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Evaluating the effectiveness of an online pre-sessional course for Japanese and international university students

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This study explores the role of an online pre-sessional program in preparing students to matriculate into an English-medium bachelor's program at a Japanese university. The study covers two program sessions, the first of which consisted primarily of international students, and the second comprised mainly of graduates of Japanese high schools. To accommodate the wide range of students from both Japan and abroad, the instructors aimed to design a program that would introduce participants to the learner-centred, interdisciplinary curriculum of the bachelor's program, encourage the development of learner autonomy regarding language study and personal academic goals, and generally ease the transition to an English-medium curriculum. Assessment of the pre-sessional program is based on the first two sessions and includes both quantitative data (usage data drawn from the online platform and questionnaires issued at the end of each pre-sessional program), and qualitative feedback gathered through opened-ended comments on the questionnaires and focus group discussions held during the first or second semester after matriculation. Results highlight gaps between instructor goals and student expectations, as well as distinctly different patterns of participation that emerged in the two sessions, despite nearly identical content.

Keywords: pre-sessional program; English-medium instruction; higher education; distance learning; Japanese and international students



Introduction

This study examines the design, implementation, and evaluation of a 6–8 week online pre-session program (hereafter referred to as PSP) designed for Japanese and international students preparing to start an English-medium bachelor's degree program (EMDP) at a Japanese national university.¹ The PSP was implemented together with the launch of this new EMDP in 2017 as part of Japan's Top Global University Project (TGUP, aka SGU, or Super Global University), a ten-year initiative started in 2014 and funded through MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology). The project provides funding to 37 selected Japanese universities to pursue policies that aim to make them more competitive internationally. EMDPs contribute to this by increasing the number of international students and faculty studying and working in Japan.

The EMDP in this study accepts applications from both Japanese and international students, with the aim of achieving a fairly equal balance of secondary school graduates from both Japan and abroad. In keeping with the MEXT initiative to make Japanese undergraduate degree programs a reasonable option for international students, Japanese language ability is not required for admission, and there are no Japanese language requirements for graduation. For Japanese applicants, the EMDP is promoted as an opportunity to have an international experience without leaving the country, a strategy designed to address growing concerns that fewer Japanese students are studying abroad long enough to acquire competency in foreign languages, despite the increasing demand for “global human resources” (*guro-baru jinzai*) on the job market.²

The EMDP offers two enrolment periods each year. Those who matriculate in the fall (October) consist primarily of graduates of international schools in Japan or secondary schools abroad [hereafter referred to as the international group]. Those who matriculate in the spring (April) consist primarily of graduates of secondary schools in Japan [hereafter referred to as the Japanese group]. This study is based on two PSP sessions, conducted for the first two batches who enrolled in fall 2017 and spring 2018.³ An informal questioning of colleagues working at other universities across Japan suggests that pre-matriculation assignments typically take the form of extended readings and reports to be submitted at the beginning of the first semester. The PSP elaborated in this study is considerably different in design, learning resources provided to students, and the extent of instructor involvement.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the PSP based on student participation and feedback, thus drawing lessons for such programs in the future. Discussion considers demographics of participants, levels of participation, English language ability, and differences between participation patterns that emerged in the two sessions.

PSP design and methodology

With more and more students going abroad long-term to pursue undergraduate degrees, pre-sessional programs have become increasingly commonplace. Varying in length from a few weeks to several months, PSPs most often focus on the development of linguistic and cultural competence in the target environment as a crucial prerequisite for academic success among degree-seeking international students. Bradford (2013) notes that in European countries, where EMDPs have a much longer history, linguistic challenges are a primary concern because students who cannot manage course content in English may lead to instructors lowering academic standards. Copland and Garton (2011), in their study of international students studying in a PSP, assert that difficulties faced by international students, categorized into four groups (academic, social, cultural, and personal), are all lessened to some extent when students have stronger skills in the target language.

Drawing on both social sciences and natural sciences, the EMDP in this study emphasizes interdisciplinary studies, and offers students flexibility in creating an individualized curriculum incorporating two or more academic fields. This is considered one of the main strengths of the EMDP, but it is also one of the most challenging aspects, as it places a heavy burden on students to formulate goals and take initiative in the design of their own curriculum. Many students would also be in an English-medium academic environment for the first time, in a program in which small seminar classes rather than large lectures would be the norm. Others would be moving to a foreign country with no prior knowledge of the language. With these factors in mind, instructors were tasked with developing a PSP that would accomplish the following:

1. introduce the field of interdisciplinary studies.
2. familiarize participants with a learner-centred instructional approach.
3. promote learner autonomy regarding language skills and personal academic goals.
4. facilitate the transition to an EMDP and/or life in a foreign country.

