

The Development and Effects of a University English Immersion Camp

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One of the features of the English Program of Utsunomiya University is a 3-day immersion program called "Honors Camp" for students that have TOEIC scores of 650 and above. This program not only offers the students a meaningful and practical forum to communicate ideas and opinions in English, but it also helps them to explore their cultural identities while demonstrating their creativity and critical thinking skills. There are four main activities in the program: (a) cultural sites, (b) a skit night, (c) a debate project, and (d) a poster presentation based on a research paper. In this article we describe the Honors Camp program in detail, discuss the camp's important role of preparing students to meet the challenges of globalization, examine extensive student feedback via pre- and postcamp survey questionnaires, and discuss the issues that have arisen from the camp.

宇都宮大学の英語プログラムでは、TOEIC 650点以上の学生を対象に3日間のオナーズキャンプ(Honors Camp)というプログラムを設けている。このプログラムでは、学生たちに実用的な英語を使用しながらアイデアや意見交換の場を提供するだけでなく、自身のアイデンティティの再考察や想像力、批判的に考える能力(critical thinking skills)等をも養成する。このプログラムでは主に4つのアクティビティ(cultural sites, a skit night, debate, poster presentation)を提供する。本論では、オナーズキャンププログラムの詳細、グローバル人材の育成のためのキャンプの重要な役割、キャンプ前後に行ったアンケート調査集計結果、そしてこれから解決していかなければならない課題を述べる。

Faculties at universities across Japan are facing challenges of globalization and trying to create citizens who can operate in an international environment. In 2013, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) decided to promote foreign language education reform in schools with a new policy called the "English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization," looking toward the 2020 Olympics. These reforms have the goals of raising global citizens willing and able to communicate effectively with people from different backgrounds as well as promoting practical English language skills such as expressing opinions, giving presentations, negotiating and persuading, and clarifying ideas.

The English Program of Utsunomiya University (EPUU) is designed to help students develop the necessary skills and international mindsets that will facilitate working and living in today's global environment. One of the components of the program is a special curriculum called Honors English for students that get over 650 points on the TOEIC placement test. Honors students usually fall into three groups: foreign students (27% in 2017), returnees who have had some or most of their education in a foreign country, and Japanese students who have a higher than average grasp of the English language. Starting in the 1st year, honors students are exempted from regular freshmen English courses and go straight into 2nd-year advanced English courses. The Honors program includes options such as a special Honors class, which they can take each semester, weekly conversation clinic classes, and an intensive English immersion camp.

The English immersion camp is held at a national youth education facility. The site provides secure sleeping arrangements, bedding, a buffet-style cafeteria, sports facilities, and amenities for the camp's activities. Costs are kept to an absolute minimum for the students by using this national facility and also by having staff salaries and transportation provided by the university.

About the Camp

Concept and Purpose

The English immersion camp is an important component in the Honors program. Studies have indicated that important factors for promoting successful, practical language use are the quality and amount of input, use in authentic contexts, the frequency of use, and meaningful sociocultural interaction (Clement et al., 2003; Dekeyser, 2000; Ward, 2013). The Honors Camp gives the students an opportunity to experience intensive, practical English, especially spoken English, in an authentic and safe environment outside the classroom.

Learner beliefs concerning motivation and confidence can be important factors for successful language learning. Tanaka and Ellis (2003) stated that being able to use English extensively for authentic communicative purposes during overseas experiences can foster confidence and motivation in Japanese English learners. It can be argued that English immersion camps can replicate the positive aspects of overseas experiences. Shiratori (2017) found that the experiences and the environment created by immersion camps in Hokkaido also had a positive effect on the participants' confidence, interest, and motivation, similar to the results from overseas language programs.

Another goal of the camp is to build the students' willingness to communicate with people outside their own social groups. Yashima (2002) labeled this a student's "international posture" and described it as having an interest in international affairs, a willingness to go overseas, a readiness to interact with foreigners, and an openness towards people with different backgrounds. A positive international posture motivates students to learn and increases a willingness to communicate with people in a foreign language. This in turn increases confidence (Yashima & Zenuk-Nishide, 2008).

More specifically, the camp's activities are aimed at improving the students' cultural awareness, including reflection of who they are as a cultural-self, which is one of the cornerstones of intercultural communicative competence (ICC). This important area of ICC is the ability to understand cultures, including one's own, and use this understanding to communicate with people from different backgrounds who do not share one's own common sense views of the world (Corbett, 2003). Being aware of one's "cultural-self," one's own cultural rules and biases, helps in this communication process.

