persian, Malay, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Polish, French, Hindi, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, and Tagalog.

#### D) Special Events

These sessions were organized to allow for the facilitation of sessions that didn't fit within the regular sessions schedule, but were considered important as a part of the GTA program. Some of the sessions that were offered were: Chinese Calligraphy, Taiwanese Pop Culture, Experiences as an International Volunteer, Introducing Kansai Dialect, and Differences Between Christianity and Islam.

#### 4. Painting a Picture of Mi-room Users

The purpose of this section is to try and illustrate the types of students that use the Mi-room and what their motivations for using the Mi-room might be. It also uses the feedback of GTA program users to try and get a better picture of why they joined sessions, how often they partook, and their opinions of its effectiveness.

It important to note that participants were not required to complete the survey, and as so, the findings may not be fully representative of all users of the GTA program.

**Table 01. Undergraduate student usage figures of Mi-room (facilities) 2018**

Faculty	1	2	3	4	Total
Law	73	40	40	32	185
Letters	127	81	201	59	468
Economics	91	47	11	10	159
Business and Commerce	124	65	35	18	242
Sociology	83	53	30	13	179
Policy Studies	15	13	27	25	347

	9	6			
Foreign Language Studies	90	10	11	15	126
Health and Well-being	15	15	20	4	54
Informatics	18	4	6	14	42
Societal Safety Sciences	9	3	1	13	26
Engineering Science	9	3	9	14	35
Environmental and Urban Engineering	6	27	3	5	41
Chemistry, materials and Bioengineering	20	8	21	8	57
Total	824	492	415	230	1961

63% of users were undergraduate students and of those, 42% were first-year students. The majority of students were from the Faculties of Policy Studies, Letters and Business and Commerce, and the greatest overall use was by students of the Faculty of Letters. Although the majority of Mi-room activities are language-oriented, the students from the Faculty of Foreign Language Studies seem somewhat underrepresented. One possible reason for this is proximity; the faculty is located at the opposite end of the Senriyama campus to the Mi-room.

**Table 02. Other users of the Mi-room (facilities) 2018**

Post-graduate Students	295
------------------------	-----

Exchange Students	751
Language-school Students	48
Researchers	51
Total	1145

Post-graduate and exchange students make up a significant proportion (34%) of Mi-room users, but their motivations are likely to be slightly different. Post-graduate students are participating in sessions, but are also likely to be receiving advice regarding studying abroad and future career opportunities, these services being offered in collaboration with the international affairs department. They may be also availing of such services as writing workshops and one-to-one counseling about their dissertations offered by certain Kansai University professors, not as part of the GTA program.

While international students actively participate in sessions, especially to encourage their friends leading sessions, international students are known to frequent the Mi-room main area when they are not attending class. It serves as a social area where they can connect with their friends, and it also serves as a living area for them when they are away from their dormitories. It helps provide an area of safety and stability to the international students daily lives. Japanese students have reported that the sheer energy and number of international students in the Mi-room at times can actually put off new Japanese participants due to what they mistakenly take as an intimidating atmosphere.

**Table 03. GTA Session-participants 2018**

Session Type	Total	Spring	Fall
English	1827	667	1160
Non-English	941	369	572
Total	2768	1036	1732

Session demand is predominantly for English sessions at 66%, however it can be seen that there is also steady interest and demand in other languages, with demand at 36% in the spring and 33% in the fall. An international perspective developed by participation in both types of sessions is paramount to students becoming more cross-culturally competent, and improving student mobility at Kansai University.

**GTA Program Participants Survey**

A survey of participants was conducted at the end of the spring semester of 2018 and again the fall semester. The data was analyzed, and highlights of the findings are shown below.

**Participation**

The largest session-participation rate by faculty is the Faculty of Letters with 23.5%. The participants were overwhelmingly Japanese, at a rate of 80%. Of these students, over 50% have studied overseas, and the majority plans to study abroad in the future.

