

English Language Education and the Internationalization of Higher Education in Japan

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intersection of English language education and the internationalization of higher education in Japan, amidst the backdrop of globalization. It explores the challenges foreign English teachers face in Japanese universities, including student motivation, effective pedagogical strategies, and intercultural communication with domestic staff. By examining the broader implications of internationalization within Japanese higher education, this article sheds light on the strategic responses of Japanese universities to globalization, primarily through the promotion of English language education. It delves into the nuanced meanings of international education and internationalization in this context, and how they shape teaching practices and policies. The article also explores the potential impact of teachers' intercultural competence on the quality of English language teaching and learning. By addressing these aspects, the paper aims to contribute to a framework that supports educators and enhances the educational experience for students in an internationalized academic environment.

Keywords

Internationalization of higher education, English language education, globalization and education, foreign English teachers in Japan, intercultural competence in teaching

Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, the role of English language education within Japanese universities stands at a critical juncture, marked by the twin forces of globalization and the pressing need for internationalization. This paper seeks to dissect and understand the intricate dynamics at play, focusing on the experiences of foreign English teachers within the Japanese academic milieu. As Japan grapples with the challenges posed by its integration into the global educational arena, the teaching and learning of English emerge as pivotal elements in this transformative process.

The phenomenon of globalization has undeniably exerted profound influences on educational systems worldwide, compelling nations to reassess and recalibrate their approaches towards language education (Nukuto, 2018). In Japan, this global imperative has heralded a significant shift towards prioritizing English language proficiency to foster international competitiveness and connectivity (Sakamoto, 2012). However, this shift is not without its challenges. Foreign English teachers in Japan frequently encounter barriers ranging from student motivation to pedagogical effectiveness and intercultural communication hurdles with domestic faculty and staff (Whitsed & Wright, 2013). These challenges underscore the complexity of implementing

English language education reforms within the context of Japanese higher education institutions.

This paper endeavors to explore the multifaceted issues faced by foreign English educators in Japan, delving into the root causes and potential solutions to enhance the teaching and learning experience. Through a comprehensive examination of the current state of English language education in Japanese universities, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the internationalization of higher education in Japan. By investigating the interplay between teacher intercultural competence and educational quality, the paper seeks to offer insights that could inform policy and practice, ultimately paving the way for a more inclusive and effective English language education framework in Japan's globalized academic environment.

English language education and the internationalization of higher education in Japan

Many foreign English teachers in Japanese universities report frustration with the low motivation of Japanese university students (Honna, 2008; Snyder, 2019). They also report having trouble designing or carrying out effective classroom activities that achieve teaching goals (Fujimoto, 2019), and have trouble communicating with domestic faculty and staff (Kelly & Adachi, 2019). As we have both taught English and trained teachers in Japan working in Japanese universities, we and our colleagues have experienced similar frustrations. In this paper we will explore research and literature on the possible causes and solutions to these and other related issues. We also hope to learn whether and how teachers' level of intercultural skills or competence affects the quality of English language teaching and learning.

Research questions

In this paper we aim to explore the following questions: 1) What do the terms *international education* and *internationalization* mean in the context of English language teaching in higher education in Japan?; 2) What issues are foreign English teachers in Japan struggling with, and why?; 3) Does the level of a teacher's intercultural knowledge and skills affect the quality of English language teaching and learning in the classroom? Answering these questions will help alleviate frustrations and point to possible solutions to problems we and our colleagues experience teaching English in Japanese universities. Additionally, it could lead to the development of a framework to assist teachers and help best serve the needs of learners in their institution.

Internationalization of Japanese Universities

To better understand the teaching and learning of English in Japanese university classrooms, it is important to understand the classroom as it is situated in greater institutional, national, and international contexts. In this part of the paper, we will attempt to define and discuss the terms *international education*, and *internationalization* concerning English language education in Japanese universities. This discussion will help to conceptualize how English language education and the internationalization of universities in Japan are parts of the Japanese national government's strategic response to the forces of globalization.

