

Global Teaching Assistants and Peer-driven Language Instruction in a Multilingual Environment

Brian Murray (Kansai University, Division for Promotion of Educational Development)

Keywords: EMI, SAL, SALC, GTA, MI-ROOM

1. English-medium Instruction in Japan

Universities in non-English-dominant countries worldwide are increasing their use of English for teaching and learning (Bradford & Brown, 2018). With more than a third of Japanese universities offering English-medium instruction (EMI) (MEXT, 2015), it is already well established as a learning approach. Self-access learning (SAL) is also in the forefront of Japanese higher-level institutions' language learning programs. Universities throughout Japan are improving student facilities by providing self-access learning centers (SALC) on-campus. Higher education institutions (HEI) in the Kansai area have specially appointed facilities focusing on SAL or EMI, such as the "English Village" at Kindai University, "Beyond Borders Plaza" in Ritsumeikan University, and the "language LOFT" at Konan University, as well as the "Mi-room" at Kansai University.

2. The Mi-room

The multilingual immersion (Mi) room at Kansai University was established in 2015 to give students a place they can feel comfortable in speaking and communicating through English. Japanese university students often state that one of the main differences between high school and university is the freedom to choose the subjects they want to learn. The Mi-room lets them choose what they want to learn in an informal, yet organized environment. It has evolved to provide multiple language sessions on top of English-mediated sessions, as well as culturally focused special sessions. This program is now called the global teaching assistant (GTA) program, and allows international students a unique, interesting and challenging way to learn while teaching others.

3. SAL and EMI in the Mi-room

The Mi-room is focused on providing self-access language learning (SALL)

solutions to the students of Kansai University. SALL is learning a language through the use of a self-contained learning environment, which provides an independent study programme with readily accessible materials. (Klassen, Detaramani, Lui, Patri, & Wu, 1998). The GTA program is SALL and the programs provided at the Mi-room are EMI sessions, and are led by dedicated international students called GTA.

Table 1. GTA Numbers by Year

Academic Year	2018	2019
Total number of GTAs	61	50
Number of countries represented by GTAs	22	18

4. Global Teaching Assistants

The Mi-room is staffed by GTAs, consisting of international exchange students, specially selected and placed in charge of English-mediated sessions, or walk in classes, provided in the Mi-room. They are hired on a semester basis and are invited to apply again to work if they plan to study at the university for more than a semester. They work in pairs, teaching their session type for sixty minutes. Pairs are selected, as far as is practical, by choosing an international student from the west and an international student from the east.

Table 2. GTA Nationalities by Region - 2018

Region	Country
Europe	Egypt, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, UK
North America	United States
South America	Brazil, Ecuador
Asia-Pacific	Afghanistan, Australia, China, Hong Kong, India, Kyrgyzstan, Philippines, Malaysia, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam

Table 3. Representative Nationalities by Region - 2019

Region	Country
Europe	France, Germany, Switzerland, Turkey, Egypt, UK
North America	USA, Mexico
South America	Brazil
Asia-Pacific	Afghanistan, China, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, South Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand

5. Promoting International Diversity

Although language instruction is the

primary mission of the Mi-room, another of the missions of the Mi-room is to promote international diversity and cultural exchange. Thus, a mix of nationalities and personalities are selected to work as GTAs to give a more realistic reflection of the contemporary world.

6. MI-room Sessions

Sessions are walk-in classes provided to registered students free of charge. These sessions require no reservation and students are free to enter sessions according to their own schedule. GTAs work in pairs and are in charge of sessions held in the Mi-room. Each session is designed to be independent of the previous or following session, allowing for effective student participation.

Table 4. List of Session Types

Session Type	English-mediated language-centered session
	English-mediated content-centered session
	Other-language-centered language session
	English-mediated content-centered special events

6.1. English-mediated Language-centered Session

These are sessions focused on specific aspects of language learning.

Some sessions offered in 2019 were: TOEIC Seminar, Pronunciation Clinic, Writing Workshop, Business English, and Tricky Grammar.

6.2. English-mediated Content-centered Session

The goal of these sessions is to expand participants' vocabulary and improve spoken proficiency in various areas. They also aim to improve international awareness among local students and improve cultural competency of participants.

Table 5. 2019 Sessions

Regular Sessions	Themed	“English Through...” series
Current Affairs		Drama & Theater
English Discourse		Anime
News Talk		Movies
English Discussion		Culture
In the News		Music
International Affairs		Hospitality
		Film
		Popular culture



Fig. 1 English-mediated content-centered session - English Through Culture Session “Religion in Malaysia”

6.3. Other-language language-centered Session

The primary function is to expose students to new languages cultures and different ways of thinking. Recurring languages like Chinese and Korean are consistently popular among participants, and less familiar languages like Kyrgyz, Turkish and Javanese are available semester to semester. Examples of languages taught in 2019 were: Korean, Spanish, German, Chinese, French, Tagalog, Urdu, Kyrgyz, Russian, Bahasa, Javanese, Arabic, Malay, Portuguese and Thai.