**Frequency**

Over 50% of users attend once a month or less. Almost a quarter of the students use it once a week, while 20% of students were using the services every day. Approximately 45% of students are regular users, having frequent interaction with international students and languages, making them more culturally and linguistically aware.

## **Motivations**

The main reasons for participating in sessions were as follows: 1) to improve language skills 2) to make new friends 3) to experience other cultures. The findings are broadly in line with Mi-room objectives of learning autonomy, motivation, curiosity and cross-cultural competency.

## **Changes**

When asked of the effectiveness of sessions, 55% of the spring participants said they felt a difference after attending a session, while 81% of the fall semester participants said they felt a difference. Actual benefits from participating in sessions include a new perspective, new knowledge, and a chance to improve their language skill.

## **Preferences**

English discussion was the most popular, followed by lunchtime discussion and film discussion. Participants felt these sessions were easier to participate in, since their content was more casual than some other sessions, in particular EMI sessions. The most popular non-English language sessions were Chinese, followed by Korean. European languages such as Spanish and German were also popular. These languages are all officially offered as courses in Kansai University, which is likely to be a factor in their higher attendance rates.

## **Awareness**

Participants said that awareness of Mi-room activities among students was still relatively low, and say that there would be better activity-participation if the profile and presence were raised. While some

said they were kept up to date with posters and fliers on campus, as well as notifications from the university information system, their preferred method of staying informed was through various social media applications such as Facebook, Instagram, LINE and Twitter.

## **Requests**

Survey participants said they wanted more speaking skills sessions, as well as more culture exchange events. More effort will be made to accommodate the students' needs, and increase the awareness of the dual-function of language and cultural learning of non-English sessions.

## **5. Future Developments**

The Mi-room has made progress in the development of an international multilingual-immersion environment, and giving students a place to find their voices, but there is still much that needs to be done. There are two areas in particular being considered at the Mi-room for 2019: expansion of Mi-room facilities and increased tangible benefits from session attendance.

### **Expansion**

While sessions have been held on other campuses such as the Sakai and Takatsuki MUSE and Takatsuki campuses, there is not a permanent presence on any of them. It is hoped that a more permanent solution will be achieved over the coming year. Response was positive from students on each campus, but logistical issues still need to be overcome.

There has also been experimentation with English-language sessions in one of the student dormitories in fall of 2018, which were well received. The expansion of these activities to other dormitories can

increase the range of exposure to the Mi-room experience to students who cannot attend regular sessions. It also has potential to reach a wider audience, and students that have historically not show any interest in learning languages.

### **Tangibility**

The walk-in nature of sessions is great for students who want to fit language learning around their busy schedule. However, there is also a desire for something tangible to compliment attending sessions. It is hoped to address some of these issues with introducing the following initiatives.

### **Global SD (Student Development) Training**

The mechanisms to support the introduction of a Global SD (Student Development) training program, modeled off the Global FD (faculty Development) program already in place in Kansai University is planned for 2019. The program will be developed in collaboration with the Global FD training staff, which will advise on developments and suggest improvements to the program. The program will focus on developing critical thinking and awareness, organizational skills, preparing effective academic presentations, and delivering academic presentations.

### **KUGF Program Integration**

Students' Mi-room participation rates can be greatly improved if they can see the association between attending sessions and how it is of benefit to them. As such, an individual recording system is being developed to help keep track types and frequency of sessions attended by students. This recording system can be used by professors interested

in incorporating this data into their students' overall grade, as part of homework assignments or non-contact hours. Students can see the benefits, and make the connection between the theoretical and applied sides of languages.

### **References**

池田圭子、ベラルガオリバー (2018) 『大学教育の国際化—EMI 科目開講の充実とグローバル FD の取組の展開—』, 関西大学高等教育研究 第9号, pp85-90

Thornbury, S. (2017) "30 Language Teaching Methods", Cambridge University Press