The PSP would require participants to spend approximately four hours per week over a six to eight-week period and could not hope to approximate a typical on-site PSP, in which full immersion in the target language may lead to a significant jump in language skills prior to the start of a degree program. However, as Dewaele, Comanaru, and Faraco (2015) have shown, even a relatively short PSP can have an impact by significantly reducing Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) and increase Willingness to Communicate (WTC). In addition, findings by Thorpe *et al.* (2017), who examined the effectiveness of PSPs in preparing students with weak skills in the target language, suggest that establishing connections with students prior to matriculation may have a positive impact. In particular, they note the value of on-line study resources in areas such as teaching approaches and subject-specific language, in order to enable students to integrate more swiftly into an unfamiliar academic environment.

The PSP was designed and supervised by two full-time program faculty and



administered through Moodle, an online learning management system. Moodle was chosen because it can be accessed by computer, tablet, or smart phone, and does not require downloading of any special software. With the assistance of university technical support staff, participants' email accounts were registered on the system. During the week prior to the start of each session, students received instructions via email for registering in the program. Instructors, supported by university tech staff, assisted students with troubleshooting, and all were able to successfully access the system prior to its start. Because participants lived around the world in different time zones, no real-time group meetings were planned. Participants were asked to complete assignments in two areas: a community reading with online discussion, and language learning journals.

Participants

As mentioned above, this study is based on the first two cohorts which enrolled in fall 2017 and spring 2018. The first batch comprised 31 students representing 16 nationalities from Asia, Europe, Africa and North America. This group included 10 native or near-native speakers of English who were assessed as not requiring remedial English study (see below for details). Among this batch were four Japanese returnees who had completed at least one year of education outside of Japan. The spring group comprised 31 students, almost all graduates of Japanese high schools, including 5 native/near native speakers of English who would not require remedial English study (see below for details). This group included five Japanese returnees who had completed at least one year of education outside of Japan (see Table 1).⁴

Table 1. Participants

	International Group (Fall 2017) (graduates of international schools or other secondary schools abroad)	Japanese Group (Spring 2018) (primarily graduates of Japanese secondary schools)
Students not requiring remedial English study.	10	5
Students requiring remedial English study.	21	26
Total	31	31

Language preparedness was assessed using two diagnostic exams – an English language proficiency exam and a writing exam – administered during orientation week after the students had arrived on campus. Due to a shift in university policy, the proficiency exam administered to the international group was the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication, reading and listening components only), while the Japanese group took the GTEC (Global Test of

English Communication, reading and listening components only). Among the international group, 25 students took the TOEIC, and four scored below 600, the minimum score set by the EMDP needed to complete coursework in English. These students were advised to enrol in skill-based ESL classes (reading, listening, and/or speaking) as appropriate. Among the Japanese group, all 31 took the GTEC and seven students scored below 260, which according to the GTEC conversion chart is equivalent to a score of 600 on the TOEIC. These seven were also advised to enrol in skill-based ESL classes. All students in both groups took a diagnostic writing exam scored by two graders, who evaluated language, content, organization and cohesion. Those scoring below 60 on a scale of 100 (considered a passing score in the EMDP grading system) were advised to take one or more remedial courses in academic writing. This included 21 from the international group, and 26 from the Japanese group.⁵

PSP contents

Participants were asked to complete two tasks each week. First was a community reading, which consisted of completing an assigned reading and responding to discussion questions via online forums. The reading aimed to encourage participants to reflect on the meaning of interdisciplinary studies and share their thoughts in an interactive online forum similar to the seminar-style format of classes offered in the EMDP. The second task was to complete at least two hours of independent language study per week (either English or Japanese), and report progress via online journals accessible only to the participant and the instructors. The journal aimed to encourage learner autonomy regarding language skills and academic goals. It was also hoped that both tasks would facilitate the transition to the EMDP by allowing participants to get to know classmates and faculty prior to arriving on campus. The two tasks are described in more detail below.