To promote this kind of attitude and understanding, the themes of the camp are either *Japanese Culture* or *Japanese Identity* and all the main activities are focused on these topics. One activity includes conducting individual research exploring an aspect of culture or identity and then having to explain or summarize that topic verbally to an

audience in a presentation. Another activity gets the students to take a position on an issue in a debate and then to scrutinize and explore all the differing perspectives and opinions that come up. Often, they have to take positions that are in opposition to their real beliefs. In another activity, skits are organized to promote an understanding of differing contexts, perspectives, and the influence of each person's background.

However, the camp organizers believe that every person is different, and learning about cultures is a complicated phenomenon. Shaules (2007) concluded from his study of "deep cultural learning" that everyone resists, accepts, and adapts to varying degrees in different settings so it is important not to moralize about what should happen. He suggested that an awareness of this salient process is what facilitates culture learning, and it is an ongoing process without end state or final goal. In the camp, we can put students in a situation where they are stimulated to think more deeply about the effects of culture with people they are forming bonds with. It is hoped that this creates a curiosity toward intercultural encounters and facilitates learning more about themselves and others.

Lastly, the camp creates a fun language-learning environment that is vastly different from regular language classrooms. Here, all the participants can form lasting relationships and break down the barriers to communication and misunderstanding that can often emerge in a more formal educational context. The camp gives the students the opportunity to

- experience authentic English communication with a variety of people for almost 3 full days without the expense of going overseas,
- learn to communicate ideas and opinions, and
- demonstrate creativity and critical thinking skills.

Description of the Camp

Honors Camp is a 3-day intensive language program worth two credits and is held once a year during the summer break. It is an English-only environment from the time the students gather for their first precamp meeting to the final awards ceremony that recognizes special team efforts. Working individually, one-on-one with their teachers, and in small groups, students participate in language projects that require speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in English. All activities and projects are aimed at helping the students enjoy using English while building relationships with other students and with their teachers.

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The preparation starts at the beginning of the semester with recruitment for the camp. Recruitment is primarily done at the orientation meetings for new Honors students at the beginning of the academic year when students are encouraged to sign up for this optional program within the first five or six weeks of the semester. After recruitment has finished, the students are divided into teams of seven or eight. They are assigned a team leader and an assistant leader who are English teachers at the university. The teams have preparation meetings that start a few months before the camp. In these meetings the teams get to know each other, create social media contacts, and prepare for the main activities of the camp. Students are encouraged to meet on their own outside the official meetings with their team leaders.

There are four main projects in the program. The first project requires students to research and be a tour guide about local cultural sites. The second is a skit night. Students decide on and perform a skit based on a situation that could be interpreted differently depending on the students' cultural backgrounds and perspectives. The third is a debate. Students are put into teams to debate on cultural issues such as "Globalization is good for the future of Japan." Finally, the students give a research poster presentation based on the theme of the camp.

Cultural Sites Project

The first main activity is visiting cultural sites by bus on the way to and back from the camp. Students research about these cultural sites in their groups before they visit them. Either teams are assigned to be tour guides for one particular site or there is a team quiz competition to see which team can answer the most questions about the sites. Each site is chosen for its cultural value relating to history, famous people, and/or folklore. The sites are mainly in Tochigi Prefecture or in neighboring Fukushima Prefecture where the campsite is located. As well as being a fun way of letting the students get to know each other better, this activity correlates with the purposes of the camp as it increases specific knowledge of Japan and highlights the important influence that the country's history has had on modern Japan.

Skit Night

The next main activity is called Skit Night. Students think of a well-known scene from a movie, book, TV program, children's folktale, or Japanese history. The skits are short, about five minutes each, and all members must be involved. The students are told to

think of something that could be interpreted differently, depending on whether the watchers are Japanese or non-Japanese. Each team performs the skit twice, first from a Japanese perspective and then from a non-Japanese perspective. The skits highlight the fact that people from different backgrounds can have different perspectives, and the purpose is to stimulate the students to think about the influence of their own cultural identity and empathize with people from different backgrounds.

