

《実践報告》

Supporting Students through the Interview Process for Overseas Internships*

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1. Introduction

According to the media and other sources, Japanese students these days are likely to choose to stay and study in Japan and often opt out of study-abroad programs. Data published by the Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO, 2017) show that the number of Japanese students studying abroad decreased from 82,945 in 2004 to 60,138 in 2012. However, in a globalizing society, more and more students need to stay and study in other countries in order to gain new perspectives and to create something valuable for future generations by collaborating with people from different backgrounds. In order to encourage this, the government of Japan has laid out goals for doubling the number of Japanese students studying abroad by 2020 and for “developing globally competitive human resources” (*Japan Revitalization Strategy*, 2013, p. 23). Recently, the government has been offering overseas programs such as the “Tobitate!” (Leap for Tomorrow!) study abroad campaign (2013) and the TeamUp campaign (2015). Through these programs, students can gain overseas experiences that are essential for understanding Japan’s position in a globalized world and how they, as Japanese citizens, can contribute to changing the world for the better. This is what is required for students

to become active global citizens. Hence, it is important for administrators and teachers in higher education to give them opportunities to experience different worlds by increasing the number of participants in study abroad programs. Therefore, two things are important: (i) to offer students appealing study abroad programs; and (ii) to support aspiring students in the stages of application for such programs. Since appealing study abroad programs attract a larger number of students than they can accept, students have to go through a competitive selection process, and there are many methods of supporting students during this process. One way is to prepare them for interviews in English, given that they have few chances to speak English in such settings.

Setsunan University offers its students a unique study abroad program with Valencia College (Florida, U.S.A.) called the Valencia International College Program. This program provides students opportunities to receive college-level education and to work at one of the biggest theme parks in the world, the Walt Disney World® Resort. This program requires applicants to have higher levels of practical English skills. Setsunan University has been developing a support system since 2016 for those students who advance to the English interview stage. Since then, five students have applied for the Valencia International College Program, and four of them successfully passed the interview stages and worked as interns at the Walt Disney World® Resort. The applicant who was not successful did not advance to the interview stage. This case-study article gives a brief explanation of the Valencia International College Program and explains why it is appealing to students. It also presents how applicants have been supported, with a focus on the interview process. Additionally, it presents techniques and ideas that teachers can use to support their students in the stages of application to any program that requires them to go through an interview process with higher levels of practical English skills.

This paper is divided into six sections. The next section presents a brief explanation of the Valencia International College Program and why it is an appealing program for students. In Section 3, the process for supporting students by engaging in interview training is described. In Section 4, feedback on the interview process collected from the four successful applicants is examined, and improvements to the interview training process are proposed. In Section 5, some limitations of the interview training process

are considered. The final section concludes this paper with some comments on how this program benefits Setsunan University.

2. Valencia International College Program

2.1 What is the Valencia International College Program?

The Valencia International College Program includes about five months of full-time academic study and relevant academic training courses. It offers students four courses, where students study with teachers from Valencia College and also work as interns at the Walt Disney World® Resort:

Valencia International College Program

- Business Management Course
- Academic Training Course
- Disney Collegiate ACE Course
- Academic Training Practicum (Walt Disney World® Internship)

The Business Management Course and the Academic Training Course are offered by Valencia College. The Business Management Course is aimed at giving students opportunities to acquire transferable skills necessary for business management in general, and they learn how to effectively communicate with guests and customers, how to organize a team of colleagues and employees, and so forth. The Academic Training Course is an online course, where students are required to participate in online discussions and submit assignments. The Disney Collegiate ACE Course (ACE = American Council on Education) is a practical course offered by the Walt Disney World® Resort. Students choose one of the six classes offered and they learn about corporate analyses, hospitality management, organizational leadership development, etc.

This program is unique in that it includes the Academic Training Practicum, where students work as interns at the Walt Disney World® Resort. They, as cast members, are assigned a wide variety of “roles” such as costumed character performers, concierges, ride and attraction attendants, sales associates in merchandise stores, staff members of quick service restaurants, etc. They work six to seven hours a day, 5 days a week, which means they work about 30-37 hours a week at the most (they may have to work more

during holiday weeks). Since this is an internship program, students are reasonably paid and can cover a part of the expenses of staying in the United States. In this practicum, students have to take responsibility for their work, collaborate with their co-workers and care for guests from all over the world. They are actively committed to guests' experiences during their stays at the resort. Working as cast members in one of the world's most popular amusement parks gives students chances to put the skills they have acquired in the other courses into practice, while obtaining hands-on training and knowledge necessary for their future careers.

