

***Top Global University Project: Promotion of Around-the-Clock Liberal Arts
Education and its Educational Outcomes***

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Abstract

This paper describes the educational outcomes resulted from the implementation of the project “Promotion of around-the-clock liberal arts education.” This project was implemented at Akita International University as part of the Top Global University Project sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) to become ‘Japan’s world-class liberal arts university.’ It aims to promote around-the-clock liberal arts education through the introduction of subject-based house group. This initiative attempts to expand the students’ learning place from the university classrooms into the living space in the student dormitory and apartments that are cohabited by the international and Japanese students. In each house, students live together and also work on common subjects as a team so as to promote liberal arts education that will enable them to acquire essential skills and competency to become effective global persons. The research focuses on a Themed House named Romance Languages House, opened for students who were studying Spanish or French and also have their mind open to other Romance languages and cultures. The results of the research show that students value positively their experience living in the house. Moreover, students affirm that the activities held in the house helped them to practice the language and develop a deeper understanding of Romance Languages speaking cultures. However, some improvements are needed.

Keywords: Liberal Arts, Themed Houses, Romance Languages, Educational Outcomes

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Introduction

The project “Promotion of around-the-clock liberal arts education” was implemented at Akita International University as part of the Top Global University Project sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) to become ‘Japan’s world-class liberal arts university.’ It aims to promote around-the-clock liberal arts education through the introduction of subject-based house group, and also engage students in their learning process as Tinto (1998) and Frazier & Eighmy (2012), among others, found in their research. For this initiative, which attempts to expand the students’ learning place from the university classrooms into the living space in the student dormitory and apartments that are cohabited by the international students and Japanese students. In each house, the international and Japanese students live together and also work on common subjects as a team to promote liberal arts education. That will enable the students to acquire essential skills and competency to become effective global persons and to encourage international and intercultural understanding through shared experience of living together and engaging in everyday activities.

To define the subject for each house, AIU reviewed the result of the questionnaire survey of the students in which they were asked about their preferences. Moreover, AIU accepted proposals from faculty interested in supervising a themed house. Thus, in April 2016 the university opened six subject-based houses: Entrepreneurs House; World Cultures House; Nihongo (Japanese Language) House; Japanese Arts and Culture House; Fitness House; Romance Languages House. In each house lived an average of ten students, who worked with the faculty in charge to develop a program of activities for each house every academic year.

The projects implemented in these houses included events such as field trips for experiencing local culture and nature (Japanese Arts and Culture House and Nihongo House), workshops about Japanese, Korean and British cultures (World Cultures), lectures by CEOs of enterprises (Entrepreneur House), movie events (Romance Languages House), lunch or dinner events (Fitness, and Romance Languages Houses). Fitness House, Nihongo House, and Romance Languages House had a strong emphasis on daily exercise/ language practices in addition to the projects.

Our research focuses on the Romance Languages Themed House, opened for students who are studying Spanish or French at Akita International University but also have their mind open for other Romance languages and cultures, such as Portuguese, Catalan, Italian, or Romanian. In this house, it is encouraged to use one of Romance languages in daily life. For that purpose, there are two sub-units in function of the language for daily communication (Spanish or French). While it is up to the residents of the house to determine specific activities to undertake during the semester, the supervisor suggests daily events (such as cooking and dinner time conversation, watching movies or listening to music in French/Spanish, and/or language cooperative-learning study hour); weekly activities (such as meeting with international students speakers of Romance languages to talk about their language and culture); and monthly activities (such as “Romance cooking cultures” sessions with the supervisor or another faculty/international student). Thus, this paper presents the educational outcomes resulted from the implementation of the Romance Languages House by using a biographical-narrative methodology. Through the analysis of the

narratives written by residents of the house, we aim to describe how living there has helped the language learning process, the improvement of communicative competence, the development of cultural knowledge of Romance Language cultures and intercultural competence.

Methodology

To conduct the research, we used biographical-narrative methods as a method of data collection. This type of qualitative research is used with the aim of understanding different phenomena from individual experiences and the perceptions that individuals have of them (Roberts, 2002). The use of narratives may uncover instances where students question their relationship with the culture of the target language and the learning process. The present study has taken into account the observations of authors such as Riessman (1993), Bolivar et al. (2001), and Pavlenko (2007) regarding methodological errors that occur with frequency when performing this type of research. According to these investigators, it is necessary to interpret the themes that appear in the informant's narratives, and also the organization, structure, and the way in which they give meaning to their experiences.

To obtain data we asked eight inhabitants of the Romance Languages House to write a text describing their experiences living in the house. Six of them studied or were studying Spanish and two of them French at Akita International University. To facilitate their writing, we provided three guiding items:

- a) Describe your experience living in the Romance Languages House.
- b) Explain if living in the house allowed you to improve your communication skills in Spanish or French.
- c) Explain if the activities conducted in the house allowed you to have more in-depth knowledge and understanding of Romance Languages speaking cultures and to improve your intercultural competence.

Results

Due to issues of space, it is not possible to include here the detailed analysis of each of the narrative texts. For this reason, we will present a summary of the results obtained.

Living in the Romance Language House:

The analysis allows us to assert that students value positively their experience living in the house. The majority of the students affirm that living and doing activities with other students that have the same interests and willing to learn and practice Spanish/French was motivating. However, two students highlight the fact that some RL House members had a passive behavior, showing a lack of interest in organizing activities. Also, four students complain in their narratives about the time of the events, asserting that often had a conflicting schedule with their club activities. That made them find difficulties in reaching an agreement on what to do as a whole group.

Improvement of Communicative skills:

There are different points of view regarding the improvement of communicative skills. Most of them remark that the activity that allowed them to practice the

language actively was the one named “Spanish/French Café,” in which they practice in an informal atmosphere some grammar topics, helping each other. However, six students affirm that the activities held in the house, helped them to practice what they had already learned, but not to improve communicative competence. On the other hand, two students highlight that the “Games Night” activity, in which they played board games such as Scrabble, was useful, to improve vocabulary. It is remarkable that five students suggest that they expected to have a tutor or a faculty member involved in their learning process, doing things such as teaching, assisting them while doing homework, or having conversation time with the students. Furthermore, four students affirm that they expected to have much more interaction with native speakers (i.e., international students’ speakers of French/ Spanish or native speakers living in Akita).

Understanding of Romance Languages speaking cultures and intercultural competence development:

Mostly all students affirm that the activities held in the house allowed them to develop a better understanding of Romance Languages speaking cultures. Eight students highlight the sessions in which Spanish/ French Language professors talked in the house about different topics related to those cultures. For instance, they mention meetings such as the ones in which they learn about the origin about the Romance Languages, Catalonia and its culture, the Mate culture, the Latin Language, the history of France, or the cooking sessions. However, two students criticize those sessions asserting that they did not want to have “lectures” in the house.

Conclusion

The analysis of the narratives shows a high degree of student’s satisfaction and that the Themed House accomplishes its educational objectives, particularly the development of the Romance Languages speaking cultures. However, it also allows us to observe that some improvements are needed. In different degrees, the house-resident students struggled to reconcile their class, study, club and circle activities with the subject-based house activities, which difficulties the development of the communicative competence.

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