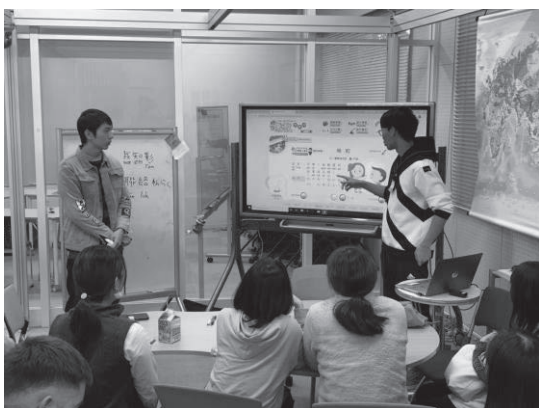


Fig. 2 Other-language Language-centered Session –Beginners Chinese

6.4. English-mediated Content-centered Special Session

English-mediated content-centered special sessions are one-off events and are received very well by participants. The range of topics covered is wide. Some of the sessions that were offered were: Visual Writing, American’s Four-Course Meal, Broadway: Musical Theatre, How to Behave in South Korea: Table Drinking and Business Manners, British Small-town Life and Culture, An insight into Punk and Hardcore Subculture, Fantastic French Sweets, Welcome to the World of K-POP! Explore the Secret of Egyptian Hieroglyphs, Taiwan Night Market Culture, Introducing Guy Fawkes, and Local Attractions in Malaysia!



Fig. 3 Special Event – Introducing Guy Fawkes

7. About Global Teaching Assistants (GTA)

GTA’s are in charge of their sessions and

are responsible for creating their content for their sessions in their pairs. They create a syllabus for each course they are in charge of and it is checked for appropriateness before content is developed. Each session is designed to be independent of the previous or following session, allowing for students to walk-in and participate.

8. GTA Feedback – Instructors Perspective

A focus group was held with 11 GTAs from the fall semester of 2019. Afterwards they were asked to complete an individual survey based on the focus group discussion. Data is outlined section by section and observations are outlined below.

8.1. Teaching

91% of GTAs think teaching is interesting. However, this number lowers considerably to 54% when asked how pleasant it is. 100% agree that teaching encourages them to be creative, and 82% state that it gave them the opportunity to use a variety of skills. 100% of GTAs agreed that the experience teaching as a GTA gave them an opportunity to advance their career, while 63% said that teaching in the Mi-room provided them an opportunity to help others learn.

8.2. Sessions and Content

91% of GTAs said they took responsibility for planning their lessons. 72% of said they

had the freedom to make their own decisions for the sessions and content. 36% disagreed, while 36% agreed with wanting a predetermined syllabus. 73% disagreed with the idea that all of the content should be decided for them. 45% agreed that preparing for regular sessions was difficult, while 45% disagreed with preparing for special events was difficult. 64% said that it was difficult to keep the participants interested.

8.3. Participants

Participation in Mi-room sessions is voluntary, and when asked, 55% said they strongly agreed that participants were motivated to learn. While 36% remained neutral, nobody disagreed. Asked if the students' English level of English was appropriate for the session it was a split of 36% agreeing and 36% disagreeing. 45% of participants were deemed to participate actively in the session, while 18% disagreed. 45% of participants were determined to be too shy, versus 36%. 36% said participants didn't speak enough, while 36% said they did. 55% of responses agreed that the English level ability between the Japanese participants and other international participants varied greatly.

8.4 Workplace

91% strongly agreed that liked the people they worked with, and 82% also strongly agreed that they got along with them.

100% agreed that their colleagues stimulated them to do better work, however only 45% of them strongly agreed. 54% agreed that their colleagues give them suggestions and feedback about their teaching. 91% of them said that they had made lasting friendships with other GTAs and staff.

73% said that their interests are similar to those of their colleagues.

9. GTA Feedback - Observations

9.1 Teaching

It is clear from the data that GTAs have enjoyed their experience overall, but have become more aware of what goes on in the background of teaching, such as preparation and practice, as well as reflecting on the process and how to improve. Some GTAs complained of the time required to prepare effective lessons and materials. Through their experience in the Mi-room they felt they were able to further their career prospects, and the experience of public speaking will help them in the future, as well as the certificate they receive upon completion.

9.2 Session Content

Students considered themselves responsible for lesson preparation. It shows a sense of pride and responsibility in their role as a GTA. However, there was an occasional voice of discontent. One GTA

commented that their partner failed to prepare for lessons and didn't communicate with them.

It is clear that they found it easier to prepare for special sessions than for regular sessions. This is likely due to the fact that they had full freedom to present about something they were familiar with and passionate about. However, finding original and engaging activities for regular sessions to keep participants engaged was more difficult than they had anticipated.

9.3 Participants

The majority of participants were motivated to learn, but the figure is lower than expected. This is likely connected to the definition of participation. Japanese students can show respect to the teacher by not speaking and listening intently, but European and North American GTA may see this as disinterest. Cultural differences in learning will have to be explained in more detail in the coming GTA program.

Much needs to be done to clarify levels of difficulty and appropriateness for both GTAs and participants. It is fair to assume that many of the participants under or overestimate their own language ability.

Thus, a more comprehensive explanation of session content and choosing appropriate sessions to participate in will be helpful in the future. As a consequence, there are plans to introduce reference levels based on CEFR.

9.4 Workplace

The fact that GTAs got along so well is very encouraging. They can support each other and give each other suggestions and advice. The GTA program provides domestic and international students with a like-minded network of global friendships that they are likely to foster moving forward, improving internationalization at home and abroad.

References

Bradford, A., Brown, H., (2018) English-Medium Instruction in Japanese Higher Education: Policy, Changes and Outcomes, Multilingual Matters

MEXT (2015) 平成25年度の大学における教育内容の改革状況について [about the state of affairs regarding university reforms to education in 2013].

(http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/koutou/daigaku/04052801/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2015/09/10/1361916_1.) (Accessed 17 January 2020)

Klassen, J., Detaramani, C., Lui, E., Patri, M., & Wu, J. (1998). Does self-access language learning at the tertiary level really work? *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 8, 55-80. Retrieved from <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ajelt/vol8/art4.htm>