

# **The Introduction of a Short-term German Language Program at a Japanese University**

**Juergen J. Bulach**

In this short essay, I write about the introduction of an overseas short-term German language program at a small university in Japan in which I describe the background of the university, the implementation and description of the program, and my observations of my students' performance in it as well as the impact it had on them. The reason for writing this essay is to highlight the need for non-English foreign language study programs even at universities that lack representative foreign language departments.

## **Background**

The university at which the short-term German language program was introduced is located in Tokyo, divided into two campuses, and made up of three faculties and fourteen departments.

The university does not have a German language department but does offer introductory German language courses, as well as other non-English second foreign language courses (Chinese, Korean, German and French) all for elective credit for a total of four semesters. Students who enroll in a German language course typically take it for one semester before taking a more advanced course the following semester, although this is more the suggested path rather than a required one. Both campuses offer the identical number and level of German language courses and students are free to choose the campus at which they would like to take courses.

The English Department is the only foreign language department at the university with the focus more on English and American literature with the language of instruction in Japanese. The department also offers English language skills courses that are conducted in English. Unlike the other departments, English Department students are required to take one of the four non-English foreign languages for a total of two semesters. It is not surprising then that the majority of students who enroll in these courses are English Department majors.

All university students are required to enroll in an introductory English language skills course that takes place twice a week for the duration of one semester. There are a number of other English language courses with a focus on various language skills that are open to all students for elective credit.

The university sends students to outbound, short-term foreign language programs at universities in Canada, the USA, South Korea, and China. Although it provides introductory German and French language courses, no short-term overseas language programs representing these languages existed until last year. The foreign language courses (the non-English Department foreign language curriculum) and international study programs, short-term and long-term, are overseen by the international center.

The staff of the international affairs division promote the university's international study abroad programs through orientations, poster and online announcements, and in a guide book that is distributed annually to all students. Instructors make occasional announcements in the foreign language classrooms about upcoming orientations and application deadlines.

I instruct two of the required English courses at the two campuses and three German language courses at one campus. Teaching English courses gives me the opportunity to become better acquainted with students and allows me to promote and motivate them to take non-English foreign language courses, too.

In the past, a few of my students expressed their desire to continue their German language studies in Germany and sought my advice about pursuing language studies at short-term programs there. As a full-time member of the faculty, this put me in the awkward situation of giving students advice about overseas study programs that were not affiliated with my university. The most logical solution was to establish an agreement with a university in Germany to which we could send our students on a yearly basis.

### **Implementation of the Short-term Program**

I approached the then-director of our international center about the possibility of establishing short-term study programs at universities in Germany and France. The director and other members of the international center welcomed my proposal to find a

suitable language program affiliated with an accredited university, as students receive transferable credit for their participation in it. A subsequent online search revealed many universities that offer short-term German language programs, but some of these programs demand that students possess a German language level that was beyond my students' average A1 (CEFR) proficiency level. I was able to reduce the number of potential institutions to three universities that admit beginning-level students into their programs.

The next step was for me to visit the educational institutions, which is the standard procedure at my university when considering new overseas programs. These onsite visits consist of talking with staff personnel and instructors, observing classes, viewing dormitories and acquainting myself with the cities in which the universities are located.

I designated five days to visit the three universities during the period that their summer language programs took place. Each university offered programs that met my university's basic criteria in terms of the quality of instruction, program support, facilities and price. In fact, each program charged the same tuition and accommodation rates. The three university programs were also located in attractive, dynamic and relatively safe cities.

Because it was difficult to choose any one program over the other two, I gave them all a closer examination. The student body at each university's summer language program was comprised of students from all over the world, but one university in particular had more Japanese students than the other two programs. While there are some critics who may regard this as a negative characteristic, I viewed it in a positive light simply because it was an indication that the program was well prepared to handle any potential issues that might come up with students from Japan. Indeed, the short-term program at this university was the only one that employed Japanese-speaking members on their staff. For this reason, I elected to propose this program to my colleagues at the international center. My proposal was subsequently accepted by my colleagues after which the program was further deliberated and approved by several successive executive committees.

We began university-wide promotion of the short-term program at the beginning of the following academic year in general, university-wide orientations. I briefly mentioned the program to students in my German classes at one campus, while the German language instructor at the other campus did the same in her classes. However, I was unable to gauge the degree of interest in the program but hoped that at least one or two students would apply. The basic application requirement that we agreed on was that applicants have some past or current German language learning experience. To my surprise, the number of student applications exceeded the number of application slots permitted by the short-term program at the university in Germany. After the submittal deadline, we selected the applicants by lottery.

The selected students subsequently attended specific orientations about the German short-term program. Because this was the first time to send students to Germany, the international center decided that I accompany our students there and spend the first few days with them. This opportunity allowed me to better evaluate our students' needs and provided me with the knowledge to better prepare future program participants. We decided it was unnecessary to employ an accompanying agent due to the strong staff support that students receive from the short-term program staff.

