

論文

# English Language for a Positive International Learning Community

Satoshi Tsukamoto

## 要 旨

本論文では、英語が日本の大学をより国際化するために、どのような役割を果たすのかを論じる。英語は学術の世界では共通の言語として位置づけられているが、英語を使った授業を提供し、より多くの留学生に日本の大学に来てもらう政策の利点と改善点をこの論文では考察する。また日本の文化や社会を留学生に理解してもらうために、英語による日本理解の授業は有効な英語の使い方であると提言する。

Keywords: globalization (国際化), higher education (高等教育), international student (留学生), role of English language (英語の役割), power of English (英語が持つ力), communication skills (交渉力), English as a medium of instruction (教える言語としての英語)

## 1. Introduction

There has been much debate on how universities in Japan can be globalized. In the 1980s and '90s universities in Japan faced a variety of pressures from industry, government, parents, and university academics (Amano & Poole, 2005). Because of

global competition and rapid dissemination of information after the millennium, issues of globalization are a hot topic in a higher education in Japan. As a notable example, Junichi Hamada, president of the University of Tokyo, in the magazine, *Bungei Shunju* (2011), claimed that an academic year starting in September, not in April which is the traditional start of the academic year in Japan, is a significant way to globalize students and attract more international students from abroad. President Hamada's comment drew a wide range of attention not only from academics but also from business executives. I think that starting the academic year in September, like in many other countries, will surely change the academic culture of Japanese universities, but as President Hamada indicated in the *Nihon Keizai Shinbun* (2012), this is not the only way to globalize universities in Japan.

To globalize universities in Japan and make them more competitive against other universities around the world, Japanese university administrators, in general, think that it is necessary to increase the number of courses offered in English for domestic and international students. For example, Waseda University, one of the most prestigious universities in Japan, established its School of International Liberal Arts in 2004, with nearly all of the classes offered in the School are conducted in English (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011, p.25). This school attracts many bright students from all over Japan, with a third of the students are from overseas. As another example, Kwansei Gakuin University, a very good university in the Osaka region, offers an English-based Degree Program in which students can graduate only by taking classes conducted in English except for non-English foreign language classes. As these examples show, classes in liberal arts and social science that are conducted in English are a key means of showing good quality education and of recruiting both Japanese and international students. In this paper, I would like to examine the role of the English language in universities in Japan and how it relates to the globalization of universities.

## 2. Views on English Language

First of all, I would like to discuss how the English language is regarded in relation to higher education in Japan. Students generally began studying English as a foreign language when they enter junior high school. Many students also go to a

private after-school called *juku* to study English. Since April of 2011, 5th and 6th graders in elementary school have also studied English, particularly listening and speaking, in a way that enables them to enjoy activities in English. In junior and senior high school students study English as an academic subject, and take an entrance examination to get into university. English as a foreign language is a required subject that they choose regardless of the academic field they will be studying in college. Almost all high school graduates take English as a foreign language in the nationwide entrance examination, although a small number of students also take Chinese, French, and German.

It is said that students rigorously study English in order to pass their university entrance examinations, but that they are relatively poor at speaking and writing. Japanese teachers of English use grammar-translation methods due to their lower confidence in communicative teaching methods as well as because of pressure from their senior colleagues (Cook, 2009). In addition, speaking and writing skills are hardly tested in entrance examinations. Tested instead are knowledge of grammatical issues, vocabulary, idioms, and reading comprehension, which is the main reason why students' English competency is still relatively low compared with that of students in neighboring countries.

### 3. The Power of English

Why do students study English? One reason is that when they want to attend a university, they have to study English to pass the entrance examination. Another reason is the belief that knowing English will lead them to the wealth of the world where economic and intellectual resources are available (Seargeant, 2009, p.8). For high school graduates, the English language opens the door to an international world to which Japanese language does not have access (Matsuda, 2011, p.44). English is used as a native language in the U.S., U.K., Canada, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, and as a second or foreign language in many other countries, with a vast amount of intellectual information produced in these countries, which is circulated around the globe. However, if one does not understand English, he/she is left behind in many fields. Even though translated works are available in Japanese language, there is always a time lag, at least six months or more. To make the matter worse, many

books contain useful ideas in English are not translated into Japanese. Without a double, the English language is a major language for generating and disseminating information on skills, knowledge, and intelligence, and it is believed that not having access to English is disadvantageous in one's education and career. Therefore, knowing English enables one to access a greater amount of intellectual resources as well as economic ones.

It should be noted the way in which Japanese people consider the Japanese and English languages. Many Japanese people likely think that Japanese language belongs to them, not to other nationals (Caesar, 2005). They are often surprised when a person of non-Japanese origin can speak fluent Japanese. Similarly, it is a common belief in Japan that the English language belongs to native speakers of English, particularly Britons and white North Americans. For example, at the School of International Communication of Aichi University where I teach, English language conversation and composition classes are taught by native speakers of English, and almost all of them are either Britons or North Americans. Students prefer to take English lessons taught by them because the English language they speak is regarded as authentic. I do not blame this tendency, but what this illustrates is that the English language comes from outside of Japan and is definitely considered foreign.