For the community reading, the text selected was Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003), a nonfiction narrative which focuses on the work of Dr. Paul Farmer, who spent many years in Haiti working to improve healthcare. As Kidder makes clear, Farmer's success is due in large part to his dual academic background in medicine and anthropology, which allows him to understand health concerns within the broader context of socio-political issues. As such, he serves as a model for the strengths of interdisciplinary studies, which encourage problem-solving from a range of perspectives. Participants were provided with extensive study guides including background information, links to useful websites for further information, short summaries of each chapter, and vocabulary lists to aid ESL students. Discussion topics created based on Bloom's revised taxonomy were designed to encourage participants to apply a range of critical thinking skills (Anderson, 2014, p. 27–37). The taxonomy targeted three basic objectives: (1) knowledge and comprehension, (2) application and analysis, and (3) synthesis and evaluation (Appendix B). Instructors posted only minimal comments on the forums, in the hope that student voices would take centre stage. Participants were encouraged to not simply post comments,

but to read previous posts and respond to others. The community reading concluded with a final wrap-up session on campus during orientation week.

For the online journals, no specific assignments were given. Instead, instructors attempted to help students articulate their academic interests, and then guided them to related study material. A bank of language resources specifically related to first-year classes was created, including online flashcards and accompanying quizzes containing EAP (English for Academic Purposes) terminology developed with support from cooperating program faculty. Follow-up quizzes gave students an opportunity to test their ability to use the terms in context.⁶ Participants were encouraged to take initiative in studying from material on the Moodle page, or selecting other material to meet their language goals. Instructors used the online journals to pose questions or offer suggestions, answer specific questions related to language study, or simply to encourage participants to maintain a regular study schedule. Because students were moving into an English-medium program where they might have little or no guidance from language faculty on a regular basis, the development of learner autonomy was a key goal of the language journals.

Data collection

In the hope of evaluating different dimensions of participants' experiences, a triangulated methodology was used. First, quantitative performance data was drawn from data collected on the Moodle page, indicating how often participants visited the site, and what sections they viewed and participated in, or responded to. Second, participant feedback was elicited through structured questionnaires administered to both batches of students at wrap-up sessions during orientation week. Questions included the time that they spent on PSP each week, the activities they participated in, how much of the shared reading they completed, their opinion about the length of the program etc., and one open-ended question inviting comments on any areas not covered in the questions (Refer to Appendix A). Finally, the questionnaire responses from the two batches were used to develop further open-ended questions. These were then used as topics for focus group discussions combining all students from both fall and spring batches. Focus groups are used to collect data about the perception of participants, to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, idea, product or service. Stimulating interactions among group participants generate more information than individual interviews (Stewart and Shamdasani 2014). In this case of this study, it was hoped that focus groups might allow for topics not covered in the questionnaire to emerge. Focus groups were conducted six to eight weeks into the spring term, approximately eight months after the first PSP, and two months after the second one. Specifically, 13 focus groups of about 40 minutes each were conducted. Each group included 3 to 5 students, a mix of students from October and April batches. In the focus groups students were asked to define the goals of the PSP, and to reflect on connections to or similarities with the course content or general curriculum



of the program. All focus group discussions were recorded with the consent of the participants.



Results

As shown in figure 1a, about 61% of the international group strongly felt that the PSP helped them connect with their classmates prior to starting the EMDP. Many reported that they enjoyed being able to communicate with classmates before arriving on campus and interpreted this as a primary purpose of the PSP. As one student explained, “I really enjoyed being able to talk [and] discuss with my classmates before meeting everyone in person”. Overall, this group gave a range of responses when asked about the goals of the PSP, including the following:

For the instructors to understand the students’ background and perspectives, which would help professors design classes.

To help us get used to school work. To give us an idea (mental picture) of what to expect in the program. So that the classes don’t seem too foreign to us.

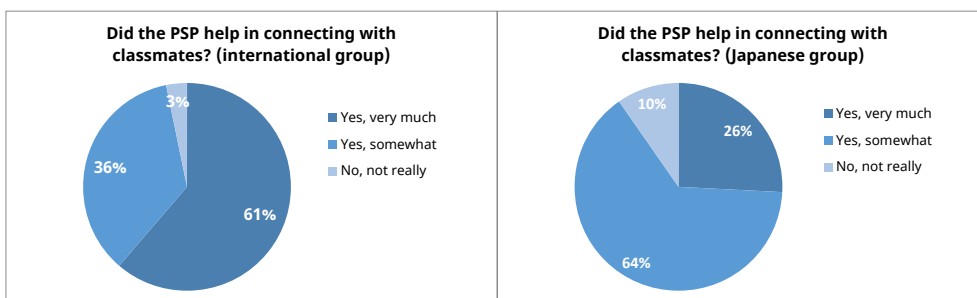
For us October students the language part (of the PSP) was more about, so you are coming to Japan and you must be able to write and read hiragana/katakana, you must know how to write your name.. for the documents etc....

