

Community Outreach and Autonomous Learning

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Community outreach projects promote autonomous learning, critical thinking, and practical language skills by enabling learners to interact with English in specific, nonscripted situations. They help students develop sociocultural competence in English as they learn about the local community and create volunteer projects to respond to community needs. Community outreach projects also foster positive bonds between the university and the local community. The Active Tokai Local Ambassadors (ATLAS) student group at Tokai University's Shimizu campus created a successful community outreach project to help with interpreting for luxury liner passengers coming into Shimizu Port. We discuss the ATLAS community outreach project, its benefits for the students, and how the project motivated them to study English.

地域貢献プロジェクトは、教室外の英語実践の場とすることで、学習者の自立学習、クリティカルシンキング、そして英語運用に多大なる貢献をすることができる。また、学習者が地域について学び、地域の英語のニーズに合ったボランティア活動を行うことによって、日本語と英語の社会文化的能力の習得を促すことができる。さらには、大学と地域との連携を促進させることができる。東海大学清水校舎の英語グループATLASは、清水港に入港する豪華客船の乗客のための通訳ボランティアを行い、地域貢献プロジェクトを成功させた。本論文では、ATLASの地域貢献プロジェクトの設立から実践までのプロセスや、学習者自身の成長、英語学習への意欲の向上について論じる。

One of the difficulties facing English language teachers and learners in Japan is finding a means for students to use English in authentic, autonomous situations outside the classroom. Japan is generally considered a monolingual country, where the language of everyday discourse is Japanese (Kubota, 1998), so finding opportunities to use English in real-life contexts can be a challenge. Universities often have English labs, chat rooms, and English clubs, but a drawback of these is that they may not actually provide students with an avenue to fluency in real-world contexts. Another option for English language students is to learn practical language skills through interaction with members of the community outside of the school setting by participating in community outreach projects (Andrew, 2011a). Community outreach activities involve researching community needs and finding solutions, creating networks, and then volunteering in the local community. Many types of community outreach exist—volunteering for community cleanup activities, helping to translate literature about the town, working in schools, and becoming community ambassadors at local events.

English language students benefit from community outreach projects on several levels. The projects promote autonomous learning, critical thinking, the development of practical skills, and the use of English for specific purposes (ESP) because students have to find ways to negotiate meaning and devise methods of communicating in English in authentic situations outside the classroom without the direct help of their instructors (Andrew, 2011b). These projects also support personal autonomy outside the classroom as learners take control over their lives and their learning (Benson, 2011) because they give students the opportunity to engage in authentic interaction in specific contexts with the local residents and other people coming to the community. Andrew (2011b) found that for immigrants and students living in a new city, engaging with the community gave them a sense of belonging as they interacted with local residents and learned about the area in which they lived. As language learners, these students developed their identity in the new language and learned intercultural communication skills and strategies to negotiate meaning by placing themselves in a situated context where they had to use English lan-

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guage skills to communicate (Andrew, 2011b). Andrew's research was conducted in New Zealand, but we believe community outreach projects can have the same benefits for university students learning English in Japan. University students are often transplanted to a new city where they are unfamiliar with the local area and living on their own for the first time. In Japan, professors can help their students adjust to life in their new city while using English in authentic situations by creating a relationship with the local city office and asking city officials if students can help develop community outreach projects that support local foreign language needs.

Tokai University ATLAS Club

The Active Tokai Local Ambassadors (ATLAS) group at Tokai University's Marine Science and Technology campus in Shimizu, Shizuoka, was started by a Japanese English lecturer who became the club's primary adviser during the 2013 school year. At the time, the campus did not have an English club, so the lecturer opened an English Café at her office to give students opportunities to use English outside of the classroom with the foreign English teachers. The impetus for starting ATLAS was that the students were interested in finding more chances to use English in real-life contexts. Also, the students were marine sciences and technology majors, and as such understood that English may be necessary in their future studies or careers.

The adviser received information from another professor that two foreign researchers were coming to the Shimizu campus and recruited several English Café students to research local sightseeing spots and act as interpreters on a tour. After interpreting for the visiting professors, the students realized there was a need for English language support in the Shimizu community and that community outreach projects in which they could use English could provide a service to the town. The students began by thinking about possible community needs, which helped them develop critical thinking skills as they started to notice areas where English was needed in the community and brainstormed ways to learn English skills that would help serve those needs. As a result, the ATLAS group decided that their first project would be to do something for the local area around the campus.