English is deemed a communication tool for exchanging ideas with foreigners in Japan (Hashimoto, 2009), but there are not many opportunities to use the English language domestically, so this aim is not easily attainable, creating situations where the discourse in English as a lingua franca does not reflect the actual learning environment in Japan (Kubota, 2011, p.107). Furthermore, as Robert Phillipson (1992, 2009) states, there is an asymmetrical power relation between native English and English as a foreign language. It is natural to assume that communication skills of native speakers are better than those of non-native speakers, and that non-native speakers generally find themselves in an inferior position when communicating with native speakers. I think that Japanese people are not so aware of the gap that exists in the English learning environment which uncritically accepts and reinforces the power of English as a dominant force.

This essentialist view of language causes a problem in Japanese universities. The most notable one is that Japanese professors of English have never been considered to be authentic teachers of English. Even though many are very fluent speakers of

English and are very familiar with academic reading and writing, they are still viewed as non-authentic teachers of language in a sense. Realistically, there are not many Japanese professors of English who can conduct lessons like native speakers of English, and they tend to use grammar-translation methods to teach English at college, which ironically distinguishes themselves from native speakers of English in the classroom.

#### **4. The Roles of English in Higher Education**

Concerning English education at college in Japan, there are three ways of using English in an academic setting. One way is where English language is the subject of study and Japanese language is used to explain grammatical issues and the meaning of sentences. The purpose of this kind of class is to make students understand the structure of English sentences and paragraphs. The second way is where the English language is the subject of study and native speakers of English teach four skills of language competence in English. This type of language learning has become popular and common in Japan, and these classes are usually labeled as English conversation or English communication skills or something similar. The third way is where the English language is not the subject of study. Rather, English is just a medium of instruction and students study a specific subject in sociology, political science, cultural studies, anthropology, economics, business management, or other discipline. Professors are either native speakers of English or Japanese who have been educated in English-speaking countries. I think that top Japanese universities are trying to implement the third type of classes and to increase them in their curricula.

When I was privileged to attend a conference in October, 2011, in Kyoto where the presidents of top Japanese and Chinese universities met and discussed the future of higher education, I noticed the different interests of both countries. While some Japanese presidents boasted of the increasing number of courses offered in English for international students to attract more students from abroad, some Chinese presidents, particularly Zhou Qifen, president of Peking University, posed a question about that tendency. As you may know, Chinese students comprise the majority of international students at Japanese universities. He said that Chinese students go to Japan mainly to learn about Japanese language and society or in some cases Japanese

business management, and that when they want to study some subjects related to English, they prefer to go to a university in English-speaking countries. He also added that it is not attractive for Chinese students to study a subject in English taught by non-native English professors. What this comment makes clear is that while Japanese presidents believe that adding more English-taught courses internationalizes their universities and attracts more international students, Chinese presidents are skeptical about this idea and they think that more English-taught classes actually discourages international students, particularly Chinese, to study in Japan.

One of the main benefits of studying abroad is to immerse oneself in a local language and culture along with studying specific subjects at college. In Japan the focus of studying Japanese language should not be underestimated. Rather, English can be used to promote the learning of Japanese language and culture. For instance, while international students study Japanese language intensively, there should be some classes in which they can also learn about Japanese culture in English. At Aichi University where I teach, I had taught Japanese culture for exchange students from the U.S., France, and Germany with the textbooks such as Susan J. Napier's *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation* and *Japan Pop!: Inside the World of Japanese Popular Culture* edited by Timothy J. Craig. Students' Japanese proficiency was not good enough to understand an academic book written in Japanese, but they were very intellectually curious about Japanese contemporary culture, and they really enjoyed the classes that I taught. Naturally, it is best if international students can understand some academic books in Japanese, but practically this is not possible for most of international students from countries where Chinese characters are not used in their native language. Putting more importance on the offering of classes taught in English, however, risks creating a dominant and monolingual view of the world and a seeming disrespect of the Japanese language.

A number of problems exist in implementing a positive international learning community in Japanese universities. First, the number of Japanese professors qualified to teach a specialized subject in English is not sufficient. To overcome this deficit, Japanese universities should make more efforts to recruit Japanese graduate students and educators who have been trained in a foreign country. Another problem

is that when an English-speaking professor or a Japanese professor with excellent English proficiency offers students a subject targeted at international students, it might be difficult for most Japanese students to understand its contents because of their limited English proficiency. I think that it is very good for both Japanese students and non-Japanese students to study and discuss together in the classroom, and this type of class should be promoted, and universities should strongly encourage students with better English proficiency to participate in this type of class more.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, I would like to say that the English language can be a bridge between Japanese students and international students, particularly from the West, and that learning environments where Japanese and international students study together should be more promoted in Japanese universities though English.

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