

## The Great Outdoors Language Lab

### ***Introduction***

As many language teachers have discovered, true communication skills are most likely to evolve in a relaxed environment that also provides healthy doses of stimulation. As a subject, it is often hard for students to relate to a foreign language other than in abstract terms. The JET program, *eikawa* and other exchange programs offer direct experience with foreigners, which in turn creates a practical reason for students to stay engaged.

The classroom, however, projects certain expectations and roles onto both teachers (foreign or not) and students. This can prevent the development of that critical mistake-friendly atmosphere necessary for communication. Students take visual cues like desk arrangement, blackboards, textbooks, etc. and respond accordingly. If these same elements are mixed up and used in novel ways, however, that alone can change how much a student engages language. And more importantly the way all students interact.

### ***Methodology***

In the same manner, the outdoors presents the ultimate mixed up and novel environment in which to teach language. The Great Outdoors Exchange Lab would aim to partner American students with Japanese students on hiking, kayaking and other outdoor activities in the U.S. and Japan. Intensive language courses would be offered by former or current JET participants along with

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support staff such as Japanese teachers and outdoors experts from non-profits or community groups.

The natural world provides a rich vein of topics that appeal to a wide variety of students. Putting students in the outdoors not only gives them something physically new to explore, but also provides the context for exploring both simple subjects (the names of geographic features, plants and animals) and more complex subjects (how different cultures view or treat the environment).

The semi-remote locations, atmosphere of adventure and pairing of students with native language partners would create a constant need for communication in another language. The close social interaction necessary for joint projects would accelerate the growth of their language skills, while the natural curiosity inevitable between those sharing an adventure would magnify students' motivation.

This alternative exchange program would benefit students who are not motivated by the academic classroom, providing at the same time a different perspective for more traditional learners. The goal would be to approach language as a macro tool, rather than simply as a school subject. Towards this, skills would be developed for overcoming hesitation, using humor, story-telling, sharing interests, complaining, expressing opinions and understanding cultural differences.

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Students would return with a fresh perspective on language learning and play a more active role in the classroom, helping to spread the lessons and experiences they have gained. This particularly applies to Japanese students, who often view language as just a rote exercise in perfecting grammar and pronunciation, rather than a living, evolving communication tool.

The viability of this type of program has already been demonstrated by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) such as Global Exchange, which runs short-term environmental volunteer and cultural exchange programs. There are also a number of successful language camps and outdoors programs with academic elements to them, such as the long-running National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) or Taupo Language & Outdoor Education Centre in New Zealand.

The essential difference between those programs and the Great Outdoors Language Lab would be the focus on building language and cross-cultural skills *through* outdoor activities. While mainstream exchange programs offer intensive language courses with side field trips, in this case, the program itself would be a full-immersion field trip. The physical nature of outdoors activities would encourage students to feel they have earned their communication skills, rather than just passively received them in a lecture.

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The rapidly expanding number of Japanese NGOs, the declining interest in outdoor activities among youth and the global nature of environmental awareness all serve as excellent examples of benefits beyond language education. This program would naturally attract the support of NGOs' whose objectives include outdoors skill-building, cross-cultural or environment education. It would also help forge new and stronger links between U.S. and Japanese non-profits (often run by young adults), creating a secondary positive impact on society as a whole.

The length of this program would range from two weeks up to two months, coordinating seamlessly with Japanese and American students' summer vacations. The summer schedule is also ideal for involving JET teachers, Japanese teachers, university student volunteers and local communities. Potential participants could be culled through regional leaders (such as the JET Program's Outdoors and Environmental Special Interest Groups) and bring together students from all over the country. The program could also appeal to JET Alumni who work as ecologists, trekking guides or linguistic specialists.

In addition to collaboration opportunities between schools (Monbusho and prefectural level) and non-profits (conservation groups such as the Sierra Club), this program could also involve local government (sister cities, etc.), community groups (JETAA), corporate sponsors (JETRO, Kintetsu, etc.) and each country's respective embassies or consulates.

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### ***Program Benefits Summary***

- \* Increased language skills
- \* Opportunity for making foreign friends
- \* Motivation for life-long language learning
- \* New outdoors skills
- \* Foreign country experience
- \* Awareness of environmental issues
- \* Cross-cultural skill development
- \* Strengthen bi-lateral links between grassroots organizations
- \* Impact of student participants in the classroom

### ***References***

*National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS)*

<http://www.nols.edu>

*Global Exchange*

<http://www.globalexchange.org>

*Taupo Language & Outdoor Education Centre*

<http://www.tloec.co.nz>

*Sierra Club*

<http://www.sierraclub.org>