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# Intercultural Communication Education at Tertiary Level in Japan: Past, Present and Future

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## Abstract

This paper examines intercultural communication education at tertiary-level in Japan through a discussion of its development from the past through to the present. It begins with a review of the current literature on the history of intercultural communication education in Japan before describing the curricula presently found in Japanese universities. A description is given of faculties in Japanese universities that provide dedicated intercultural communication and intercultural-studies programs as well as other Japanese universities that take a dynamic view of culture within their EAP/ESP courses. The successes gained from such development as well as the gaps that still remain are then discussed. Finally, future possibilities of further enhancement of education in this field at Japanese universities are presented as a conclusion.

## 1. Introduction: Setting the Scene

This paper seeks to canvas the development of intercultural communication education at tertiary level in Japan from its initial introduction through to present day. It will also introduce insights into future potential development with a specific focus on the author's current research project. The project is funded by the *Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research Grant (26580119)* under the category of *Challenging and Exploratory Research*. It has three main aims: 1) to investigate the content of current intercultural business communication and understanding programs at leading universities overseas and within Japan; 2) to collect intercultural workplace

related data in Japan from companies with a Japanese and English-speaking foreign worker dynamic and 3) to create authentic 'real-life' intercultural business communication material as classroom and online programs that provide Japanese students with an array of skills to navigate the work processes and dynamics of intercultural workplaces.

Accordingly, this paper centers its attention on the first aim of the project – an investigation of the current situation regarding intercultural communication education – by way of reviewing how it has developed at tertiary level in Japan. Through a discussion and analysis of the current literature and data available, the paper will connect the past and present with potential developments for the future. In short, the main premise is to provide a framework for future considerations and possibilities that the current research project aims to develop.

## **2. Literature Review: Looking at the Past and Present**

In order to understand the present context and content of any particular field of academic study, an investigation into its development is required. This section begins by reviewing the domain of intercultural communication education. Firstly, a clarification of the meanings of intercultural communication and intercultural business communication is offered before reviewing the current literature on intercultural communication education in Japan.

### **2.1 Definitions of Intercultural Communication and Intercultural Business Communication**

Lustig and Koester (1998: 42) give a succinct and concrete definition of intercultural communication as representing “a symbolic process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings.” In other words, the focus is on the creation of mutual understanding between people from differing cultures when communicating with one another. In terms of intercultural business communication, as Varner (2000) underlines in her research, the definition must therefore be distinguished from intercultural communication in general with a distinctive framework that concentrates on the contexts of working and doing business as a unique variable.

In the context of intercultural communication education, it is therefore

imperative for students to be equipped with the ability to be aware of cultural differences, so that they can learn to find pragmatic ways of abating factors such as stress, stereotyping, and misunderstandings they may hinder effective intercultural communication both in general and in distinctive contexts such as business (Neustupny, 2000).

## **2.2 Intercultural Communication Education in Japan**

This section now turns its attention to the development of intercultural communication education in Japan from past to present in the following two areas: (1) intercultural communication education policy and methodology and (2) intercultural communication (general and business) education development at tertiary level. As a starting point, a critical review of current literature on foreign language policy, particularly that of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL), shows that Japan still has a long road ahead in terms of establishing a base for true intercultural communication education. As Zhang (2006) and Zhang and Cao (2012) point out in their analysis of minority language education in Japan, despite English being the designated language taught in national junior and senior high schools in Japan, the nation as a whole tends toward conservative and stereotypical views of the world. As a result, English language education has been labeled as being inefficient in providing effective exposure to cultural differences and other sociolinguistic learning opportunities for Japanese students.

Dognecy-Aktuna (2005), in her analysis of intercultural communication in English language teacher education, suggests that teachers must remain cognizant of the sociocultural background of the language learner without over-watering down the cultural content. This level of cognizance, as a result, can help to ensure an enhanced learning experience that intertwines language and culture. Indeed, until present day, many researchers (e.g., Neustupny, 2000; Zhang and Mok, 2009; Zhang and Cao, 2012) confer that more pragmatic use and conscious interaction with not only the language, but also the cultures that lay behind the English language are required to steer Japanese learners away from a strongly attached self-consciousness of their own culture. As a result, the fostering of more effective development in intercultural communication education would be expected. To do this successfully, however, attention must be paid to the balance of developing

language and intercultural skills together, which as Shibata (1998) claims is, often overlooked.

