

## 2012 International Student Conference AWA Creating Opportunities for Active English Learning

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In summer, 2012, the International Student Conference AWA was held over two days by the University of Tokushima. In attendance were over 120 students representing 12 countries who gathered together to discuss topics ranging from culture to sustainable development, all under the main topic of education. Though students learned from each other about various cultures and the state of education in various countries, this presentation focuses on the conference's main purpose of creating a tool for active learning in English education.

Countries represented at the conference include Japan, China, Taiwan, Korea, New Zealand, America, Ireland, Indonesia, India, Vietnam, Poland, Malaysia, and Mongolia. The majority of non-Japanese participants came from China and Taiwan. The first day of the conference had over 120 participants, many of which joined through the summer school held by the University of Tokushima, Faculty of Engineering. The second day of the conference had a smaller crowd of 25 students and several non-students from the local community. The conference, including all presentations and discussions, was held in English only, in order to put emphasis on the goal of active English learning. Topics discussed over the two-day conference were diverse, including traditional culture, food culture, medical care, alternative power, education for sustainable development, views about the future, exchange programs, general education, language education, and active education. The participants were divided into groups of 8-10 members and given time for an ice-breaking discussion. Each group selected a sub-topic from the assigned discussion

topics and were given time to share their thoughts and ideas. During the discussion time, the groups also made posters to summarize their group's opinions and conclusions about the topic. They were encouraged to work together to make a creative, instructive poster in limited time. The completed posters were hung up around the room and groups presented their summaries to each other in a poster presentation style. Participants were asked to judge the posters and select the best poster from the session. Two discussion sessions were held each day with a lunch break in between. At the end of each conference day, the groups with the best posters were announced and prizes were given to the best groups. A questionnaire was also taken at the end of both days. The results are as follows, including reflections for future conferences.



**1) How did you know about the conference?**

More than 60% of participants of the conference were also attending the summer school program held by the Engineering Faculty. About 20% of participants were informed of the conference by a professor, and a few other participants knew of the conference through the International Office or from a friend. No participants knew about the conference through posters. For future conferences, posters will be displayed sooner and more prominently to increase awareness of the conference on campus.

**2) Did this conference improve your English skill?**

More than 97% of participants responded that this conference helped them to improve their English skills. This shows that the conference met its aim of being an opportunity for students to apply and improve their English skills through active learning.

**3) How interesting were the discussion topics?**

The majority of participants indicated that the discussion topics were either very or somewhat interesting. Few participants said the topics were average, and no participants indicated that the topics were not interesting. It is important that students have topics that are interesting to discuss because they are motivated to actively participate as both listeners and speakers. The conference organizers will make an effort to come up with more interesting topics for discussion at the next conference to be held in winter.

**4) How difficult were the discussion topics?**

Responses regarding the difficulty of the topics given vary widely due to the differing levels of English mastery among the participants. Around half of the students indicated that the topics were of average difficulty, but almost half indicated that the topics were either somewhat or very difficult. Less than 15% of participants felt the topics were easy or very easy. Discussion topics should be of average difficulty in order to challenge students without

discouraging them. Topics that are too simple or too difficult cannot be discussed in depth or at length and students may lose motivation quickly. The difficulty of the discussion topics will be taken into consideration during the planning of the next conference.

Participants of the conference were also asked to give comments and suggestions about what could be done to make the conference better. Some problems stated by students in their feedback included poor time management during the discussion and poster creation period, and too many members at each table. It was also expressed that some topics, such as medical science, were too difficult for discussion. There was a suggestion to separate participants by English level, and to include more native English speakers. Among the suggestions included a wider selection of topics, smaller tables with fewer group members, and the inclusion of foreign professors. One suggestion was to set up a video conference for students who cannot travel to Japan. The most common suggestion was to allow more time for discussion and poster creation. The organizers of the next International Student Conference, to be held in winter, 2012, appreciate this valuable feedback from the conference participants. It is because of the participants that the summer conference was such a success. The conference organizers will consider this feedback in the planning of the winter conference. It is their hope that the winter conference will also be a success and that these international conferences will continue to be held in the future. Opportunities for applying English skills, such as the conferences held by the University of Tokushima, are valuable tools for active learning in English education.