Debate

One of the most rewarding yet challenging activities is the debates. Students debate issues relating to the theme of the camp. This past year, for example, the topics, based on the theme of Japanese society, were "Japanese culture has become too westernized" and "To preserve Japanese culture, Japan's strict immigration policies should not be changed." This activity is designed to get the students to think more deeply about cultural influences, to challenge their own beliefs, and to understand there are many facets to these complicated issues. Although the debate can take a lot of the student's preparation time before the camp, it is an effective team-building exercise, and all group members are expected to participate in the research, strategy planning, and presentation stages. Both the students and staff judge and decide the winning team of each debate immediately after the conclusion.

Poster Presentation

The last main activity is the poster presentations. An academic paper, based on the theme of the camp, must be handed in before the camp and the presentations done at camp are the summaries of these academic papers. Students display their posters in different locations and present to a rotating group audience for approximately six minutes. Each student presents up to eight or nine times. The posters are printed at the university and taken to the camp. During this activity, students listening to the presentations are also evaluated based on their questions, comments, and active participation. For Japanese students, this activity directly corresponds to cultural self-awareness as they are required to understand and explain aspects of their own society. For the non-Japanese students, it is a good way to get to know Japan and its people better. Because there is a diverse range of topics, all participants (both students and staff) are exposed to a wide range of cultural knowledge and differing worldviews.

Survey

To further develop and evaluate the camp, pre- and postcamp surveys have been administered since the program started in 2012 (see the Appendix for the complete survey). The two surveys were primarily designed not only to collect feedback on the participants' experiences but also to elicit participant preferences about the camp, which could then be fed back into future planning for improvement to increase participant satisfaction. The surveys also collected data about the impact of the camp on the students' confidence in using English and their attitudes toward learning the language.

Students' Perceived Confidence in Using English

Honors Camp focuses on skills such as discussion, debate, academic writing, and presentation. One section of the survey (Figure 1) asked students about their confidence toward using English and learning the aforementioned skills before and after the Honors Camp. There were six statements to be rated on a 10-point Likert scale. The scale ranged from 1 (*no confidence at all*) to 10 (*very confident*).

- | | |
|-----|---|
| Q 1 | I can survive in an English-only environment. |
| Q 2 | I can debate in English. |
| Q 3 | I can express my opinions in English. |
| Q 4 | I can make a presentation in English. |
| Q 5 | I can write an academic paper. |
| Q 6 | I can explain Japanese culture. |

Figure 1. Pre- and postcamp survey questions about students' perceived confidence in using English. Participants responded to each statement with a number from 1 *no confidence at all* to 10 *very confident*.

Table 1. Perceived Confidence Pre- and Postcamp Survey Results, by Year

Q#	2012 n = 20		2013 n = 21		2014 n = 26		2015 n = 27		2016 n = 25	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1	5.3	7.3	6.2	8.3	6.0	6.7	6.1	7.3	5.3	7.2
2	5.0	7.1	5.7	7.3	4.7	7	5.4	6.9	4.6	6.0
3	5.4	6.8	5.8	7.7	5.3	6.7	5.7	7.1	5.0	6.4
4	5.4	6.9	6	8.1	6.1	7.7	5.4	7.8	5.8	7.4
5	5.4	6.4	5.8	7.5	6.9	6.8	5.8	7.2	5.9	7.3
6	5.4	6.5	5.5	7.3	5.0	6.2	4.9	6.8	4.8	6.6
Mean	5.3	6.8	5.8	7.7	5.7	6.8	5.5	7.2	5.2	6.8
Diff.	1.45		1.86		1.08		1.71		1.6	

Note. Responded to on a Likert scale from 1 *no confidence at all* to 10 *very confident*. Q = question; Diff. = the mean difference between the pre- and postcamp survey results per year.

The survey results in Table 1 show that the camp had a positive influence on the students' confidence to use English. Overall, the students' level of confidence for most of the criteria was significantly different before and after the camp. There were exceptions, for example, "I can write an academic paper" in 2014 (Question 5). Because there was limited student feedback concerning this matter, the reasons why are not known and further research is required.

The bar graph (Figure 2) shows the camp's impact on the students' feelings of confidence in using the language pre- and postcamp in 2016. It clearly shows the students' increased feelings of confidence using the language after attending the camp. The increased confidence can be seen in general terms, for example, "I can survive in an 'English Only' environment," and also in doing more focused activities in English, for example, "I can debate in English."