At the beginning of the 2014 school year the ATLAS group found that there was a need for an English map of the *Miho no Matsubara* seaside woods, which had been designated as part of the Mt. Fuji World Heritage Site in 2013. With the help of their Japanese adviser, the students decided to apply for a university Challenge Center grant to provide funding for the map project, but they were still undecided about the map's contents. The students did not have a specific audience for the map and therefore did not have a clear

idea of what type of information to include in it. At their initial meetings, the ATLAS students brainstormed many ideas for the map, including a list of local restaurants, general information about the Miho area, and the actual route that would be presented on the map. However, they had a difficult time determining what information would be the most useful for foreign visitors to Miho.

Around the same time, a new foreign instructor began working at the campus. She went to the Shimizu city office to find information and learned that Shimizu was a waning industrial port city, and due to the decline in industry, the city was looking for ways to revitalize itself. With beautiful beaches and the *Miho no Matsubara* seaside woods, the town had decided to promote its tourist industry. Through her conversation with the city hall staff, the instructor discovered that beginning in 2014 several luxury liners would be stopping at Shimizu Port each year, and the city was looking for volunteer interpreters to help foreign passengers with a variety of tasks when they came onshore.

Armed with this information, the two ATLAS advisers discussed with the students the prospect of becoming involved with this volunteer opportunity. The students decided the interpreting project would be a useful opportunity to improve their English communication skills and further develop their map project, but were concerned about missing classes to do the volunteer activities, which often took place on school days. The Japanese adviser arranged for university support by getting permission for ATLAS students to receive excused absences when volunteering in the community. This encouraged them to join. The students were eager to participate in interpreting for the cruise ship passengers because it provided them with a chance to engage in English with people from all over the world, which would help them develop sociocultural skills through interaction with people unfamiliar with Japanese customs. With the help of the advisers, they began to think about possible needs that the passengers might have. They also began learning about services currently available to foreigners visiting the town and discussed English skills they would need for the project to succeed.

The Community Outreach Project: Phase 1

The ATLAS club members began their community outreach project by organizing meetings with city hall staff to determine the type of interpreting they would be asked to do and to get advice from a professional map designer about the map project. Because 2014 was the first year luxury liners were coming to Shimizu, the city hall staff had made plans for cultural exhibitions at the port along with booths providing information and the selling of local products. However, they could only estimate the type of English assistance that would be needed by the passengers. Also, the students were not local citizens

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and had not done any prior research, so they did not know much about local services such as money exchange, international postage, and goods sold at local shops. Therefore, the experience was challenging, yet it was encouraging for both the city hall staff and the students because they had found a project that could be developed. They were also encouraged by the realization that they were capable of communicating with the foreign visitors and that they could think on their feet and find ways to understand and address the foreign visitors' needs.

After their first volunteer interpreting experience, the students realized they lacked the English vocabulary and knowledge about the town that was needed to help the passengers. At the next ATLAS meeting, they discussed several ideas about how to improve their next foray into volunteering for the luxury liner passengers. First, they talked about the different types of language skills and vocabulary they would need to develop in order to successfully help the passengers. For example, the students needed to know how to explain access procedures to the local free WiFi service, give directions to the nearby shopping mall and convenience stores, provide information about and describe local goods that were being sold at portside booths, and use the English maps provided by the city to tell the passengers about local places of interest.

The students saw typical daily activities from an outsider's point of view and realized that working with foreign luxury liner passengers was very different from working with their foreign instructor, who was familiar with daily Japanese life. For example, they realized that foreign guests had difficulty with tasks such as taking a city bus, shopping for souvenirs at shops where English was not spoken, and understanding the Japanese money system. The experience proved an autonomous learning opportunity for the students because they interacted with people unfamiliar with Japanese life, and the teacher was not telling them what they needed to do or providing them with the necessary language to complete their tasks. Rather, they had to determine the best method of communicating and making themselves understood in real time with people who were not used to speaking with language learners, used unfamiliar vocabulary, and spoke very rapidly.

