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CUBE Study Abroad Project: Universal Studios Japan

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【Abstract】

This report describes the USJ Project, an English language activity which is held during the first semester of the CUBE Study Abroad program. In this project, CUBE freshmen taking the Study Abroad course are brought to Universal Studios Japan and assigned to carry-out employee interviews and research on attractions with the aim of producing a professional presentation afterwards. This paper also details issues relating to the design, development and assessment of the USJ Project in addition to how the program has evolved over time.

【Keywords】

Universal Studios, USJ, CUBE, poster presentation, language education

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1 Introduction

The Konan University Study Abroad (SA) program at the CUBE campus in Nishinomiya city is a skills-based preparation program taught in English with the aim of preparing students for successful study in overseas universities. SA program students typically plan to study in business-related courses at either the State University of New York at Buffalo in the United States or at Victoria University in Victoria, Canada. One of the signature components of the first year for SA program freshmen is the Universal Studios Japan project (USJ Project). This paper will outline the project, its goals, its structure, and the manner in which it is assessed.

2 Background

Every year in April, the SA program takes its students to Universal Studios Japan (USJ) and requires them to complete a collaborative, skills-integrated group project afterwards. Universal Studios Japan is a movie-themed amusement park located in Osaka's Konohana ward. According to the 2012 Theme Index Global Attraction Attendance Report, Universal Studios Japan is ranked ninth among the top 25 amusement/theme parks worldwide; USJ attracted 9.7 million visitors in 2012. (Themed Entertainment Association, 2013) USJ is, therefore, a major tourism asset in the Kansai area and offers a unique context in which to carry-out a student project.

The USJ Project at CUBE began in 2009, the same year that the SA program was initiated at the Konan University campus in Nishinomiya. Since the relatively recent inception of the CUBE SA program, the USJ Project has become a major and integral component of SA students' first semester. In addition to comprising a portion of freshmen's grades, it also plays an important role in enriching and extending the

curriculum of the SA program beyond the classroom.

The USJ Project represents a portion of the grade for students' first-year Speaking and Listening class. The key requirements of the USJ Project are interviewing USJ park employees and the creation of group presentations with posters. The specific details and design of the USJ Project can vary from year to year depending upon specific circumstances, but every year the USJ Project retains its main components: the visit to USJ, employee interviews, note-taking and group-presentation with a visual aid.

One premise of the USJ Project is that the development of speaking, listening and reading skills can be enhanced if students have opportunities to experience real-life language interaction through meaningful and motivating activities (Cummins & Swain, 1986). In addition, another premise is that the USJ Project helps students to develop communicative competence. That is, the ability to communicate effectively in a variety of situations and contexts to accomplish certain goals (Brown, 2001; Canale, 1983). By requiring students to engage in real-world communication, the tasks of the USJ Project are conducive to developing several different kinds of communicative competence, such as interactional competence and academic competence (Richards, 1999). These competencies are utilized as the students engage with the intercultural, creative and problem-solving aspects of the USJ Project.

3 Project Objectives and Learning Objectives

The aims of the excursion to USJ can be divided into its project objectives and its learning objectives. The project objectives include: the development of presentation skills, group work skills, note-taking skills and the improvement of student socialization. The learning objectives include: listening to native speakers of English, practicing

interviewing skills, developing group presentations, exhibiting key elements of presentation delivery and using creative visual aids to enhance oral presentations. The project objectives and learning objectives are in agreement with the overarching semester objectives of the SA program's first semester Speaking and Listening class. In addition, the experience at USJ is also used as a prompt for an individual writing assignment in students' Writing and Grammar classes.

Presentation skills include the abilities of students to stand in front of an audience and deliver an informative lecture about their group's trip to USJ. Cooperative group-work skills are involved in the creation of the project presentation and its accompanying poster. Note-taking skills are required for the interview portion of the group project. Finally, the project aims to provide an opportunity for students to socialize in a fun environment; this is perhaps the most difficult-to-measure aspect of the USJ Project goals and requires some further elaboration.

