

Collaboration in the Okinawa Summer Language and Culture Program for Middle/High School Youth



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A two-week intensive language and culture summer program for middle and high school youth from Okinawa, Japan, was organized and taught at Washington State University using the principles of collaborative learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1991). Through partnerships with community organizations, and local host families, the teacher-organizers became a high-functioning team creating collaborative in-class activities that were differentiated (Tomlinson, 2014) for language proficiency and grade level.

The program was developed with a content-based curriculum (Brinton, Snow & Wesche, 2003) for middle and high school students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The curricular theme was *Sustainability*. Instruction focused on the concepts of *environmental footprints* and *sustainable practices* at the individual and local level. Through the lens of sustainability, the students learned the names of local domesticated and wild animals, studied the primary agriculture of the Palouse, and gained rudimentary knowledge of the local economy. Students explored sustainability through in-class activities and multiple excursions, such as visits to a local farm, a farmer's market, an environmental institute, and a variety of museums, including the Nez Perce Museum. In addition, they learned about the roles of the local mayor, fire, and police with field trips to these offices/stations. Students also participated in an enthusiastic and memorable cultural exchange with youth from the Spokane Tribe.

At the organizational level, the local teacher-organizers built relationships with the Okinawan partners (chaperones and representatives from the Okinawan school board). The program built relationships locally among families who hosted students for a weekend meal, as well as amongst the counselors who were hired from within the greater Palouse community.

Teacher-organizers met for a week prior to the start of the program to prepare materials and discuss how the activities and classes should work together. It was from these discussions that the material, ideas, and activities were developed. The teacher-organizers also met each day of the two-week program to ensure that they were meeting program and student learning outcomes. These meetings fostered interpersonal and intercultural social skills development among the teacher-organizers as they strategized how to improve the relationships with students as well as with the Okinawan chaperones.

There were two groups from Okinawa that overlapped slightly in time. All teachers (for both groups) were involved in planning the curriculum and adapting to the needs of the students. The larger group (Group A) came for two weeks at the end of July and was comprised of 52 students. There



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were four 45-minute blocks based on pop culture, content, grammar and writing, and slang/survival English. The second group of students (Group B), was comprised of only 15 students, who arrived during the last week of the first group's session. Because the group was small, from the same rural region of Okinawa, and of a similar level of English language proficiency, we opted for a modified format with one teacher (instead of four). This smaller group of students participated in some field trips and activities with the larger group, receiving the same content and language instruction in a slightly different order than the larger group.

The previously mentioned theme for the camp was sustainability. Materials and lessons were created based on this overarching theme and were designed to support students' language learning needs for their afternoon excursions. Students were given multiple opportunities to be active in class and were encouraged to interact with each other and the teacher in the learning process.

The content course introduced key vocabulary necessary for the afternoon activities, setting the stage for the concepts the students would be learning about through their in-person excursions. The students were introduced to native wildlife, Nez Perce tradition and history, environmental concerns and sustainable practices, health and sports, and community—specifically, community as it pertained to the Palouse region. Authentic readings were gathered for some of these themes, and the teachers spent part of the lesson preparation simplifying the language to the appropriate levels of the students. The English proficiency levels of the students had been assessed in the first days of the program, and students were placed in one of four groups based on their proficiency and age. Student placement was done in collaboration with chaperones from Okinawa.

The pop culture class focused on presentation skills and facilitating student engagement with content related to the program-wide themes. Students watched and discussed relevant videos and then created an artifact that represented what they learned. For example, after discussing what students knew about teepees and then watching videos about team mascots, students worked on projects such as building and decorating teepee name tags that included images of, and/or information about, their favorite animals, as well as their favorite sports, and anything else they wanted their teachers to know about them.

The grammar and writing course worked to reinforce the vocabulary presented in the content course by giving the students grammatical concepts or writing activities to help them acquire the language. Two days were devoted to teaching process vocabulary to prepare the students to teach the youth from the Spokane Tribe how to make origami cranes. The lessons for other days allowed students to apply grammatical concepts useful for the afternoon activities, such as using vocabulary related to the local animals to practice present and past tense verbs or working with sentence frames to talk about the environment.

The slang and survival English course focused on giving the students exposure to everyday and informal language. Activities included telling a funny family story to build fluency and intonation and learning idioms related to animals discussed in all of the classes (e.g., *like a deer in the headlights*). A highlight was a "values auction" in which students bid on items related to sustainability such as clean water.



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Group B (15 students) had a slightly different structural format, with only one course teacher who taught all four subject areas, assisted by an ELL endorsement practicum student. This group used the same overall content, but the afternoon excursions were in a different order than for group A. There were some modifications since the students were a mix of high school and middle school students: first, the class was arranged so that each high school student worked in a group with two middle school students. The trio arrangements changed daily, so the students worked with different people each day. Some of the materials also had to be adapted for group B. Since the classes were 3 hours long, the instructor created short “wiggle” breaks using actions songs in English to help the students maintain energy and focus.

The teachers in this language program collaborated well to realize our Japanese partner’s vision. The program’s success can be measured by the feedback from the Okinawan partners, students’ thank you notes, and local newspaper coverage of the excursion to the mayoral offices and civic services. Having such a well-rounded program in which the activities, materials and teachers worked together smoothly allowed for an extremely successful program.

References

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