Using the ideas generated from the first volunteer experience, the ATLAS students began to think critically about their interpreting project. They brainstormed ways to make their next volunteer opportunity go more smoothly. They made mini phrase-books to refer to when talking to the foreign guests and revised the map project. Once the students had a draft of their map prepared, they showed it to the city office staff and were told the map did not match the needs the staff had envisioned for the luxury liner passengers. The students then looked at existing English maps of Shimizu and realized these maps had information about the downtown area, but nothing explaining how to get to

Miho no Matsubara, which is on a peninsula several kilometers from the main part of the town. They revised their map again and the *Miho no Matsubara* map became a colorful, artistically drawn map of the route from Shimizu Port to *Miho no Matsubara* using public transportation or taxi. The final version was a user-friendly map that included the bus route, listing all of the stops and the total price to get from the port to *Miho no Matsubara*. It also featured a simple explanation of the procedure for taking a city bus with photographs showing how to pay and the coins needed for fare. Another section of the map had basic phrases for explaining where visitors wanted to go that were written in both English and Japanese, so people could simply point to the phrase and the bus driver could understand what they needed. Finally, the map had information about some local shops where people could buy inexpensive meals. Once the map was completed, the students added it to the materials about Shimizu that were provided to the luxury liner passengers when they came off the ships at the port.

The Community Outreach Project: Phase 2

During the 2015 school year, the ATLAS students decided to expand the community outreach project with the luxury liners coming into Shimizu Port. They visited *Miho no Matsubara* and were given a tour and detailed explanation of the history of Miho Shrine, the God's Road path leading to the well-known seaside pine tree woods, and other general information about the area. The students then translated the information into English and prepared a tour to *Miho no Matsubara* using the city bus and the Shimizu waterbus. For the final volunteer day in October 2015, they prepared accident waiver forms and posters in English advertising the tour, and then talked to passengers as they came off the ship. Passengers who had not signed up for a tour through the tour agent were asked if they wanted to try the students' tour. Equipped with copies of the Miho map, the students led a group of 21 visiting luxury liner passengers on their tour. The tour was well received by the passengers who were interested in doing something less minutely planned than the bus tours arranged by the ship's travel company. They also showed enthusiasm in supporting the students in their project to develop their English skills by introducing the local sights.

ATLAS Student Reactions to Community Outreach

The instructors surveyed the students about the ATLAS projects and found their experience correlated with Andrew's (2011a) assessment of his project with students in New Zealand. The students rated the three main community outreach projects, called The Miho Map, Luxury Liner, and Miho Tour on a scale of 1-5 (1 = *like a lot*; 2 = *like*; 3 = *no*

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opinion; 4 = *dislike*; 5 = *extremely dislike*). The results were that 69% of the students rated the luxury liner 1 or 2, 60% ranked the Miho tour at the top, and 36% liked a lot or liked the Miho Map. This indicates that the most popular projects were the interactive activities. It also suggests the students preferred working directly with the luxury liner passengers and wanted to have more social opportunities to use English rather than indoor preparation tasks.

In the comment section of the questionnaire, the students' responses coincided with their ratings of the interactive activities (comments have not been edited for accuracy):

It was my first time to have authentic opportunities to use English.

I became aware that my English level, my English is poor and this experience led to study English hard.

I thought I wanted to speak English more.

I could listen to English spoken by non native English speaking people.

These comments attest to the meaningfulness of the projects to the students and how the projects inspired them to pursue their English studies. They became aware of their speaking level and their other strengths and weaknesses. For example, the students learned that there was a gap between classroom English and English used in authentic communicative situations. They talked to people who spoke very fast or used idiomatic expressions that they were not familiar with and realized the need to find more opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. The comment on listening shows how the student gained curiosity by listening to a variety of Englishes. Although the students were used to the English used by Japanese and native English-speaking teachers in their classes, for some this was the first opportunity to interact in English with a variety of people from around the world. This motivated the students to develop their language skills, critical thinking, and intercultural competence as a result of using English in new and uncontrolled situations.

Most of the students involved in the ATLAS club in the 2014-2015 school years were 1st- and 2nd-year students who were taking compulsory English courses that taught general English skills but did not focus on ESP or the development of intercultural communication skills. Some students had studied English conversation online or completed short study-abroad programs or homestays, but many had never used English outside of the classroom in Japan. The survey showed that the community outreach project benefited the students' English education because the opportunity to use English in real-life,

unscripted situations motivated them to continue to look for opportunities to use English and to improve their language skills.

Benefits of Community Outreach

The ATLAS community outreach project was beneficial to the students for several reasons. Through their community outreach work the ATLAS group members came to understand some of the Shimizu community foreign language needs and were able to help address those needs. They were also able to experience English in a setting in which they interacted with people from around the world who are not used to dealing with language learners. The advisers observed that the students had to develop skills to negotiate meaning and deal with a variety of styles of interaction, including people who communicated in a very direct or demanding fashion that was unlike the typical communicative style of people in Japan. Some of the luxury liner passengers also had different conceptions of social distance than the students were used to. When helping with WiFi connections for example, sometimes the passengers stood very close to the students or handed their devices to the students to find the network and input the passwords. This helped the students understand that they were in situations of trust with the foreign visitors, and as a result they developed intercultural competence and negotiation styles that could not be learned from a textbook.