In contrast, only 26% of Japanese group felt the PSP helped them connect with classmates (Figure 1b). Instead, the majority interpreted the primary purpose of the PSP as improvement of English abilities, especially regarding extended academic readings. Comments from the focus groups included the following:

I think getting English skills was the main goal.

To improve our English writing skills and learn how to write our opinion.

I think it was to brush up our English skills and to get used to reading English, since I believe most of the April students are not really used to reading English books.

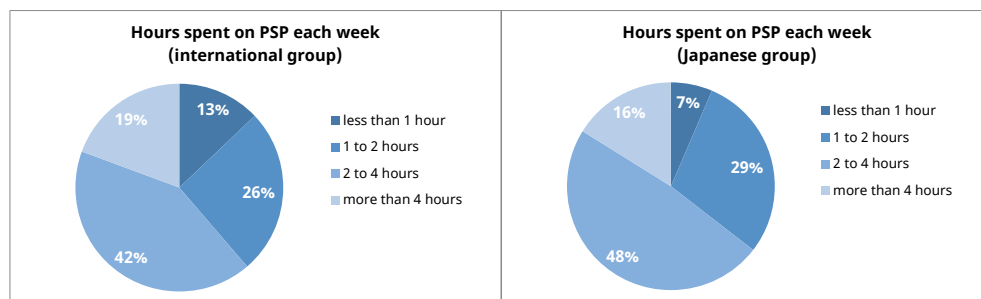


Figures 1a and 1b. Did the PSP help in connecting with classmates?

The component of the PSP that generated the most comments was the shared reading assignment, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. During the focus groups, students from both groups tried to interpret the goals of the PSP based primarily on this component. Most of the international students linked the themes of the book with the interdisciplinary framework of the EMDP. However, only a very small number of students from either batch reported completing the entire reading assignment. Many students emphasized how much dictionary work was needed to complete weekly reading assignments. As one student explained, “I felt that the vocabulary words used in MBM were too difficult and [I found it] made me hard to understand the contents.” “I think the book we were given was a little difficult.”

The participation rate in weekly discussion forums for the international group was high in the first week, with 93% of students responding to at least one question.⁷ However, the response rate began to fall consistently from the fourth week when it dropped to 64%, and eventually reached 38% by the final week (Week 8). 32% of participants participated consistently in the discussion every week until the end.

The Japanese group had a more regular response rate on group forums throughout the program. Approximately 80% attempted at least one discussion question every week, although a larger number chose the simpler questions which fell within the “Knowledge and Comprehension” category. (See Appendix B for sample discussion questions.)



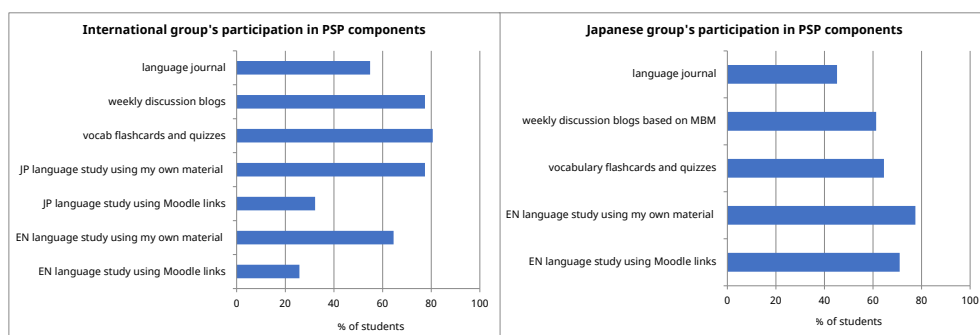
Figures 2a and 2b. Hours spent on PSP each week

A key difference between the two groups was the timing of postings. Although participants in the international group tended to post responses throughout the week, responses by the Japanese group were almost all posted on the last day of each week, shortly before the forum closed. Possible reasons for this are discussed later. During the focus groups students spoke about their participation in the discussion activity and admitted to not discussing the reading assignment sufficiently. As one student noted, “What they wanted us to do in the PSP is comment on each other’s responses; but I really did not do that. I did it just once.” Several commented that the same 4–5 students always took the lead in responding to the discussion questions. The students who posted later during the week would pick from the earlier responses, write a shorter version or simply copy from them.

