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Tertiary Education in Japan: A Student's Personal Experiences

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日本における大学教育：一学生の個人的経験

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Abstract

The author, a graduate student in Japan, describes her experiences as a student in Samoa and Japan, and situations in both countries where she has had to use English as a second language for study and research. She also reports on her experience of Japanese as a third language for study and research, and her working relationships with local and foreign students at a university in Japan.

日本在住の大学院生である筆者は、サモアと日本における学生としての経験にもとづき、勉学と研究のための第2言語として英語を使用しなければならなかった両国の状況について説明する。そして、勉学と研究の第3言語としての日本語の経験ならびに日本の大学における日本人学生と外国人学生との研究上の交流関係についても報告する。

Research writing requires a lot of hard work and it has become a compulsory part of university education. Few students are seriously interested in being research writers. Learning about research in Japan has been different from my own experience in my own country, Samoa. In this paper I evaluate the cultural and practical issues I have faced in Japan. At the tertiary level in Japan, doing research is emphasized as the basis for learning about a particular theme. This helps us to understand more about a topic deeply. Although I don't like it, writing is an avoidable part of the research process. It is necessary for research communication and as a part of tertiary education.

English as a Second Language

In Samoa, English was introduced to us at the age of five. It became our second language and was used for teaching in schools. Although English was recommended for daily use I never had confidence in speaking it. English was only used at school, among students and teachers and between friends. It is an embarrassment if you know your English is not good; I remember some kids laughing at me when I

pronounced something wrongly. At home, we speak in our mother tongue with our parents according to our culture. Speaking in English makes people think I am smart especially when I visit my relatives in the remote areas. Talking to a European person signifies that you have a good education. I didn't believe that. English is just a universal language used to communicate widely and to understand others. As a second language it began to clash with my own language. I always think in English then try to translate it into Samoan. Japan is very different as people are more confident in speaking their own native language. Most Japanese people don't speak English. Japanese language is also encouraged for foreigners to study. It became my third language though a lot of difficulties have been faced. Living in a place with a Japanese culture and an international university, I find English and Japanese being used most of the time. Although contradictions in how language is used matter in research using English has made it possible for me to succeed in a different environment. I find English much more useful for my understanding. I have also experienced preferring English to my own native language for some kinds of expression. There is no lack of words with clear definition. English language has helped me so far and I expect it will in the future.

Student Experience in Samoa

I graduated in the year 1999 with a Bachelor of English Linguistics and Literature at the National University of Samoa. I survived through some good writing but it never meant I was smart at English language. I enjoyed my university life but academically there was more to learn. In my final year I was given a Language project. The aim was to compare how language was used in different areas of Samoa. This was to be carried out by recording people as talked, then later transcribing and translating their speech. This research was difficult and took a long time. The places I chose were, the playground, classroom, market place, the interviews of Miss Samoa Pageant and a village council meeting in a rural area. The results varied tremendously and were very interesting.

At one extreme the most difficult results were from the village council meeting. The elders speaking used the formal and very cultural or traditional Samoan language in their speeches; even I cannot understand it. A lot of translation was required, that is, from formal Samoan to simple Samoan then lastly to English. Even though the process of translation was hard English made the research easier to do; working with two languages was somehow interesting. This Linguistic research did allow me to learn a lot about language and our own local society. I found research relatively easy in Samoa because I understand the culture - the language, the people and their way of life. I was raised in that culture.

Studies at the Asia Pacific University (APU)

Of all countries, I chose Japan for further studies. The very different culture with fast development of technology was an environment I preferred for improving my education. I came to Japan through the Asia Pacific University and it became my second home. I find many differences in the learning environment at APU, compared to my previous university but my knowledge increases as I interact with other at this International University. Before coming to Japan I was told English will be used and I don't need to take Japanese. Unfortunately this was partially true because during enrolment, we found that Japanese language was essentially a compulsory course. It was worth four credits compared to the two credits of other courses. This was a risk I had to bear, although all the other courses were relevant and academically recommended. During our second year we were required to take an "Introduction to Research Survey Method" as a course. This was our first step in learning how to begin and conduct a research project. The course was a prerequisite for the "Methods of Social Research course in our third year. These courses were aimed at helping us develop our research and research writing skills. We were also encouraged to join Seminar or Research Project classes, in which we could develop our own research projects.