Another benefit was that the students had to learn to work on their own without constant support from their advisers. The interpreting for the luxury liner passengers usually took place during school hours. Therefore, when the students engaged in these activities, their advisers were only able to be present for short times to observe and provide support. For the bulk of the time spent helping luxury liner passengers, the students were not able to rely on their advisers. By volunteering themselves as English ambassadors in the Shimizu community, the students were able to engage in autonomous learning activities that helped expand their base of English knowledge and develop real-world communicative competence. They had to use English in unscripted situations that required thinking quickly and finding the language skills needed without the help of an instructor. As a result, they gained confidence in their ability to use English when communicating with people from around the world as well as to work smoothly with town officials and other volunteers at the port. These experiences helped the students acquire not only language skills, but also the critical thinking and sociocultural understanding that will be useful for working in the global community of the future.

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Hurdles to Developing Community Outreach Projects

One of the most important elements necessary to start a project outside the classroom is administrative support. In order to start a project and for it to succeed, it is mandatory to get permission or understanding from the university. The preparation of university documents is one of the adviser's roles and may involve several steps, depending on the university. For the ATLAS community outreach project the Japanese instructor needed to explain the project and register special documents with the university for extracurricular activities. This enabled students to conduct the projects safely because they needed to be fully insured and also get excused absences from the university. Without support from the university, the project would not have succeeded due to worries about liability or accidents as well as the students' inability to take time off from class. Therefore, it was important to establish a good relationship with the university office in charge of student activities and to make sure the office had a clear understanding of the content of the activities. Due to possible misunderstandings or language barriers, this part of the project fell on the Japanese adviser, who could clearly explain the parameters and goals of the project as well as navigate the administrative work involved more easily than the foreign adviser could.

Another hurdle is recruiting new members and maintaining student interest, which can be challenging because the students have many other obligations such as classwork, research activities, and part-time jobs. Also, the ATLAS group has not been recognized as an official club despite receiving university support for the community outreach project. As a result, students might feel the projects are casual activities and not something that needs to be carefully planned or taken seriously, and an effort needs to be made to promote the activities. To advertise the group's projects and create interest, the ATLAS community outreach project was introduced in the inter-Tokai student newsletter and on the school's homepage. At the same time, the ATLAS students have worked to recruit new members by holding an exhibition about their project at the school festival. The advisers have helped the students maintain interest by providing language support and making connections with ship staff to give the students ship tours and explanations about working on luxury liners. These activities have helped the students realize future career options for marine science and navigation majors, which in turn promotes interest in improving their English skills and continuing to participate in community outreach projects.

Conclusion

Although the ATLAS community outreach project seems quite complex and time consuming, generally the group meets for 1 or 2 hours each week to discuss their activities. Students then do individual tasks on their own and share ideas through social media. For

example, when they began preparing for the Miho tour, the Japanese adviser helped the students meet with the owners of local businesses and service providers. The students then divided their notes to work on translating the information and planned their activities during the weekly meetings.

Volunteering for the luxury liners often takes place during school hours and lasts for about half a day, but because the students receive excused absences from the university, they eagerly volunteer. The advisers provide guidance with the projects but offer little overt supervision, which contributes to the autonomous aspect. Both advisers often attend the ATLAS meetings to provide the language support that enables the students to implement the projects. The ATLAS students and advisers have found the staff at the Shimizu city office open and interested in working with the university group. The city office staff appreciates the support the students provide when the luxury liners visit and the students feel connected to the community they are living in. They also have a unique chance to connect with the world as part of a project that benefits the town and helps them develop their English skills.

The Tokai University ATLAS group community outreach projects currently focus on a specific situation in a port city, but similar projects can be developed by other university English groups in communities throughout Japan. By making enquiries at the local city office or international center, instructors and students can find information about possible projects involving English to help visitors or make them feel welcome in the community. They can also begin to notice areas where English support is needed and work with the city officials to develop creative projects for meeting the community's needs. As a result, community outreach projects benefit both the town and the students while creating a positive relationship between the university and the people in the town where it is located.

Bio Data

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