Globalization and education in Japan

English language education took on a more prominent role in Japan because of economic deterioration and the collapse of Japan's *bubble economy* in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Mundy (2005) discusses the theory that economic globalization weakens the authority of nation-states by forcing them to compete with each other. This real or perceived weakening of the Japanese nation-state seems to have influenced the direction of national educational and economic policies. Japan began to heavily promote English language education to remain

internationally competitive in the global economy after the collapse of the bubble economy (Hashimoto, 2007). Wang et al. (2011) illustrate two perspectives that conceptualize the realities of globalization relevant to education: the economic imperative perspective and the critical resistant perspective. According to Wang and colleagues, the former sees that nations need a competitive edge in the global economy, and therefore education must equip students with the knowledge and skills to become part of a workforce that will develop and maintain that competitive edge. The latter sees this form of global capitalism as harmful to the well-being of people, and that the role of education should prepare citizens “committed to social justice and human rights” and who will “build solidarity in opposition to global capitalism” (Wang et al., 2011, p. 116). Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) seems entrenched primarily in the economic imperative perspective, with many of its current educational policies and initiatives aimed at cultivating students able to deal with globalization, and to enhance the competitiveness of higher education in Japan (MEXT, n.d.). Kakuta (2015) also describes the *internationalization* of higher education and the private sector in Japan as part of the Japanese government’s attempts to strengthen the nation. She also reminds us that only 20% of universities in Japan are public, and that elevated tuition levels at private universities make it difficult to provide equal educational opportunities to students from low-income households. This strengthens the argument that Japan’s response to globalization is based on the economic imperative perspective rather than the critical resistant perspective.

Defining international education and internationalization in Japan

In order to understand and discuss Japan’s response to globalization and how it relates to the context of teaching English in Japanese universities, it is useful to define the terms *international education* and *internationalization*. This section introduces the scholarly definitions and contextual information that contribute to our working definition of these terms.

Bunnell (2014) writes: “The term ‘International Education’ has never been a satisfactory one and has always been used in the absence of a consensually agreed alternative” (p. 39). Tarc (2013) refers to international education as a ‘movement’, which he describes as both: “a set of pressures stemming from globalization and, more concretely, as a key strategic mission of [his] university’s desire to ‘internationalize,’ to be (recognized as) ‘world-class’” (p.2). One of the difficulties in defining the term international education seems to be that it encompasses such a wide variety of teaching contexts, each with different aspirational and instrumental goals, which are responding to influences from multiple stakeholders, as well as to the phenomena of rapid globalization. In Japan, Kakuta (2015) describes international education as being divided into three educational streams: development, environmental, and international understanding. However, she only mentions the term *internationalization* sparingly, and without definition.

Knight (2015) defines internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education. Knight’s definition focuses on postsecondary education and is general enough to cover a broad range of national and cultural contexts, which makes it useful for describing the internationalization of higher education in Japan.

A clear example of internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional level in Japan is the MEXT’s *Top Global University Project*. According to the MEXT, the project provides funding for select universities that carry out comprehensive efforts towards reform and internationalization to “enhance the international compatibility and competitiveness of higher education in Japan, creating an environmental infrastructure to foster capable and talented

graduates” (MEXT, n.d.). The top 3 goals of universities awarded by this project were increased percentages of the following: 1) international full-time faculty staff and those who have received degree at foreign university; 2) international students; and 3) Japanese students with credit earning study abroad experience (MEXT, n.d.). As of now, about half of the universities that have received funding through the Top Global University Project are private universities. This is also in keeping with Knight’s definition regarding the integration of international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, or delivery of postsecondary education.

Drawing from both Tarc’s (2013) description of international education, we would describe international education in Japan as part of movement prevalent in Japanese universities, which are responding to both the forces of globalization as well as actively trying to *internationalize* higher education. We will borrow Knight’s definition of internationalization, although imperfect, to describe the internationalization of higher education in Japan. Knight’s definition is broad enough to describe the complex stakeholders, dimensions, processes, and actions involved in the internationalization of Japanese universities. We realize that specific contextual factors are needed to describe the terms *international education* and *internationalization* fully or accurately in the context of Japan, however these definitions provide a sufficient starting point for further exploration and discussion.

English and internationalization of higher education in Japan

The teaching and learning of English have historically played an important role in the internationalization of education in Japan. According to Rogers et al. (2002), before the mid 1960’s in Japanese society’s view of internationalization or international communication revolved around the mastery of *eikaiwa* (English conversation). Edward T. Hall’s contributions to the field of intercultural communication influenced Japanese scholars to look closer at the role of culture in communication, including the limitations or difficulty involved in translating Japanese concepts in English, and the role non-verbal communication in both interpersonal and intercultural communication (Rogers et al., 2002).

