

# Japanese University Students in Taiwan, Who Are Working as Volunteer Interpreter-guides for Tourists from Japan

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the Japanese speaking students' volunteer guide program. Questionnaire surveys and interviews revealed that this program gives students opportunities to converse with natives, and helps them to achieve a feeling of fulfillment and confidence or awareness of problems that can occur. But the labor involved in setting up the schedule may sometimes be a burden for students.

**Keywords:** Volunteer interpreter guide, Students studying Japanese in Taiwan, Tourist from Japan, Cultural exchange.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Objectives and methods

This paper examines the Japanese speaking students' volunteer guide program run by a university's Japanese language department. There are two objectives in this research. One is to clarify the benefits and problems of the volunteer guide program from the students' point of view. Another is to examine how the experiences of volunteer guides influence students' language learning.

The first step in this research was to conduct a questionnaire survey and then a detailed interview with some of the students who answered the questionnaire. This research puts more weight on the interview.

In this paper, Section 1 describes the target volunteer guide program. Section 2 examines the answers of the questionnaire. Following the results of section 2, Section 3 examines the interview analyses. Section 4 will then discuss the benefits and problems of the volunteer guide program and how the experiences of volunteer guides influence students' language learning.

### 1.2 Details of the volunteer guide program

A volunteer Japanese tour guide team run by the Department of Japanese Language and Literature of Shih-Hsin University was launched in August 2005. According to the department's website, this program aims to promote international exchanges between Taiwan and Japan, due to the increasing number of Japanese tourists coming to Taiwan every year, and to encourage students to engage in international affairs. In addition, this program provides the students with the opportunities to interact with Japanese native speakers.

The application process is as follows. First, clients send an application form to the office of the Department of Japanese Language and Literature by e-mail or fax with their name, contact information, travel schedule, requests for the volunteer guide and so on. Then the office finds students available to be guides during this time schedule, and tells them the client's contact address. After that, the student in charge will communicate directly with the client and arrange the schedule.

Before applying for this volunteer guide service, client tourists have to read guidelines consisting of fifteen rules, which are concerned with prohibited matters and

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students' expenses while being guides. For example, [article 5] the volunteer guide service shall be carried out by two or more students.; [article 9] this volunteer guide service shall not extend past 10 p.m.; [article 14] it is prohibited that the client require students to travel by an individually owned or rental car or motorbike. These rules were set to protect students' security and to let them work within a scope which does not affect their study at the university. Of course, it is prohibited that students ask for a reward [article 13], but the client is responsible for transportation, meals and any other costs during the time the service is being provided [article 7].

### **1.3 Research on volunteer tour guides**

A tour volunteer guide is a person who voluntarily assists and guides tourists for free or a nominal fee. According to the Japan Travel and Tourism Association, there are 1,748 volunteer guide organizations and 41,641 volunteer guides in Japan in 2015. About 30 to 40 percent of them are fee- charging organizations. In large city areas such as Tokyo and Osaka, and famous tourist cities such as Kyoto and Nara, there are several volunteer interpreter guide organizations of students. These organizations are run by volunteers not associated with universities and mainly provide service in English.

At Hokkaido University, whose campus is well known as a popular tourist spot, there are two campus tours in which university students are participating. Okamoto carried out questionnaire research on these two campus tours [Okamoto2008]. Okamoto evaluated the interactions between guides and tourists, analyzing them according to two models, PIKM (Providing Information and Knowledge Model) and CPM (Common Pleasure Model). The results showed that CPM gives higher satisfaction for both volunteer guides and tourists, and gives higher motivation for students to continue to work as volunteer guides.

Nine years have passed since Shih-Hsin University's voluntary Japanese tour guide team was created, with the number of users growing every year. According to an announcement by the department, the voluntary guide team has given service to 56 tourists in 2010, 90 tourists in 2011 and 133 tourists in 2012. The university promotes this program as one of its features, but no objective assessment has been done so far. Although guidelines are set as shown above, students are almost entirely in charge of exchanges with clients after accepting the offer. Therefore, this program owes much to the students' individual performance. Although no troubles have been reported until now, this research will help to prevent future troubles and to develop a better program.