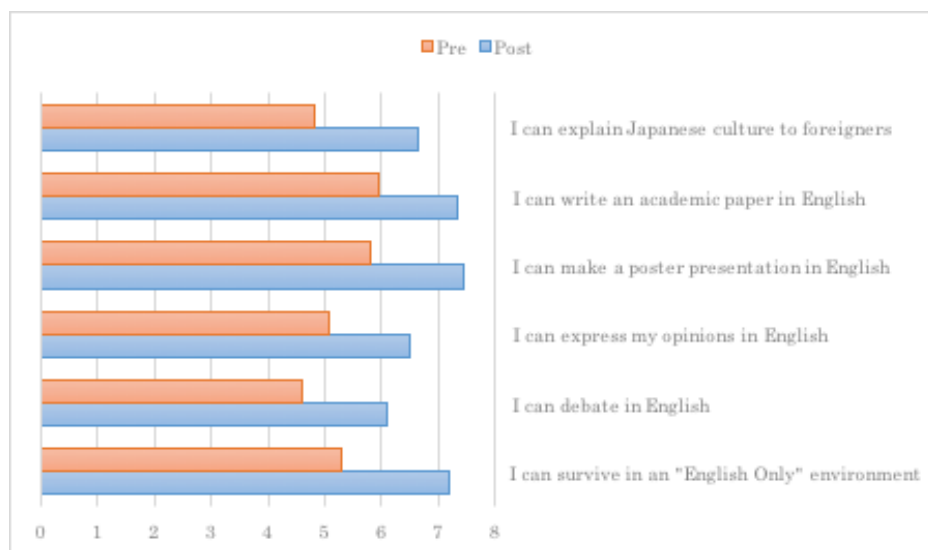


Figure 2. Students' perceived confidence in using English (2016), pre- and postcamp.

Attitudes Toward Learning English

The pre- and postcamp surveys were also aimed at measuring the impact of the camp on the students' attitudes toward learning English. Students were asked to respond on a 10-point Likert scale questionnaire. The scale ranged from 1 (*I don't need this skill*) to 10 (*This skill is very important*). The statements are in Figure 3.

- Q 18 Ability to discuss my opinions in a group.
- Q 19 Ability to make a presentation to a group.
- Q 20 Ability to write an academic research paper.
- Q 21 Ability to debate a topic.
- Q 22 Ability to explain Japanese culture.
- Q 23 Ability to explain how Japanese people think.

Figure 3. Statements on pre- and postcamp surveys about attitudes towards English skills. Participants responded with a number from 1 *I don't need this skill* to 10 *This skill is very important*.

Despite the sample sizes being quite small, some interesting results were unearthed from the data (Table 2). The students had positive attitudes before the camp as might be expected from high level learners, but overall, the students' attitude towards these skills were more positive after they had participated in the camp. Further research or analysis of the data is needed to find out why there is such yearly variance in the results. It is the authors' assumption that the results could be affected by the number of foreign and returnee students in the group.

Table 2. Attitudes to English Skills Pre- and Postcamp Survey Results, by Year

Q#	2012 <i>n</i> = 20		2013 <i>n</i> = 21		2014 <i>n</i> = 26		2015 <i>n</i> = 27		2016 <i>n</i> = 25	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1	8.2	9.7	9.0	9.2	9.4	9.6	9.0	9.1	8.8	9.6
2	7.7	9.5	8.9	9.2	9.0	9.5	9.1	9.0	8.7	9.3
3	7.6	9.5	8.3	9.0	8.9	9.1	8.2	8.8	8.7	9.1
4	8.0	9.8	8.9	9.2	9.1	9.5	8.9	9.1	8.4	9.3
5	7.5	9.3	8.0	9.1	8.7	9.3	8.6	8.9	8.5	9.0
6	7.1	9.3	8.1	9.2	8.8	9.2	8.6	8.8	8.3	9.0
Mean	7.6	9.5	8.5	9.2	9.0	9.4	8.7	8.9	8.6	9.2
Diff.	1.93		0.65		0.38		0.19		0.65	

Note. Responded to on a Likert scale from 1 *I don't need this skill* to 10 *This skill is very important*. Q = question; Diff. = the mean difference between the pre- and postcamp survey results per year.

Other Comments

Comments from the surveys indicate that students were very satisfied with the camp and had an overwhelmingly positive experience. Especially, a lot of students commented that the camp gave them confidence to operate in an English-speaking environment. The comments were originally written in English and have not been altered.