English language education appears now to be once again an integral part in Japan’s concept of internationalization. Hashimoto (2007) explains the position of Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Japan, and the promotion of TEFL in Japanese government policy documents from approximately 1990 to 2000. Hashimoto argues that in the aftermath of Japan’s *Lost Decade*, Japan sought to use the English language as a useful tool to communicate with the international community, participate competitively in the global economy, and export Japanese culture possibly even. Rather than succumbing to the cultural homogenization associated with globalization and English language imperialism, Hashimoto describes Japanese internationalization as a process of reaffirming Japanese national and cultural identity.

The role of English in the internationalization of Japan remains evident in Japanese universities. Kakuta (2015) reports how the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology directs teachers to emphasize both nationalism and cosmopolitanism and aims to internationalize education in Japan through the strengthening of English language education, the internationalization of Japanese universities, and the development of identity based on Japanese traditions, culture, and history. Although primarily concerned with the potential of Japan’s approach leading towards greater nationalization and militarization, Kakuta also points to a recent study that indicates instructional strategies found in international education programs in Japan are comparable to teaching and learning methods deemed effective in other parts of the world.

Conflicting views of international education

If scholars have different definitions or conceptualizations of *international education* or *internationalization*, then so likely do individual teachers. A teacher's assumptions and beliefs impact how and what they teach in class, it is worth exploring how differing views on international education can impact the Japanese university English classroom. For example, Kakuta (2015) is concerned that Japan is straying from the ideals of international education and drifting towards nationalism and isolationism. An individual instructor who shares Kakuta's concerns may be tempted to interpret the Japanese students' lack of enthusiasm for studying English or discussing global issues as evidence of this drift towards nationalism and isolationism. However, nationalism and internationalization are not necessarily contradictory. Tate (2012, 2017) calls for greater consideration to the role of the nation-state regarding the purpose of education and the formation of identity. Tate (2017) aims to challenge dominant liberal ideology in education and proposes fifteen conservative principles for education that he believes are compatible with any democratic country or education system with high levels of individual liberty. Included in these principles are a call for curriculum that reflects the dominant cultural influences that shaped the country, and systems that help to induct students into becoming members of the nation-state. As discussed in the previous section's, MEXT English language education policies are explicitly designed to advance Japan's national goals, which include the fostering of a national identity and the internationalization of education. Considering Tate's principles, Japan's seemingly divergent educational policies of cultivating both nationalism and internationalism might offer foreign teachers in Japan an alternative lens to view and interpret their role in the Japanese university English classroom. An individual instructor who shares Tate's view may interpret Japanese students' lack of enthusiasm for studying English or discussing global issues as evidence of students' struggling to find alignment between their own individual interests and explicit and implicit goals the Japanese nation-state. As de facto agents of internationalization, we therefore believe it is particularly important for foreign faculty teaching English in Japanese universities to examine and reflect on their own understanding of international education.

English Teachers and Foreign English Teachers in Japanese Universities

In this part of the paper, we will describe the position of English teachers, and specifically foreign or non-Japanese English teachers in the context of the Japanese university English classroom. We will discuss the roles and perceptions of teachers currently or potentially teaching English in Japanese universities, and the classroom and institutional challenges they may face. Additionally, we will explore the role of culture as it relates to understanding and communicating with Japanese students, faculty, and staff.

The roles and perceptions of foreign English teachers

There is demand for qualified English language teachers in Japanese universities. Despite Japan's declining population, the percentage of the population going to college in Japan has risen from 30% in 1990 to 50% in 2017 (Hale & Wadden, 2019). There are over 1133 higher learning institutions in Japan, and 274 more four-year colleges and universities than in 1993 (Hale & Wadden, 2019). Most of these universities require their students to take at least two years of language education, and most of the opportunities open to qualified foreign teachers are part-time and fixed-term full-time teachers in the fields of English language education or EFL (Larson-Hall & Stewart, 2019).

Foreign English teachers may find themselves competing for positions against highly qualified native-Japanese English teachers (Takaesu & Sudo, 2019). However, there still exists a biased and stereotypical view that native speakers of English are the best teachers of English. Honna

(2008) argues that Japanese teachers and students are strongly indoctrinated with the concept of English as an American or British language, rather than a multicultural language and tool for intercultural communication. According to Honna, Japanese learners have unrealistic goals of becoming American or British English speakers, which results in feelings of failure, inferiority, and even guilt and shame. Fujimoto (2019) also addresses the prevalence of this biased and stereotypical preference for native-English speaking teachers, noting that while there is a greater acknowledgement of world Englishes, it will likely take time for a shift away from this kind of thinking in Japan. However, according to Hale and Wadden (2019), “the days of foreigners being offered full-time positions by showing up as native speakers with college degrees in hand have long since passed” (p. 6). In other words, Japanese universities will no longer offer full-time employment to a young native-English speakers who recently graduated with a bachelor’s degree from any American or British university. This is not to say that a preference of native-English speaking instructors no longer exists, but that now, even for part-time and full-time limited-term contract teaching positions, Japanese universities typically require such candidates to have advanced graduate degrees, research experience, a particular number of publications, and a communicative level of Japanese-language skills.