Participation in language journals varied significantly between the two

groups. For both sessions, participants were asked to post at least once a week. Among the international group, approximately half completed at least five of eight assigned postings. Figure 3a shows that the participants in the international group spent most of their time on weekly discussion blogs, vocabulary flashcards and accompanying quizzes created for the PSP, and Japanese language study using outside material. Among those who posted less than half the time or not at all, reasons cited included full-time study at a language school, internet problems, or lack of time due to family vacations or moving preparations.

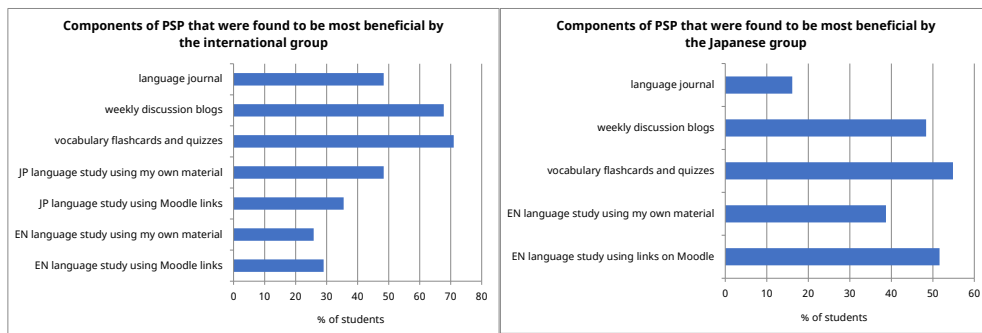
The Japanese group posted more consistently. Approximately 65% reported using the PSP quizzes, and particularly those with lower skills felt this helped them understand English-medium content courses right from their first term in the EMDP with greater ease. This suggests that acquiring basic EAP vocabulary in one or two fields, a goal which can reasonably be achieved in a short PSP, can significantly ease the transition to a student's first classes in English. However, nearly 80% used outside material for their independent language study. Despite instructor encouragement to focus on authentic listening or reading activities in preparation for English-medium classes, many students in this group continued to use textbooks recommended by high school English teachers in Japan aimed at preparation for a standardized English test such as the TOEIC or Eiken (*Jitsuyō eigo ginō kentei*, or *Eiken Test in Practical English Proficiency*).



Figures 3a and 3b. Student reports on participation in PSP components

Both batches listed the weekly discussion blogs as one of the most beneficial components of the PSP. After the first PSP, instructors speculated that the length of participant responses may have discouraged some from reading others' posts and responding, especially those with weaker English skills. With an average length of 400 words posted by the international group, many of the forum threads became quite lengthy. To encourage greater interaction, a limit of 100 words was introduced for the Japanese group, which did have slightly better and more stable responses throughout the six weeks of this PSP course. Of the 31 participants, 26 attempted at least one discussion question each week. As mentioned previously, this group was given a wider choice of discussion topics but tended to choose the more straightforward topics that did not require complete reading or comprehension of the text, falling within the "Knowledge and Comprehension" category. As with the online forums, participants who failed

to post regularly cited busy personal schedules related to moving or graduation as the primary reason for not completing assignments.



Figures 4a and 4b. Components of the PSP that were most beneficial

Discussion

The PSP in this study attempted to anticipate linguistic and academic challenges which a group of diverse international and Japanese students would face when starting an EMDP at a university in Japan. Returning to the original four goals around which the PSP was designed, the above findings suggest that the PSP met with good success despite clear areas for improvement.

The primary means for achieving the first goal of introducing participants to the field of interdisciplinary studies was the community reading and online forum. Frequent student comments in the focus groups about the difficulty of the reading, despite access to detailed study guides and discussion questions to guide reading, suggests that many were overwhelmed by the challenge of an extended reading in English. However, the fact that both batches listed the weekly discussion blogs as one of the most beneficial components of the PSP suggests that despite the difficulty of the reading and the lack of experience posting comments in an interactive manner, participating in a public forum appears to have generated interest. Online discussions generated a somewhat wider range of responses from the international group. Interaction may have also been more meaningful for these students because English was their only common language, lending the exchanges a sense of authenticity.