Before the camp I was afraid I wouldn't enjoy it because I'm not good at English. I was very nervous on the bus, but without my noticing, I soon was enjoying the activities. (Student A, Japanese, no overseas experience)

After the camp was finished, I realized that I can survive in English Only. Now, I think I can survive in another country. (Student B, Japanese, no overseas experience)

Honors camp gave me a lot of cool opportunities. I could experience debate for the first time . . . But I can say that it was an amazing time to spend 3 days with friends and teachers in English. And sure thing, that time improved my English skills and built my confidence a lot. (Student C, Japanese, spent 1 year in the U.S. as exchange student)

Honors Camp's "only english rule" was amazing. It creates a space for me to build my confidence speaking in english with my friends. During the camp I realized that everyone make mistakes and we should be confident with ourselves. (Student D, non-Japanese)

This camp gave me the chance to learn lots of important communication skills. (Student E, non-Japanese)

Issues

The camp has an English-only policy. Every year, it is expected that this policy will be difficult to enforce. Because of this, the coordinator is sanctioned to use penalties, such as deducting points from groups who use Japanese during team competitions. However, from the beginning, in the preparation meetings, students naturally used only English in the presence of the teachers. At camp, it is generally the students who self-police the rule; at times they even keep the teaching staff in line with the policy.

The goals of the camp are aimed at showing the effects of culture on a person's perceptions. The themes are either "Japanese identity" or "Japanese culture," alternating year by year. The skit night, debates, and academic paper along with the accompanying poster presentations are designed to explore these themes and encourage students to think more deeply about cultural issues. Because of the nature of some of the activities (such as the skit night, which requires a scene done from both a Japanese and non-Japanese perspective), sometimes students have fallen into the trap of oversimplification and this has resulted in projecting stereotypical, oversimplified ideas. This issue needs to be addressed in future camps in order to realign the outcomes of the activities with the purposes of the camp.

Conclusion

The camp is focused on giving and developing necessary skills and international mindsets that the students may need in order to work and live in today's global environment. First, it requires them to think more deeply about the effects of culture with the goal of creating a curiosity toward intercultural encounters. The camp also creates an environment where students can use the target language in authentic contexts and there is opportunity for meaningful sociocultural interaction. It supplements other more formal components of the English program such as classes and conversation clinic sessions.

Realistically, 3 days of English immersion will have a limited effect on the students' overall language ability and any changes would be difficult to measure. However, the data show that the experiences the students have and the environment created by the immersion camp have a positive effect on the students' attitudes towards English, especially in increasing their confidence in using the language. The feedback provided by the students also provides data for further development and keeps the organizers firmly focused on student satisfaction. The Honors camp is an important component of Utsunomiya University's English program that helps prepare the students for their future.

Bio Data

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Appendix

Before/After the Camp Survey

Answer these with a number from 1 to 10, with 1 being *no confidence at all* and 10 being *very confident*.

- 01 I can survive in an “English only” environment _____
- 02 I can debate in English. _____
- 03 I can express my opinions in English. _____
- 04 I can make a poster presentation in English. _____
- 05 I can write an academic paper in English. _____
- 06 I can explain Japanese culture to foreigners. _____

Answer these with a number from 1 to 10, with 1 being *not at all* and 10 being *very well*.

- 07 I know my team members. _____
- 08 I know the students who are on other teams. _____
- 09 I know my team leader. _____
- 10 I know the Japanese teachers. _____
- 11 I know the native speakers. _____

Answer these with a number from 1 to 10, with 1 being *sounds like a waste of time* and 10 being *sounds very useful*.

- 12 The camp theme “Japanese Culture” _____
- 13 Poster Sessions _____
- 14 Skit Night _____
- 15 Sight-seeing _____
- 16 Debate Night _____
- 17 Team Competition Challenge _____

Answer these with a number from 1 to 10, with 1 being *I don't need this skill* and 10 being *this skill is very important*.

- 18 Ability to discuss my opinions in a group. _____
- 19 Ability to make a presentation to a group _____
- 20 Ability to write an academic research paper. _____
- 21 Ability to debate a topic. _____
- 22 Ability to explain Japanese culture. _____
- 23 Ability to explain how Japanese people think. _____

Additional comments about your camp experience:

How many years have you lived outside Japan? _____

How many times have you travelled outside Japan? _____

What is your faculty and major? _____