### **Program Description**

The overseas program is part of a major university located in southern Germany. The duration of the summer program is four weeks for a total of 72 hours of language instruction classes taking place in the mornings and optional courses or seminars focusing on current issues in the afternoons. The short-term program offers courses for language levels ranging from CEFR A1 to C1. Students also have access to self-study materials in the language laboratory, which they may use after classes. In addition, the program offers a wide variety of cultural activities in and around the city, which are organized by mentors who are regular students at the university. Program participants can choose from weekend excursions to other cities, too.

### **The Students**

The students who participated in the short-term program ranged from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> year and came from different departments and campuses. One student had spent a year abroad as an exchange student but this was the first study trip for the other students. Two of the selected students later informed me that they had enrolled in my first-year

German courses specifically so they that they could fulfill our institution's application requirement to study overseas. One other student had already successfully completed two German language courses but decided to audit one of the two courses again although at a different campus.

### **Observations**

While still in Japan, I observed that the students who had been selected to study in Germany became more active in my German classes in the degree to which they involved themselves in class activities, and asked questions during and after class. They also requested additional homework from me.

I would characterize my students' collective mood throughout their time in Germany as very positive. They were eager to use the daily German vocabulary, phrases and set conversation patterns that they had acquired in their classes back in Japan and put them to use in Germany. In the time I spent with them, we went to bakeries, supermarkets, department stores, restaurants and tourist destinations at which I encouraged and guided them to speak in German with the staff and personnel at the various establishments. I instructed my students to tell people they were learning German and they would like to speak it if possible. It was remarkable how strangers in these establishments reacted so positively and sometimes even assisted them by teaching them new words, correcting their pronunciation or speaking at a slower pace. Without telling them to do so, students regularly took notes of these encounters and often referred to them whenever they thought it necessary to do so.

At the university in Germany, my students were placed into two different classes based on their performance results on an online placement test they had taken before they departed Japan. Apparently, many of their fellow classmates in the short-term program were German majors, even those from universities in Japan. My students did not appear to be intimidated by them at all as they had no difficulty in keeping up with their classmates.

In my daily post-class talks with my students, they informed me that they found their classes challenging but not overly so, but all agreed that it was essential for them to have studied German before taking part in the overseas program. One student, who had been placed in the lowest level class, reported that it would "have been impossible"

to participate in the program had she not previously studied German in Japan.

While still in Germany, I regularly perused my students' textbooks, class materials and assignments and found them to be appropriate for their language learning levels. During the first two or three days, my students posed questions to me about what they had covered in class, but I soon realized they were just overly concerned about their studies and turned to me due to the simple reason that I was there.

### **Post Program Impact**

After leaving my students to continue with the short-term program in Germany, I did not meet them again until the start of the second semester classes in Japan some seven weeks later. In class, it was immediately evident that their comprehension of German had greatly increased in the relatively short period of time, much more than I had anticipated. I found that these students who were enrolled in the second semester German courses were now at the average proficiency level of students who were enrolled in the third and fourth semester courses. In my estimation, they had jumped our own university proficiency level by at least one, if not two, semesters.

There were additional benefits as well. Throughout the duration of my German courses, I observed that the "short-term students" regularly assisted their classmates who sat near them with their own explanations when any of them had difficulty in comprehending my introduction of new lesson content. This was always done without any overt encouragement from me.

My language lessons are often interspersed with occasional comments about culture. It has been my experience that students are interested in learning about daily cultural topics that everyone understands such as food or shopping. In one such lesson on food, I talked about the abundance of bread and the various types that one can purchase in Germany. During my talk, one of the "short-term students" shared her own experience with German bread with the class and produced pictures on her phone that she had taken of the types of bread available in the supermarkets and bakeries she had seen there. Although this student communicated her comments in Japanese to her classmates, she explained it in a way that I would not have thought of describing it; "the bread has such a hard crust that you almost need a saw to cut it." It made her classmates laugh but also added color to my own explanation.

Throughout the semester, I made it a point to hold one-on-one talks with each student who had participated in the summer short-term program. Each one had a story to tell filled with their personal observations. It was clear that they had not forgotten their experiences overseas and it was easy to see that they had talked about the same topics many times with their family and friends. These talks revealed a new sense of self-confidence and independence among my students, which only comes with having experienced something on their own.

One common, unsolicited comment made by almost every student was a strong desire to travel on their own in the near future, something that is not entirely academic but “these short-term experiences may encourage some students originally unwilling to take the “risk” of a longer study abroad experience to explore other opportunities after gaining confidence in themselves and their travel ability” (Rowan-Kenyon & Niehaus, 2011, 225). This sense of confidence was particularly strongest in the youngest student who said, “I really want to study overseas for one year now.”

### **Conclusion**

In talks with my students, they expressed that their objective for taking part in the short-term program in Germany was to improve their German language skills, which they most certainly did. The results, however, were not just limited to language improvement. My students also became more culturally competent even after just spending one month abroad. We live in a multilingual, multicultural world, and although English is by far the dominant language that we use to communicate with one another, there is still interest in learning other languages. Short-term programs, such as the one I have described in this essay, can further develop and satisfy our students’ skills and interests in learning more about other languages and cultures, and this is why universities should provide their students with the option to do so.

## References

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