The online discussion forums may have also been less effective with the Japanese group because of what Tsuchiya (2016) describes as differences in “behavioural norms” observed during EFL discussions carried out among international students in a PSP. According to Tsuchiya, Japanese participants not only speak less, but use interruptions aimed at cooperativeness rather than intrusiveness. In other words, a lively exchange of contrasting opinions is simply outside the behaviour norms of exchange for these learners. However, as noted in results above, in focus group discussions students acknowledged that they failed to follow instructions and respond to other participants’ comments. This suggests that participants were gaining awareness of the student’s role in a learner-centred classroom, even if they were not able to participate actively.

The tendency of Japanese participants to post to forums shortly before



weekly deadlines led the PSP instructors to speculate that the activity may have been viewed as a homework assignment rather than a forum for meaningful communication and exchange of ideas. Homework is typically defined as an activity done to either prepare students for future lessons, or reinforce previously introduced information (Corwin 2016). As noted above, most Japanese participants in this study perceived the primary purpose of the PSP as improvement of English skills, particularly reading. Student comments about the difficulty of the book, or the time needed to look up unknown words, accords with Corwin's observations that students may recognize the importance of doing homework, but may lack motivation to complete it if they find it too difficult. Interestingly, however, in the focus groups, many participants from the Japanese group discussed how this activity in particular was useful for introducing them to the discussion-based format that they later encountered in most of their classes. The value of the community reading, as well as the experience of completing an extended reading in English prior to beginning the program, may have been an awareness which came to students only after matriculating into the program.

Student journals were the primary activity designed to promote the second goal of the program: learner autonomy and development of language-learning strategies. Approaches among participants varied greatly. Those who used the online quizzes frequently attempted each one multiple times until they got a perfect score and described this as a fun activity. Several participants in the international group actively engaged instructors in dialogues that extended across the weeks on topics related to news stories, books, or online videos. This kind of exchange was less common with the Japanese group, many of whom simply reported a list of activities. A significant portion of the Japanese group later reported that rather than focusing on EAP skills to facilitate study in the EMDP, they felt more immediate pressure to continue preparing for standardized exams in order to qualify for study abroad programs in their second or third year. Although Takase (2007) suggests that extrinsic motivation to pass entrance exams is found primarily in high school students preparing to take entrance exams, student comments in this study suggest that this may continue to be a primary motivation in university as well.

In both the community reading and language journals, motivation appears to have been an issue. Given the fact that maintaining motivation has been recognized as a significant issue for online programs in general (Park & Choi, 2009; Murugaiah & Thang, 2010; McDougall, 2019), revision of PSP material should address this in greater detail. Although questionnaires and focus groups did not include questions directly addressing motivation, as indicated above, participants cited busy personal schedules related to moving or graduation as the primary reason for not completing assignments. Considering the fact that the EMDP would be the focus of their lives for the next four years, why did participants place the PSP relatively low on their priority list? A starting point might be to question them about their interest in the PSP material, particularly the community reading. Takase (2007) notes that motivation to read in an L2 is influenced by both the difficulty level and the content of the material.

Although the text chosen for the community reading was highly appropriate for introducing the strengths of interdisciplinary studies, the focus on social and medical conditions in Haiti may not have engaged participants. On a more general level, it would be useful to ask, perhaps anonymously, their motivation for enrolling in the EMDP. The instructors may have erroneously assumed that a group of primarily ESL students, or international students moving to Japan, would be highly motivated to improve their language skills. However, other factors such as early admittance to a national university in Japan prior to the entrance exam season, or the offer of a scholarship, may have been primary motivators for some.

Finally, the fourth goal of easing the transition to university life met with good success primarily with the international group. Because most of these students were coming from abroad, the PSP was their first connection with their peers. Many participants established online connections outside of Moodle and later reported that rather than the PSP, other social networking sites became their primary venue for sharing information about the logistics of moving to Japan. This was viewed positively by the instructors, as it likely gave participants a greater degree of freedom to ask questions or have frank discussions not monitored by faculty.