According to the results of a national survey, full-time international faculty at Japanese universities reported they experienced challenges at the national, institutional, and personal level (Huang et al., 2017). The survey discovered differences in the attitudes of different categories of international faculty based on their academic rank, discipline, and nationality (Huang et al., 2017). American and British junior faculty from the Humanities seemed to encounter more difficulties than the other categories of international faculty, such as unstable employment, uncertain career prospects, and competitive circumstances (Huang et al., 2017). Junior faculty refers to faculty members in a range of non-tenured positions, which, as discussed in the previous section, make-up a majority of the positions available to qualified foreign faculty in Japanese universities (Larson-Hall & Stewart, 2019). Although Japanese universities tend to favor native-English speakers as English teachers in their university, the results of the national survey suggest that this ‘favored’ group have their own unique real or perceived challenges. For example, many perceive themselves as tokenized symbols of internationalization (Brown, 2019; Chen, 2022a, 2022b).

Challenges of teaching English in a Japanese university

Both foreign and native-Japanese teachers of English report trouble with the low motivation of students in Japanese universities (Honna, 2008; Snyder, 2019). They also have trouble carrying out effective teaching plans (Fujimoto, 2019). We have found this research to match our and our colleagues’ own experiences at several universities in Western Japan. Although this suggests that foreign English teachers cultural or national background is not the only barrier to effective teaching, it is still an important factor worth further exploration.

An ethnographic approach to teaching English language and culture in Japanese universities

For English teachers to effectively teach English in Japanese universities, they should understand more about students and their institution. Proponents of an ethnographic approach to teaching state that the English language classroom is not a culturally neutral one. English language teachers may see themselves as just teaching the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, but they are also teachers of culture as a ‘fifth dimension’ (Damen, 1987). Kramsch (1993) writes, “Language teachers are so much teachers of culture that culture has often become invisible to them” (p. 48). Ignorance of the cultural dimension of language teaching may unknowingly assert their own assumptions and cultural norms. Damen (1987)

urges language teachers to actively learn and teach culture and intercultural skills in the classroom. Damen also offers seven-step ethnographic approach called ‘pragmatic ethnography’ to facilitate their own and students’ cross-cultural and intercultural learning.

Similarly, many other ethnographic approaches also prioritize understanding the social context of teaching and learning. Holliday (1994) argues that English language education should be appropriate to the social context within which it will be used. In order to design appropriate classroom methodologies, Holliday encourages teachers to take an ethnographic approach to discover the implicit and explicit goals of the institution and of individuals in the classroom. According to Byram and Feng (2005), it is the hidden objectives of students that will often determine whether a teacher’s curriculum or methods will be accepted or rejected. Ethnographic approaches introduced by Byram and Feng and Holliday suggest that teachers’ specific cultural knowledge and intercultural competence can help them to identify explicit and underlying cultural beliefs, values, and assumptions held by themselves and their students, and improve the quality of teaching and learning in English language classrooms.

Understanding the underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions of teachers in students could prove very valuable. In a study of one class of 33 Japanese high school students and 4 teachers, Matsuda (2011) discovered a great diversity of perspectives within and among teachers and students regarding their perceptions of English as an international language and their expectations and beliefs about their English language classes. Perceptions differed greatly in four areas specifically: on the role of English as a lingua franca, on the importance of learning English, on classroom goals, and the assessments made by students and teachers regarding the contribution to learning in the classroom. Matsuda suggests that if such diversity can be found even among such a small sample size, then a larger study would reveal an even greater diversity of opinions. Understanding the diverse opinions and beliefs of students could also help with student motivation. Honna (2008) describes how many Japanese teachers and learners of English are surprised to learn that most Japanese are more likely to use English to communicate interculturally with other Asians. Honna reports some success in improving the motivation and engagement of students by directly addressing their assumptions.