I decided to join the media seminar where most of us should make a film. Our class is composed of Koreans and half of others non-Asian countries. Each half became a separate working group. The non-Asian group in which I was a member, decided to make our film in English while the other group did worked in Japanese. There was no interaction between the two groups because of a communication breakdown. Members were not confident in speaking the language they were not good at, with members of the other group. At first we filmed a drama and it was quite simple because everyone understood English and came with a common understanding of what to do.

The second film I got involved with was difficult. I was with a Korean and a Japanese student doing a documentary about Beppu and APU relations. For me there was a problem with language but I tried really hard to understand as much Japanese I could. We planned to produce the film will be in English, so I wrote the script in English. Interviews with people were hard because they had to be conducted in Japanese. I and the Korean guy struggled when translating our questions into Japanese. When we went into the city, I felt so insecure because of my poor knowledge of Japanese language. I just stayed behind the camera pretending to understand everything. Practically, the results seemed great but we could not reach any real conclusion. The research reflected various biases and I know that people didn't always understand our questions or answer them truthfully. Translating their Japanese into English was huge work so we decided to present the documentary in Japanese with just an English title, at the start of the film.

I found APU students lacked in research skills and interest. I have friends who don't know how to write an abstract, bibliography, and so on. We have a lot to learn despite the problems with language. I noticed that many students practice plagiarism but this will not help them solve their problems. I meet students who depend on other students to do their work for them. Despite these problems, APU is a friendly environment to work in and to learn about different people.

Cultural and Practical Experiences in Japan

My learning experience at APU was a practical experience of learning in Japan. Through the research in Beppu city and sharing thoughts with other APU students, I found that the practical assignments were very effective for discovering the nature of research writing. There is no use in writing when there is nothing to write about. Actions are very useful and in through actions I could have new experiences that determined the results of our particular research. Our film project was inconclusive because the people interviewed appeared to be biased and dishonest in their responses. I believe this is part of the Japanese culture, to not say NO directly, because it is very impolite. This politeness of the culture really determines the way people think and they cannot directly answer the interview questions. This reflects their humility and respect but as researchers we failed to obtain any real result from our research.

Not a single person gave any negative opinions, contrary to our expectation. We needed a greater diversity of views in order to draw conclusions. The research results were not enough to test our thesis or argument. In this way I discovered that culture does determine the way we conduct research in Japan. The way of writing also affects our research. Of course, Japan is not the only place where we can find difficulties in doing research. Practical and Cultural problems associated with language can be found everywhere in the world. This doesn't mean it is impossible to obtain accurate results from research in Japan. Many people succeeded in doing research in Japan, even though they face the same problems.

Conclusion

Tertiary education in Japan has been a wonderful experience for me as a student. I learned a lot through studying in Asia Pacific University. This Institution has an international range of young adult students. The learning environment is unique. I could experience conducting a small research project in the local community and the university itself. Despite the language barrier, most projects succeeded in using both languages, English and Japanese. Japan in its nationalistic way maintains a firm hold on its language and culture. This cultural strength – the life of the people - affects how some research is conducted and written. I believe APU should aim to be a research institution where students interested in doing research can attend.

There are plenty of brilliant students but the University does not have enough resources to support them. Research writing should be encouraged in a tertiary institution. Most students just want to graduate and leave school. Nevertheless, focusing more on Research methods and skills might encourage more students to become involved in research. Though writing seem like an enemy, it can turn into something beautiful. From my experience in Japan, I am looking forward to do further research in the future.