For the Japanese group, who were not facing the daunting task of moving to a foreign country, the transition to university life was not such a primary concern. In addition, many of the spring students appeared most eager to connect not with their Japanese peers, but with the international students who were already on campus. Several from the Japanese group were able to connect with the international students through social networking sites, and a few eager students living in the area even became frequent visitors on campus in the months prior to enrolment, informally auditing classes, or meeting with international students for meals or other social activities.

Overall, language journals allowed for more direct interaction between instructors and participants, but rather than reflecting on personal goals strengths, or weaknesses, many journal entries simply provided a report of what had been studied. Given that participants had not yet started the EMDP and had limited understanding of its curriculum, the goal of promoting learning autonomy may have been premature. Some participants may have also lacked the English skills needed to articulate their learning strategies. In the future, more concrete questions posed by instructors may yield more meaningful student responses.

Limitations of the study and conclusions

Although the PSP described in this study did not progress as envisioned by the instructors, it did result in a number of benefits. For the international group, the primary advantages were the opportunity for participants to connect, exchange information, and facilitate the move to Japan, thus easing anxiety prior to the start of the EMDP. For the Japanese group, the PSP served as

an introduction to a student-centred classroom approach which participants would be expected to engage in once they arrived on campus.

A number of limitations should be noted. First, this study is based on only two PSP sessions, with a total number of just 62 participants. A wider study encompassing sessions held over a period of several years is needed to support the preliminary conclusions offered here. In addition, student feedback may have been limited by the manner in which focus groups were carried out. The international group had an eight-month gap between the end of the PSP and the focus group sessions, making it difficult for many to recall the content of their program, or details about their participation. For the Japanese group, who had only been on campus a few months at the time of the focus group sessions, FLA or lack of WTP may have prevented some from fully participating together with the international students. PSP instructors also served as facilitators of the focus groups. Although questions were designed to elicit perceived goals and impressions of the PSP rather than positive or negative critique, the presence of the instructors in the room likely limited student willingness to share honest comments.⁸

Another limitation of this PSP was that collaborative projects in which students take responsibility for working together and completing tasks, which Arnó-Macià (2017) designates as a key component in the development of learner autonomy, were not present. Although participants were asked to engage with each other in the online forum, collaboration was not required for participants to complete the assigned tasks each week. Instructors were hesitant to assign group projects, fearing that it might lead many to drop out of the PSP, which was optional and not for credit. Redesigning the PSP to include collaborative projects might be one means of increasing participant commitment.

Overall, the PSP analyzed in this paper faced a number of challenges. For the university in this study, it represented a new model which had not previously been attempted. Besides, it was implemented at a time when online learning was not the norm. The demands of keeping up with an online pre-sessional program can be considerable both for participants, who are preparing to make the transition to university, as well as instructors, who are conducting the PSP between semester breaks. While further recognizing the difficulty of maintaining motivation in an online, non-credit program, results of the first two sessions discussed in this study indicate that there is nevertheless much to be gained. The above analysis of participation patterns can provide useful insights for EMDPs in Japan enrolling international students in designing PSPs that can better equip students to make such a transition.

Notes

1. The first PSP ran for eight weeks. Because of time constraints between acceptance and matriculation, the second PSP ran for only six weeks.
2. Despite the MEXT initiative of Tobitate (Leap for Tomorrow) to increase students studying abroad by offering more scholarships, the number of Japanese students going abroad long-term decreased by 36% between



2004 and 2014. Although students on short-term programs of one month or less have increased, such experiences are not long enough to have a significant impact on foreign language skills. Reasons for the drop may be linked to the declining birth rate, as well as a prolonged job-hunting period that puts Japanese students who study abroad long term (a year or more) at a disadvantage (Voice of America, 2017).