Upon entering the SA program, students are streamed into three groups according to their ability levels. Placement into these groups can sometimes become a barrier to student socialization within the SA program. For the USJ Project, the SA program teachers divide the students into groups of three to cut-across their placement in different Speaking and Listening classes; the groupings are designed with the aim of including one student from each of the three ability levels. This provides opportunities for students to work cooperatively alongside classmates with whom they do not share classes. Additionally, the USJ Project presents an opportunity for students to interact with their English teachers outside of the classroom.

As for USJ Project learning objectives, listening to native speakers of English is required as a part of students' USJ park employee interviews. Interviewing skills are

involved in asking follow-up questions and taking notes. Information from the USJ park outing and USJ employee interviews are combined and used to create a group-presentation. Presentation delivery requires students to perform their presentations before an audience with a question and answer session at the end. Finally, students must use their posters as a means of supporting and enhancing the effectiveness of their presentations.

4 Program-Level Preparation and Student Orientation

Program preparation for the USJ Project starts before the beginning of the spring semester. The Study Abroad program makes special arrangements for all participating students to meet with and interview English-speaking foreign USJ park employees. These arrangements are made beforehand by CUBE staff through close consultation with the appropriate personnel at USJ. Other necessary steps of preparation take place after the start of the semester. SA teachers hold regular planning meetings in the weeks leading-up to the USJ Project. These preparations include the assignment of student groups, the assignment of SA teacher mentors to student groups, the printing of documents for students, coordinating the timing of the visit with the availability of USJ staff and confirming the train schedule to facilitate the trip between CUBE campus and USJ. Times and dates for the project are chosen with the aim of minimizing the impact on students' regular class schedules.

Student orientation for the USJ Project begins with a meeting of all SA program students and teachers during a portion of a designated Speaking and Listening class. Orientation materials detailing the goals and requirements of the USJ Project are distributed to students by the SA teachers. During this initial orientation meeting, the

teachers describe the objectives and requirements of the USJ Project and show a brief video which contains model examples of past student poster presentations. At the end of the orientation meeting, students are divided into their assigned groups and are given responsibilities to be carried-out before, during and after their USJ park visit. After assembling student groups for the first time, they have an initial brainstorming session in which they generate questions to ask during interviews of USJ park employees.

5 USJ Visit

During their visit to Universal Studios Japan, the students are required to complete a number of assignments in order to gather the information they will need for their presentations. These assignments include interviewing park employees (and at one point international guests), exploring a particular area of the park, and gathering information about a particular attraction (either a show or a ride). The exact nature of these assignments has evolved over the course of the Study Abroad Program due to changing circumstances within the Study Abroad Program and at USJ.

In 2009 and 2010, students visited USJ on a Saturday. The students arrived in the morning and stayed throughout the day. Since 2011, the visit has taken place on a weekday afternoon. In addition, the scheduling of activities at USJ is subject to negotiation. For example, generally the employee interviews occur immediately upon arrival at the park. However, one year there was a potential scheduling conflict that raised the possibility that the interview time might be moved to later in the day. Although ultimately this did not occur, it demonstrates the nature to which the USJ visit is subject to change based on factors both at CUBE and at USJ.

5.1 Employee Interviews

One of the central components of the USJ Project is the employee interview. Students have the opportunity to interview native speakers of English. Students are able to develop both their English ability and their cultural awareness through this interaction. They also have an opportunity to utilize English in a “real-world” setting, outside the walls of the classroom and with native speakers with whom they do not have a pre-existing relationship.

Employee interviews are conducted in English using questions generated by the students during the preparatory activities. During the project orientation, students are provided with very basic information about the employees (such as name, job title, and nationality). More in-depth information on employee backgrounds is withheld. Students are also encouraged to consider possible follow-up questions to further develop answers.

The format of the interviews has evolved over the years in response to the number of USJ employees available. In some years, only one or two interview subjects were available and interviews were conducted in a large group setting. In other years, multiple subjects were available and the Study Abroad Course students were divided into smaller groups (either together with other members of their assigned team or apart from other members of their team). Regardless of the format, all students are encouraged to take an active role in the interview by asking questions and taking notes of the USJ employees’ responses.



Figure 1: In years when few USJ employees are available for interviews, employee interviews take place in a large group.



Figure 2: Interviews are conducted in small groups when multiple USJ employees are present.