Students are responsible for creating an environment where guests can enjoy the park services, which requires them to use English, so they have to undergo a competitive selection process that requires higher levels of English proficiency. First, applicants must have sufficiently good English skills with TOEIC[®] scores of 600 or higher. Then, their general English proficiency is measured with the Versant[™] test. If their English proficiency is judged to be good enough and they can pass the test, they have to take two interviews in English: one is a 10-minute Skype interview with a representative from Valencia College, and the other is an interview with recruiters from the Walt Disney World[®] Resort. This interview is extremely challenging because the recruiters ask applicants many difficult questions in English. They ask students questions such as why working with team members is important. This type of question is probably difficult for applicants to answer even in Japanese. Hence, even students with high TOEIC[®] scores can be perplexed during the interview, and it is challenging for them to successfully go through the actual interview process. This is mainly because they are not accustomed to having interviews in English. It is, then, essential that students prepare beforehand to answer a wider variety of questions in English. Therefore, they need strong support from teachers, and teachers have to assist students through this selection process. Setsunan University has developed an interview training process for applicants to the Internship program.

2.2 Why is the program appealing for students?

The internship program is extremely appealing and valuable for aspiring students for the following reasons. First, students study in academic courses at a diploma-course level (not at a language-school level). Since participants are highly motivated and have

already achieved a certain level of English proficiency before starting the program, the academic components are developed so that students can learn in English, not simply learn English. In addition, the entire program is effectively created in such a way that what students learn in the courses can be directly applied to their work responsibilities, and vice versa. What they do as interns at the resort lays a concrete foundation for classes. For example, students are offered opportunities to talk about their working relationships with other cast members in the Valencia business management class. The internship component is effectively connected with the other three academic components.

Secondly, this program offers students many merits that they cannot gain in other overseas internship programs. The Walt Disney World® Resort is world-renowned for its customer service and it makes every effort to make “magic” happen for guests. Visitors are impressed with Disney’s “it-is-all-about-guests” policy (Cain, 2018). Cast members are expected to be cast members whether onstage or backstage. In order to make that happen, the Walt Disney World® Resort has many “secrets” that only cast members can gain access to. Such secrets cannot be learned in other similar amusement parks. Since many students at the Faculty of Foreign Studies hope to work in the hospitality industry, learning these secrets hands-on is of much benefit for their future careers.

Thirdly, the program can offer its participants the opportunity to experience diversity. People from all over the world visit the resort, so working as cast members means that they have to collaborate with people from different cultural backgrounds. Under the “it-is-all-about-guests” policy, they have to be careful even when giving directions with their fingers, because it may be interpreted differently from what they expect it to mean. The Walt Disney World® Resort is one of the best places for students to learn how to work in diverse settings. Moreover, cast members also come from every part of the world. Working with highly motivated cast members with different cultural backgrounds at the resort represents a multicultural business setting, and this gives participants opportunities to get a few steps closer to their future dreams.

As can be seen, the Valencia International College Program has much to offer, so it is no wonder that many students hope to participate in the program. However, the selection

process is challenging and there are some hurdles that they have to overcome to be successful applicants. One of these hurdles is the English interview process.

3. The Interview Training Process

At Setsunan University, an interview training process for applicants to the Valencia International College Program has been developed. This process focuses on three aims: (i) predicting questions, (ii) answering unexpected questions, and (iii) personalizing answers. This process is conducted over four to six one-hour interview training sessions depending on the time available in the applicants' and the interview trainer's schedules.

The first aim is to predict questions. At the beginning of the interview training process, applicants are asked what questions they expect to receive during the interview. Even though participants have little experience with interviews, generally they are able to come up with some of the most common interview questions: “Why do you want to join this program?”; “Why do you like Disney?”; “What kind of work would you like to do at Disney World?” By having students brainstorm questions at the beginning of the interview training process and by having them make a list of the questions that they create, it sets the expectation that applicants need to take an active role in the interview training process. Generally, students generate three to six questions during the initial question prediction. In order to help them generate more questions, a variety of interview situations are presented. For example, what if the interviewer looks very businesslike—what kind of questions would he or she ask? What if the interviewer seems to be a big fan of Disney animation? What kind of questions would he or she ask? By providing situations such as these, students will become aware that different types of interviewers may ask different types of questions, and that they may value different answers. This encourages students to focus their attention on their interviewer rather than on themselves during the interview process, and this, in essence, helps them improve their skill of observation during the interview process.