Furthermore, not much research can be found which focuses on volunteer guides. Travelling has become diversified; therefore, travelling which uses volunteer guides is expected to increase. The study of volunteer guides will be of growing significance in the field of tourism studies with increased recognition of the importance of the volunteer guides' role. Whether or not travel results in a good memory for a tourist, largely depends on the tour guide's role. On the other hand, hosts will also be influenced through the exchange with tourists [橋本1999]. And it will be an even more valuable experience for students studying language.

## **2 Survey by questionnaire**

### **2.1 Outline of the questionnaire**

This survey was conducted in January 2015 among the students in the Department of Japanese Language and Literature, Shih-Hsin University. This questionnaire was answered by 25 students, including 2 Japanese minor students<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The student enrollment in the Department of Japanese Language and Literature, Shih-Hsin University was 60 until 2013, but it doubled to 120 in the 2014 school year.

The questionnaire is roughly divided into three components. The first section consists of question items regarding Japanese language skills and backgrounds. The second section is concerned with the experiences of volunteer guides and their fulfillment levels. The third section has open ended questions regarding the difficulties and advantages that guides felt during the experience. Answers to open ended questions could be written in both Japanese and Chinese.

## 2.2 Respondents' background

Respondents are all junior and senior students. This is because this voluntary Japanese tour guide team in principle is supposed to be led by juniors and seniors<sup>3</sup>. Respondents' Japanese language skills according to the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) are all Level 3 or above.

The number of times in which participants were volunteer tour guides ranged from just once to more than twenty times. The number of times that students worked as volunteer guides is shown in figure 2-1. Twelve students out of these 25 answered just once, one answered twice, four answered three times, one answered four times, and seven answered six times or more. And there are two students who have being a guide more than twenty times.

As for the question of whether or not they have had any part time job requiring use of Japanese, eleven answered yes. The job categories range from fields that require higher language skills such as translation work for apps, to relatively simple ones such as being a vender at food exhibition. It is notable that eight of eleven had worked as a Japanese interpreter-guide. This will be discussed during the later section concerning the interview.