5.2 Attraction

Each group of students is assigned a specific attraction—either a ride or a show—at the USJ Park. This ensures that each group has a distinct element to their presentations. Consequently, student groups for the USJ project are generally identified by the attraction to which they are assigned (*e.g. Jaws group, Space Fantasy group*).

Students are instructed to observe the attraction carefully, and encouraged to take pictures when possible. Photography is largely dependent on the specific attraction. For example, groups assigned to the Hollywood Dream roller coaster are limited to photos of the entrance area and other external aspects of the ride, whereas students assigned to Waterworld are able to take photographs throughout the show. After experiencing the attraction, students take notes. These notes will later be used in preparing for their presentation.

5.3 Area

USJ is divided into several areas, each reminiscent of a movie set. Each group is responsible for exploring and reporting on an assigned area. Often, these areas host the attraction to which the group is assigned, so the Back to the Future group is responsible for the San Francisco area, where that attraction is located. Again, students are encouraged to take photographs and notes in preparation for their presentation. They are advised to pay attention to the types of businesses located in the area, the style of architecture, and any décor used by USJ to help create a distinct atmosphere in that area of the park. The final presentation requires students to explain how these elements contribute to the overall experience of the area for USJ visitors.

6 Preparing for the Presentations

Prior to the USJ visit, student groups may meet with their advisor informally to address any questions the group may have and to ensure the group is prepared. Such meetings are ungraded, and are generally quite short (about 5 minutes). Following the USJ visit, the students have approximately two to three weeks to prepare for their

presentations. During this period, students work with other members of their group to create a poster and plan their presentation. Groups are required to meet with their advisor four times between the trip to USJ and day of their presentations. These meetings provide the students the opportunity to ask questions and develop ideas for their presentation, and allow the advisor to monitor the group's progress.

The course of the mentoring meetings varies widely between groups. Often, initial meetings involve brainstorming ideas and organizing them. The second meeting involves refining ideas and identifying aspects of the presentation that need further attention. By the third and fourth meetings, much of the work is likely finished and the focus may be on rehearsing and practicing the presentation. However, this is highly variable, depending on group initiative and scheduling concerns.

Advisors score the mentoring meetings based on a standardized scoring sheet. Students are evaluated as a group, and each meeting is worth a maximum of 5 points based on the following criteria:

- a) Attendance (1 point): awarded if all members of the group are present
- b) Participation (1 point): awarded if all members of the group are engaged and active in the discussion, rather than letting one or two active students take the lead
- c) Questions (1 point): awarded if the students are prepared and asking question, as opposed to "awaiting instructions" from the advisor
- d) Preparedness (1 point): awarded if students have completed the tasks they agreed upon with their advisor during the previous meeting
- e) Progress (1 point): awarded if the instructor feels that the students have moved their presentation towards the final product

On presentation day, advisors compile the total score for each group and give this score to the student's Speaking and Listening teacher to be added to students' final grade.



Figure 3: Students consult with their USJ advisor while preparing for the presentation.

7 Presentations and Assessment

The final product of the USJ Project is a group poster presentation which is scheduled for an afternoon that does not interfere with students' normal class schedule. The Ozone, which is an English-only section of the sixth floor of CUBE, is the setting for student presentations. The presentations are delivered concurrently and multiple times to small audiences, which can include CUBE students, teachers and invited parents. The presentations are delivered in professional dress and each presentation lasts for approximately 10 minutes. All groups' presentations take place at approximately the same time and audience members can move between the presentations at will. The three members of each presentation group must divide their participation time evenly and be prepared to address audience questions. SA teachers monitor the presentations and take notes on a project rubric which will be used for final assessment. (See Appendix 1)

Project assessment criteria includes: students' professional attire, effective use of the poster as a visual aid, adherence to the 10 minute time-limit, eye contact with the audience, the quality of the presentation content, the clarity and grammar of the presentation and the responses to audience questions at the end of the presentation. All teachers in the Study Abroad program are involved in the assessment of student performance; grading is achieved by calculating the average of students' presentation scores and adding the scores from earlier mentoring meetings. The resulting score is given to all students in each group and comprises 10% of their overall grade in Speaking and Listening class.



Figure 4: Students present their USJ experience in the O-Zone.