Once students have brainstormed about ten questions, the actual interview practice can begin. In the first few practices, only the applicant-generated questions are used. The goal during these first few practices is to make sure that the interviewee feels comfortable with the questions they have created. This practice with the applicant's

questions is held during the first session of the interview training.

Once students are comfortable with the base interview, they can start working on the second aim of the interview training process. This is to practice answering unexpected questions. During the interview training process, students tend to prepare fixed answers for interview questions. These answers do not take into account the fact that interviewers will often ask questions that applicants do not expect, and they usually do this intentionally to determine how well applicants perform under pressure. Starting from the second session, the interview trainer adds a new question to the interview practice that is not on the student's list of questions. Generally, applicants are not able to answer it well. After the interview, they are given some feedback on their performance in regards to the new question. This usually involves feedback on body language, tone of voice, expressions, vocabulary, and grammar. The main focus of the feedback is to give advice on how not to look or sound surprised or nervous. This provides applicants the opportunity to improve the impression that they make on interviewers, even when answering unexpected questions. In each session, two or three new questions are added to the list of questions that applicants have made. This also allows the interview trainer to add questions to the interview training that previous applicants have said were difficult for them. Another benefit of this is that the more questions that are added to the list, the more variety there is in the interview practice. It is important that applicants get a variety of questions in differing orders so that they do not fall into the trap of practicing a fixed dialogue. Since the questions are different in each practice, applicants are required to listen carefully to the questions in the interview, and this allows the applicant to receive advice on active listening skills such as eye contact, nodding, smiling and so on.

The final aim of the interview training process is to encourage students to personalize their answers. Personalizing answers means that they should be related to applicants' experiences, opinions, and emotions. In preparing their answers to interview questions, applicants tend to focus on what they think interviewers want to hear. This results in answers that sound very mechanical and which are devoid of personality or passion. Such answers will not make a strong impact on interviewers. Personalizing answers is one way to avoid this. Additionally, personalizing answers makes it easier to see the

passion of applicants. To give an example, one previous applicant was asked why he wanted to work for Disney. He answered that Walt Disney worked hard to make his dream come true, and that he was able to make it come true because he believed in the power of dreams. The applicant stated that he also believed in the power of dreams, which is why he wanted to work at Disney World. As an answer to the question, it makes sense, but it was not very concrete. What were the applicant's dreams? How was he going to achieve these dreams? In what way was his experience similar to Walt Disney's? Another thing to consider about this answer is that the interviewer is likely to have heard many applicants talk about Walt Disney as an inspiration, so such an answer would not have been very memorable. In order to stand out as an interviewee, it is important to say something different from others. The applicant received feedback to personalize his answer, which resulted in a dramatic improvement. He talked about his dance performance experience. He was very active in dance, and had even traveled to the United States as a part of a dance team who won a dance competition. Then he went on to explain how he would like to use his dance experience to entertain guests at Disney World. This was a much more memorable answer. By relating his personal experiences, he was able to communicate his passion and connect his experience to what he might be doing in the Disney parks.

In addition, personalizing answers has another benefit. If the applicant had persisted in talking about Walt Disney in the interview, the Disney interviewer is likely to have had extensive knowledge about the founder of the company and would have been able to ask follow-up questions that would have revealed a lack of knowledge in the applicant. When applicants personalize their answers and talk about their personal experiences, interviewers are no longer experts and will be more likely to ask follow-up questions that will be easier for the applicant to answer.

4. The Participant Questionnaire

This interview training process is continually being updated based on feedback received from successful applicants. In order to improve this process, the four most recent applicants were asked to complete a questionnaire on all aspects of their experience with the Valencia International College Program. Regarding the interview training process, four areas for improvement were identified: (i) focus on casual interviews,

(ii) improve applicants' background knowledge of Disney parks, movies, and characters, (iii) provide more feedback on body language, and (iv) practice asking questions as well as answering them.

First, the interview training process should focus more on casual interviews. In previous trainings, an equal amount of time was devoted to formal and casual interviews.

However, previous applicants mentioned that the interview was different from Japanese-style interviews in that it was more casual than they expected. The tone of the interviewers was friendly rather than formal, so they reported that the interview was less stressful than anticipated. Additionally, one applicant mentioned that there were some questions that were not about Disney or the internship, so the interview felt more like a regular conversation. These comments make it clear that cultural knowledge is just as important as language ability. It is not just cultural differences between the recruitment practices in Japan and the United States, but also differences in corporate culture.