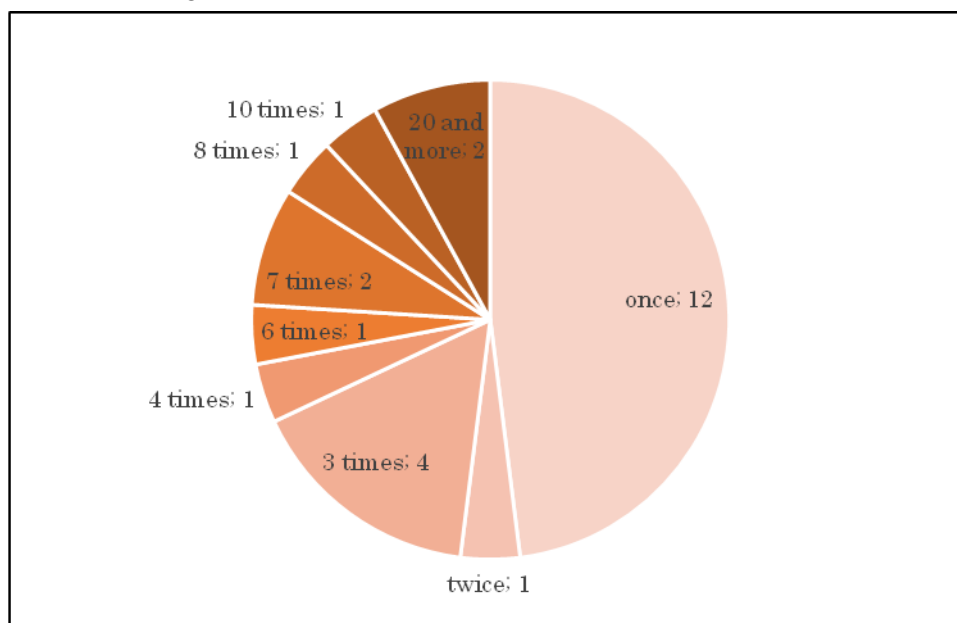


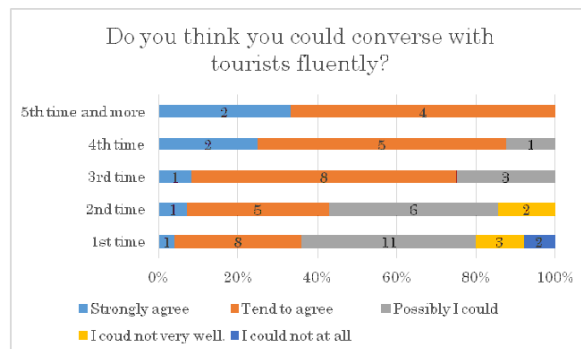
Figure 2-1 Number of times respondents worked as a volunteer guide

## 2.3 Fulfillment in conversing with tourists, and in being a guide

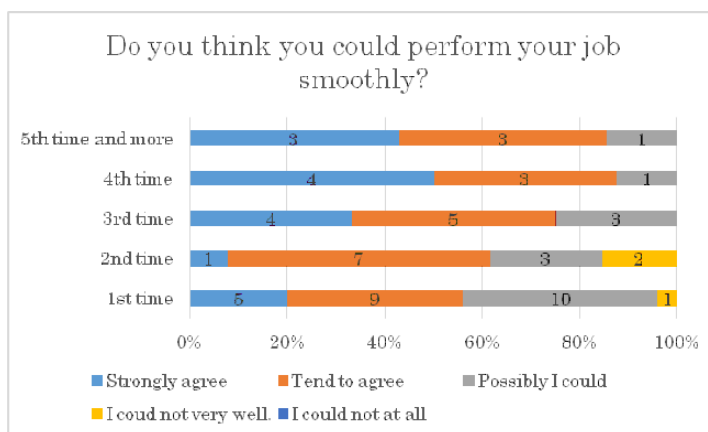
Students were asked to evaluate their fulfillment in conversing with tourists and in being a guide on a scale of five levels. Regarding their fulfillment in conversing with tourists, the number of students who answered “I could not at all” or “I could not

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes freshmen and sophomore students of advanced level can be paired with experienced upperclass students.

very well” after the first time, was five [see figure 2-2]. And for all students, the level of fulfillment increased with the number of times they were guides. In response to the question, “do you think you could perform your job smoothly?”, the majority said “it possibly could” or higher [see figure 2-3]. Concerning this question, for students who had been a guide more than once, there was no tendency for the levels of fulfillment to rise with the number of times they were a guide. This is because the places where they were a guide varied; therefore, their levels of fulfillment fluctuated depending on the location.



[Figure 2-2 levels of fulfillment in conversation with tourists]



[Figure 2-3 levels of fulfillment in guiding]

## 2.4 Open ended questions regarding difficulties and benefits

### 2.4.1 Difficulties when conversing

I asked students the open-ended question, “While you are conversing with a tourist were there any difficulties, or did you have any bad feelings towards them?”. No one answered that they had bad feelings, but all of them wrote various comments about difficulties. The predominant comment was that they could not express what they wanted to say in Japanese. The second most common comment was that they did not know names of places, plants and animals, specialized vocabulary about temples and Taiwanese traditions in Japanese. And several others mentioned they had difficulty with listening; for example, they could not understand tourist’s Kansai dialect, or could not follow native speaking speed.

### 2.4.2 Difficulties in performing your job

In response to the question, “Were there any difficulties in performing your job, or did you have any bad feelings while you helping tourists?”, some students felt frustration towards the tourists who did not mention where to go clearly and left all the scheduling up to volunteer student. For example, they were often asked that to,

“Please bring me to the restaurant that local people like” and “Please tell me about any spots popular for local students but not found in guidebooks”. Regarding the tourist spots, there are many places unfamiliar to university students, and they sometimes have difficulty in checking transportation routes and travel times, especially students not from Taipei.