3. This PSP was designed to be taught by program faculty members on a rotating basis. Following the first two sessions, management of the PSP shifted to different instructors. Program assessment is not available for these sessions.
4. The EMDP policy asks entering students who have completed at least the final two years of their education entirely in English to self-identify as either (1) native or native-like speakers of English, or (2) ESL learners. Those who identify as the former are not required to take English-language proficiency tests during the orientation period but may do so if they wish. All students were required to take the writing test.
5. All recommendations for remedial English study were optional, but all students followed these recommendations. In several cases, students whose test scores indicated that remedial English was not required requested permission to enrol in ESL classes and were allowed to do so.
6. Online flashcards were created with Quizlet, a free application. Japanese translations for each term were included on the flashcards along with brief English definitions and/or images, so that the cards could also be used by international students wishing to improve their Japanese. 16 sets of flashcards with an average of 20 terms each were created. Students could choose to study any or all of these depending on their desired coursework in the EMDP.
7. In one case, a participant who lived in an area without regular access to the internet was not able to participate.
8. The three questions asked were as follows:
 1. Discuss the activities in the PSP. What do you think was the goal of each?
 2. Do you think the PSP had similarities or connections to either the content or the classroom style that you have experienced so far in your classes?
 3. What critical thinking skills do you think are necessary for this program (EMDP) and why? Which of these do you think were covered in the PSP?

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Appendix A

Questionnaire given to participants during orientation

1. How much of *Mountains Beyond Mountains* did you read?
 - a. all of it.
 - b. most of it.
 - c. about half.
 - d. a little.
 - e. none.

2. Which of the following did you use and/or participate in? Circle as many as apply.
 - a. English language study using links on Moodle.
 - b. English language study using my own material.
 - c. Japanese language study using links on Moodle.
 - d. Japanese language study using my own material.
 - e. vocabulary flashcards and quizzes.
 - f. weekly discussion blogs.
 - g. language journal.

3. Which parts (if any) of the study guides for *Mountains Beyond Mountains* did you use?
 - a. background information and links.
 - b. chapter summaries.
 - c. vocabulary lists.
 - d. I didn't use the study guides.

4. Which part(s) of the program did you find to be beneficial or useful? Circle as many as apply.
 - a. English language study using links on Moodle.
 - b. English language study using my own material.
 - c. Japanese language study using links on Moodle.
 - d. Japanese language study using my own material.
 - e. vocabulary flashcards and quizzes.
 - f. weekly discussion blogs.
 - g. language journal.



5. Which part(s) of the program did you find to be difficult or NOT useful?
Circle as many as apply.
- English language study using links on Moodle.
 - English language study using my own material.
 - Japanese language study using links on Moodle.
 - Japanese language study using my own material.
 - vocabulary flashcards and quizzes.
 - weekly discussion blogs.
 - language journal.
6. How many hours did you spend on activities each week (on average)?
- less than one hour
 - one to two hours
 - two to four hours
 - more than four hours
7. Did you read/ watch any of the books/ movies recommended by the faculty members? If yes, which ones?
8. How did you feel about the length of the program?
- too long.
 - a little too long.
 - just right.
 - a little short.
 - too short.
9. How did you feel about the scheduling of the program?
- no problems.
 - sometimes inconvenient because of my job.
 - sometimes inconvenient because of other classes or studies.
 - sometimes inconvenient because I couldn't access the internet.
 - sometimes difficult because I was on vacation or traveling.
 - sometimes difficult because I was busy with moving preparations.
 - other: _____
10. Did you feel that the PSP Moodle site helped you connect with your classmates?
- yes, very much.
 - yes, somewhat.
 - no, not really.

Please add any comments or suggestions to help us improve the PSP in the future:

Appendix B

Sample discussion questions

Week 2

On page 7, Farmer describes himself as a “poor man’s doctor.” What do you think he means by this? In the first two chapters, do you see anything in his attitude about his work, or his interactions with patients, that seems different from your typical image of doctors?

Week 4

Chapter 6 provides a brief biography of Rudolf Virchow, a nineteenth-century German doctor who is not so well known today. Why do you think Virchow had such a big influence on Farmer? Describe a famous person, either living or dead, who has influenced you in some way.

Week 6

Do you have a good memory? On page 113, Kidder describes Farmer’s memory as “encyclopedic” and “daunting.” Farmer completes a difficult medical program without even attending class, to the amazement of his classmates and friends. But according to Farmer, he simply uses mnemonic techniques - associations or patterns – to help him remember. What are your strategies for memorizing things, especially when studying a difficult foreign language like Japanese or English?

On page 110, the reader learns the Haitian proverb “rocks in the water and rocks in the sun.” What do you think this means, and what does President Aristide mean when he says he wants “the rocks in the water” to find out how “the rocks in the sun feel”?

Week 8

Has reading about Farmer’s life and work made you think about your plans for your future? Does his interdisciplinary approach give you any ideas about how you might integrate interests in different areas into your own study plans or career goals?