Cultural differences and cultural conflict in the Japanese university

For native-English-speaking teachers in Japan, awareness of their own culture and the cultures of their students seems important. However, according to Kelly and Adachi (2019), knowing Japanese culture and values is not enough to understand Japanese university colleagues, and one should know and understand the intricacies of the university system and its key values to remove barriers and reduce misunderstandings between colleagues. Kelly and Adachi (2019) point out anecdotal evidence of foreigners who have risen to the top in Japanese universities over the last 25 years as proof that the national and institutional cultural context of the Japanese university they dub the ‘chrysanthemum maze’ can be navigated.

In addition to context-specific knowledge, intercultural miscommunication theory can provide a valuable framework for conceptualizing and managing differences in culture at the national or institutional level. This theory posits that groups with different cultural beliefs and practices get into conflict because of their inability to communicate effectively (Hall, as cited in Ross, 2000). This is because the process of communication contains many elements that the participants are unaware of (Hall, as cited in Ross, 2000). Littlejohn and Domenici (2007) define conflict as “the state of being challenged by human difference” (p. 9) and suggest that “humans construct and manage their differences through communication” (p. 26). We appreciate Littlejohn and Domenici’s conceptualization of conflict and communicative conflict

resolution because it seems immediately applicable to the language classroom. The pragmatic approaches addressed earlier require specific knowledge and a disciplined approach to learning and teaching culture (Byram & Feng 2005; Damen, 1987; Holliday, 1994). However, recognizing the state of being challenged by difference and managing difference through communication is a practical conceptual framework for recognizing and addressing cultural differences in and outside the classroom. This framework does not seem to conflict with the previously discussed ethnographic approaches either. Additionally, from our own experience, we find the definition well suited for discussing conflict or cultural difference in the Japanese English language classroom. We believe this is because Japanese are familiar with using words and concepts comparable to the words *different* or *difference* to refer to conflicts over facts, interests, relationships, values, and beliefs.

Summary of Research

The internationalization of Japanese universities is part of the Japanese national government's strategic response to the forces of globalization by using English language education as a tool to gain competitive advantages in the global economy, while at the same time developing Japanese national and cultural identity. The key role of English in Japan's internationalization strategy indicates there is continued demand for foreign native-English-speaking English language teachers in Japanese universities. Compared to other international faculty, American and British teachers may be received more favorably by students and institutions, however, they may experience more real or perceived challenges at the national, institutional, or personal level. Japanese and foreign English teachers alike report challenges with the low motivation of students, as well as effective teaching methodologies. Therefore, there is a need for qualified teachers who make time and efforts to understand students' motivation and goals. Special attention to the cultural dimension is especially recommended for foreign English teachers in Japan, who require specific and general cultural knowledge and intercultural skills not only to teach language and culture effectively in the classroom, but also to communicate with Japanese university students, faculty, and staff.

Conclusions and Further Research

Our research has partially answered all three of our research questions. 1) We now have a greater understanding of the terms *international education* and *internationalization* as they pertain to the context of teaching English in Japanese universities. Further research could reexamine Knight's 2015 definition of *internationalization*, perhaps using it to compare the processes of internationalization in Canadian and in Japanese higher education. This comparative approach might shed light on any unique or unexplained aspects of Japanese internationalization. 2) We have found research pointing to the causes and possible solutions to commonly reported challenges faced by foreign English teachers in and outside of the classroom. Wadden and Hale's (2019) handbook has provided a wealth of information directly addressing our initial problem statement and offers suggestions for further research regarding student motivation and effective teaching. 3) The ethnographic approaches we read about seem to offer useful theories and practices for building specific and general intercultural knowledge and skills that could prove useful for understanding social and cultural contexts, choosing appropriate teaching methods and approaches. Applying one of these ethnographic approaches could possibly aid instructors in better understanding their own institutions and colleagues. However, all these approaches require a great investment of time. This might be practical for self-directed personal development, but we imagine it would be difficult to implement as a top-down strategy for training teachers. Future research may entail comparing and contrasting approaches and theories in order to derive or create a simplified worksheet, check list, set of

guiding principles, or best practices that could help orientate teachers to their various social and teaching contexts, and gently nudge them toward further learning.

Up until now we have mostly resisted diving into our past research in organizational development and intercultural conflict resolution. However, we find intercultural miscommunication theory is a useful conceptual framework for analyzing and resolving conflicts and learning about culture. We would like to examine more conceptual and theoretical frameworks in the future.

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