#### **2.4.3 Benefits for the volunteer guide**

All respondents answered “yes” to the question “Do you want to work as a volunteer guide again in the future?”. And almost all students mentioned their experience of conversing with native Japanese speakers, in response to the question “What are good things you think about being a volunteer guide?”.

In addition, they mentioned benefits related to their studies, such as “I could know my weak points by talking with native speakers”, “I could get information about various regions in Japan”, “I could learn about Taiwan better”, “I could learn about the difference between Taiwan and Japan”. Some students said that they made Japanese friends, and they keep in contact with the tourists they helped using tools such as LINE, facebook and e-mail. Other benefits were the good opportunity to travel to famous spots never visited before, meals at expensive restaurants, and souvenirs from Japan.

#### **2.5 Result of the questionnaire**

The questionnaire revealed following results. First, for all of those who were a volunteer guide more than once, their fulfillment level of conversing with tourists increased with the number of times they were a guide. Second, all respondents answered that they wanted to work as a volunteer guide again in the future. The most common benefit of being a volunteer guide is the experience of conversing with a native Japanese. However, some students had difficulty with making the travel schedule.

### **3 Survey by interview**

#### **3.1 Details of the interview**

Eighteen students of who answered the questionnaire were interviewed for more detailed information. In this section, some examples, especially of interviews about conversations with tourists, will be introduced. Interviewees’ names are aliases.

Case 1: Ms. Lin (4th grade, JLPT1)

I worked only once as a volunteer guide. The tourist was a woman in her 30’s. She came to Taiwan by herself. She really liked Taiwan, knew a lot about dramas and news of Taiwan. But I am not familiar with dramas, so I felt awkward because I could not carry on a conversation with her on the bus. Also, I had a little trouble with ‘keigo (honorific expression) and polite speech, because her ‘normal Japanese’ seemed a little different from my ‘lessoned Japanese’. She was an elder and the first person I met, so I tried to use ‘keigo (honorific expression)’. But I was afraid that sometimes I might forget to add ‘-desu’ and ‘-masu’ (polite expression) at the end of sentences, because she was not adding ‘-desu’ nor ‘-masu’. I haven’t had any opportunities to talk with Japanese in Japanese for any length of time, so it was a very valuable experience for me. She was very kind person. I want to work again.

Case 2: Mr. Wan (3rd grade, JLPT2)

I worked only once as a volunteer guide. The tourist was an old man, perhaps in his 80’s, traveling by himself. He said he had traveled to Taiwan for many times. I

felt it was a little difficult to listen at first because of his Kansai dialect, but I was used to it soon. I felt as if I were in Japan after I talked in Japanese all day. In the afternoon, I realized that I was able to carry on a conversation with little difficulty. But sometimes I could not answer his questions because of lack of knowledge. The old man's interest was outside my knowledge, for example, he asked about the retail business in Taiwan, but I don't have any knowledge of it. If possible, I would like to be a guide for young people who can talk about a common interest.

Case 3: Ms. Liao (4th grade, JLPT1)

I have worked 3 times as a volunteer guide. The first time was for a family including small kids; the second time was for a three-generation family including an old lady, her daughter and grandson; and third time was for a young couple. I was very nervous during my first time, but the small kids talked to me the whole time. It helped me a lot, so I was very glad. I had little difficulty with listening, because all the tourists talked to me in familiar phrases such as those in textbooks. I think the Japanese dialect is cute, especially the spur-of-the-moment dialect which makes me 'moe (think very cute)'. I keep in touch with the first family by e-mail. I met them and had dinner together in Tokyo the other day. The tourists whom I helped seem like friends, not 'customers'. They gave me souvenirs from Japan. I feel happy but sorry about it. I will be glad to be a guide for them even if they want to go outside of Taipei.

Case 4: Ms. Chang (3rd grade, JLPT3)

I have worked 20 times as a volunteer guide and had five part time jobs. As for part time job, I went with around ten high school students on a school trip by myself. The daily wage was TWD1,500. Transportation costs were provided, but I was responsible for the cost of my food. The high school students talked by themselves, while I only listened and sometimes nodded. High school girls said nothing but 'kawaii (cute)'. They usually enjoyed shopping most of time, but only spent a few minutes just taking pictures in famous historical spots.