Disney cast members are well known for their ability to create a warm and welcoming environment (Disney Institute & Kinni, 2011), so it should come as no surprise that interviews with Disney would be designed to elicit how well applicants can interact with others in a warm and friendly manner.

Second, applicants' knowledge of Disney parks, movies, and characters should be increased. In their answers to the questionnaire, previous applicants mentioned that it is important to be confident. In order to become more confident, they advised that future applicants should do research on Disney and the Disney parks. In previous trainings, applicants were given little support in this area. One way in which applicants could be supported in this area is by providing web sites that they could research independently. Additionally, while adding questions to the interviews, interview trainers could add questions that elicit a deeper knowledge of Disney. In this way, applicants could become more aware of the importance of learning more about the company and its properties and products as a way of improving their confidence during the interview.

Third, the impression that applicants make through their body language should be improved. Past applicants mentioned that smiling and presenting a friendly appearance during the interview was important. This is understandable, since participants in this

internship are required to work in customer service. Interviewers are looking for applicants that can make a good impression on guests. Therefore, during the interview training process, applicants should receive more feedback on the impression that they make through smiling and body language.

Finally, the ability of applicants to continue talking during the interview should be improved. In other words, applicants should keep talking beyond the answers that the interviewers' questions elicit. One applicant mentioned that it is important not to just say "nothing" or "no." For example, when an interviewer asks an applicant if he or she has any questions, the applicant should have some questions to ask. Additionally, if an answer to a question is short, the applicant should be prepared to follow it up. To provide an example, one applicant mentioned that he was asked, "Have you ever watched Winnie the Pooh?" He had not watched it, but instead of just answering, "No, I haven't." he followed up by mentioning that he was interested in watching it and then asked the interviewer which movie or series he should watch first. The applicant felt that he was able to answer the question successfully even though he hadn't seen the series that the interviewer asked about. For the interview training, the primary focus was on answering questions, but from this feedback, it can be seen that asking questions in interviews can also be important. In fact, asking questions can empower applicants to gain some control in their interviews. In the future, asking questions will become one of the core skills taught in the interview training process.

5. Limitations

There are some limitations to consider when evaluating this support program. First, the number of applicants each year is quite low (one to two applicants per year). Therefore, there are not enough participants to conduct a quantitative study, so no claims can be made for the effectiveness of the interview training process described in this paper. There are other factors that may contribute to passing the interview stage of the application process. The first is preexisting English ability. A TOEIC[®] score of 600 or above is required to apply to the program, and applicants must achieve an acceptable score on the Versant[™] test in order to move to the interview stage. It is possible that most of the applicants who accomplish this already have sufficient English ability to pass the interview stage. Second, study abroad experience could contribute to interview

success. Of the four most recent successful applicants, two had recently studied abroad before the interview. The experience of living abroad may have made speaking with the interviewer easier for these applicants. Finally, motivation may play a factor in interview success. Since the program has strict application requirements, it is possible that only highly motivated students would apply, and that they would be motivated enough to sufficiently prepare for the interview on their own without any assistance from the university. The limitations mentioned here are beyond the scope of this paper, but future research in how these factors affect the result of the interview would be beneficial.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the interview training process for the Valencia International College Program focuses on the following three aims: (i) predicting questions, (ii) answering unexpected questions, and (iii) personalizing answers. Through the feedback provided by previously successful applicants, some ways in which the training program can be improved have been identified. First, focusing on casual interviews will better prepare applicants for the type of interview that Disney conducts for its internship program. Second, providing students with more information about Disney can improve their confidence level. Third, giving students more feedback on smiling and body language can improve the impression that they make on interviewers. Fourth, training students to ask questions as well as give answers will enable applicants to develop the skills they need to gain some measure of control in their interviews.

The Valencia International College Program increases the possibility of attracting more prospective students to Setsunan University. When high school students visit this university on open campus days, many of them show keen interest in the program. In fact, one of the successful applicants stated that she came to Setsunan University because it has this program. Therefore, it is not sufficient to just offer students opportunities to participate in this program. It is essential that the number of successful applicants increases. This will require gathering feedback from previous successful applicants in order to improve the interview training process, and conducting future research on factors that may contribute to interview success. By doing these things, the university will be better prepared to support the students who apply to the Valencia International College Program.

Notes

*This is based on the paper orally presented by Hooper and Sumiyoshi at the 57th JACET international Convention (at Tohoku Gakuin University, on Aug. 29, 2018). We would like to offer our sincere thanks to those who gave us suggestions and comments there.

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