8 Conclusion

The USJ Project has become one of the signature features of the CUBE SA program and one of the major grading milestones of the early academic year. The USJ Project not only provides students with opportunities to develop their English skills but also allows them to do so in a way that is engaging and fun. Future challenges to the

USJ Project will come from the ongoing need to tailor the program to match year-to-year circumstances in addition to meeting and surpassing student expectations. Student feedback of the USJ Project is typically favorable, but further research is required to gauge student feedback more accurately.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Presentation Rubric for USJ

Points	Descriptors	Comments
<p>60-54 AA</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Attire:</i> All members of the group are dressed professionally for the presentation. • <i>Visual Aid:</i> Good use of the poster. Each person points to the poster when giving the speech without turning away from the audience. The poster itself has large visible pictures and titles which can be seen and easily understood by the audience, thus making it an effective visual aid. • <i>Timing:</i> Each person in the group spoke an equal amount of time (about 3-4 minutes) for a total of a 10 minute presentation. • <i>Eye contact:</i> Students had frequent eye contact with the audience. Their presentation was memorized or they had prepared note cards which they used as an aid to spark their memory only as needed; the students did not read the speech “like a robot” from the card. • <i>Content:</i> The speech was well organized and included all six key discussion points (ride, restaurant, area, shop, employee interview, guest interview). The students provided a lot of interesting details. • <i>Clarity:</i> The speech was easy to understand. All members had good fluency, intonation and pronunciation. • <i>Questions:</i> At the end of the presentation, the members boldly requested questions and were able to answer them with little hesitation. 	
<p>53-48 A</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Attire:</i> Most members of the group are dressed professionally for the presentation. • <i>Visual Aid:</i> Some good use of the poster. However, some members forgot to point to the poster during the presentation or turned their back to the audience to do so. The poster may lack large pictures or titles making it less effective as a visual aid. • <i>Timing:</i> Each person in the group spoke but some people spoke more than others. The presentation was between 9 and 10 minutes long. • <i>Eye contact:</i> Students paused occasionally due to trouble remembering their speech or often read directly from notecards. This caused occasional lapses in eye contact with the audience. • <i>Content:</i> The speech was slightly disorganized or missing one of the key discussion points (ride, restaurant, area, shop, employee interview, guest interview) organization. The students provided some interesting details. • <i>Clarity:</i> The speech was easy to understand most of the time. Most members had good fluency, intonation and pronunciation. • <i>Questions:</i> At the end of the presentation, the members made a weak request for presentation and had some difficulties answering them. 	
<p>47-42 B</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Attire:</i> Most of the group members are in less formal, not professional clothing. • <i>Visual Aid:</i> Little use of the poster. Fewer than half of the members referred to it during the presentation speech. Pictures and titles were hard to read. • <i>Timing:</i> Each person in the group spoke but some people spoke significantly more than others. The presentation was NOT 10 minutes long. • <i>Eye contact:</i> There was infrequent eye contact with the audience. Note cards were overused with students reading directly off the cards or there were major lapses in memorization. • <i>Content:</i> The speech was not well organized and lacked two or more of the six key discussion points (ride, restaurant, area, shop, employee interview, guest interview). The students provided only a few details. • <i>Clarity:</i> The speech was not easy to understand. Most members were not fluent, and had trouble with their intonation and pronunciation. • <i>Questions:</i> At the end of the presentation, the members made a weak request for questions from their listeners but could not answer the question asked. 	
<p>41-36 C</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Attire:</i> None of the group members are dressed professionally. They are wearing casual clothing. • <i>Visual Aid:</i> No use of the poster. The poster was only seen behind them and not used during the speech. Pictures and titles were incomprehensible. • <i>Timing:</i> Each person in the group did not speak and the presentation was NOT 10 minutes long. • <i>Eye contact:</i> Members were not prepared with note-cards. This hurt their ability to give a smooth speech and interact with the audience. Students were not able to look at the audience when talking. • <i>Content:</i> The speech was very disorganized and lacked most of the six key discussion points (ride, restaurant, area, shop, employee interview, guest interview). The students gave little to no interesting details. • <i>Clarity:</i> The speech was not easy to understand. Members were not fluent and had trouble with their intonation and pronunciation. • <i>Questions:</i> At the end of the presentation, members did not request questions from the listeners and were not able to answer any questions when asked. 	