As for the volunteer guide, in contrast, every tourist's character was different each time and it varied from a family with a baby to an old man. So, I always worried about what to talk about with them. I enjoyed both of the volunteer and part time job. But the tourist, who I was with as volunteer guide, treated me as their daughter and cared about my future.

Case 5: Ms. Chen (4th grade, JLPT 2)

I have worked twice as a volunteer guide and had two part time jobs. The first time as a volunteer, I helped an elderly couple and the second time, a woman in her 30's. As for part time job, I went with around ten high school students on a school trip by myself. The daily wage was TWD1,500. Transportation costs were provided, but I was responsible for the cost of my food. Both of the tourists who I was with as a volunteer really loved Taiwan. I keep in touch with them by LINE and facebook, talking about when we will meet in Japan. As for the high school students, however, we were only together for a day. I was very glad when I could hear 'real' Kansai dialect, although I could not understand. I thought the conversation I heard while being a guide was different from what I had learned in class. We could understand each other, although I was too busy with carrying on the conversation to think about grammar. In the beginning, I took care to use 'keigo (honorific expression)' because the tourists were elderly and the first people I met. But I stopped using 'keigo' as we got friendlier. I enjoyed all day.

### **3.2 Results of the interview**

Through the interview, it is apparent that students had difficulty carrying on a conversation while performing their duties but, by the end of the job, they felt a sense of accomplishment. Students, while somewhat embarrassed by the dialect which for, casual spoken Japanese is conversation different from that found in textbooks, treated this embarrassment as a valuable experience. They could manage with the conversation itself, but they recognized the problems related to the lack of knowledge and topics to talk about.

There were some differences between working as a volunteer and in part time job. In the restricted situation of the part time job dealing exclusively with high school students, there was almost no variation in the tour schedule. On the other hand, the volunteer guide has to set the tour schedule through exchanges with the tourist; therefore, they must be flexible. Tourists who use a volunteer guide are independent tourists, and they are generally 'Taiwan-loving' Japanese so their questions and conversation topics are wide and varied. Volunteer guides often needed not only Japanese skills, but also knowledge about enough topics to answer questions from the curious Taiwan-lover.

### **4 Conclusion**

Through the questionnaire and interview, the following three benefits and one problem with the volunteer guide program can be noted. First, the biggest benefit is that this program gives students opportunities to converse with native Japanese speakers, and students gain a sense of fulfillment and confidence or become aware of problems that can occur through this experience. Second, students enhanced their interests in Japan through the conversations with tourists such as those about the dialects and differences among various places in Japan. And third, some students made Japanese friends through the volunteer guide program. They keep in touch with the tourists even after the trip is finished.

One problem is that, the labor involved in setting the schedule may sometimes be a burden for students. There are some clients who don't indicate where they want to go but instead leave much of the scheduling to students, making only ambiguous requests such as 'place to recommend' or 'restaurant frequented by locals'. In this case, the student has to research a variety of spots and transportation. Although students make an effort to prepare the schedule, sometimes students are suddenly required to go to an unexpected spot on some days. It could be a considerable burden for an amateur guide to be required to have the ability to adapt to circumstances. This problem happens because a lot of flexibility is needed in this volunteer guide program. And also another big reason is that the tourists who use the volunteer guide service are repeat tourists who are Taiwan-experts or Taiwan-lovers.

There is no doubt that this volunteer guide program is valuable for students. In Taiwan, there is no lack of opportunities to see and hear several Japanese language varieties on TV, foods, daily commodities, amusement items and so on, rather it is more difficult not to see any Japanese language. However, when it comes to the opportunity to have conversations only in Japanese, there are few chances even for Japanese language students. Therefore, students are able to have a Japanese conversation with native speakers through this volunteer guide program. But it is not clear whether volunteer student guides are able to offer what tourists really need. Further research from the perspective of the tourist is therefore needed.

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