Another area in which education related to intercultural communication and understanding in Japan has gained attention has been the focus on 'returnees'; in other words, children that have returned to Japan from living overseas for extended periods of time. As Fukushima (2005) points out, returnee intercultural understanding and competence have been the center point of interest in interdisciplinary research on intercultural encounters from linguistic, socio-linguistic, and foreign language pedagogical perspectives since the early 1990s. Since this time, the definition of intercultural communication and education research has developed from a once heavily critiqued focus on cultural studies and cultural difference analysis to the point of using intercultural contact and interaction as the catalyst for a more pragmatic focus.

As a result of this shift in definition, instruction of how intercultural contact can be used as a structural framework to enhance cultural intelligence has become more predominant in Japan. Furthermore, research and curriculum development in this field has been able to produce an array of interdisciplinary subjects such as globalization, communication competence, bilingualism, biculturalism, multiculturalism, global identity as well as more cultural-specific regional studies and skill-specific business communication, interpreting, translating, presentation and intercultural negotiation studies (Fukushima, 2005).

### **2.3 Current State of Intercultural Communication Education at Tertiary Level in Japan**

As the section above shows, the development of intercultural communication education in Japan has been slow, but nonetheless, solid, especially at tertiary level. A survey of universities nationwide show that there are currently four universities – Rikkyo University, Kobe University, Shoin University and Ryukoku University – that have dedicated faculty and/or graduate programs in the fields of intercultural communication and intercultural studies. As for faculties not dedicated to intercultural communication and intercultural studies, if we were to include skills-based classes such as interpreting and translating skills, ESP and EAP courses that also cover cultural-based content and the like, it could be said that most Japanese universities provide students with opportunities to broaden their

intercultural related competencies.

Noteworthy is the effort made by Nanzan University, which has developed as a university that is not only dominant in foreign language education, but now boosts a canvas of content-based courses known as the *International Course Category*, or *Kokusai Kamoku Gun* in Japanese. This category provides students with the opportunity to learn a variety of content (e.g. economics, business administration, science, liberal studies, policy studies, intercultural business communication understanding etc.) in an English-only environment.

To that end, the remainder of this section shifts its focus to an overview of efforts being made to bridge the gap in intercultural communication education, firstly by the above-mentioned universities that have dedicated faculties to the study of intercultural understanding and communication, and secondly by introducing examples of intercultural-related programs provided by other universities.

## **2.4 Faculties Dedicated to Intercultural Communication Studies in Japan**

### **Rikkyo University**

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive programs currently in existence is that of Rikkyo University in Tokyo. Through a review of their homepage, university brochure and interviews conducted by the author with key teaching staff within the program, it is evident that critical steps toward ensuring progressive curriculum development and instruction in practical, useable skills are being taken. The foundation of study in the Faculty of Intercultural Communication (Ikebukuro Campus, Tokyo) at Rikkyo University is based on the fostering of multilingual competence and the ability to think from multi-perspectives through the choice of focus in the fields of 1) intercultural communication, 2) combined regional culture or 3) language education. After intensive study and acquisition of English and another foreign language, students then begin to study the cultures and societies in which those languages are used.

Throughout the four-year program, ample opportunities are provided to students to acquire foreign language skills and cultural intelligence through projects and compulsory subjects such as its second-year study-abroad program and on-campus Japanese-International student-paired projects. According to the Faculty of Intercultural Communication (Rikkyo University, 2014), the curriculum design

focuses on a multilingual approach in an effort to foster true global thinking and to stimulate a deeper understanding of culture in global and dynamic terms.

#### Shoin University

Shoin University is another example of a Japanese university dedicating an entire department to intercultural communication study. The basic premise of its curriculum is founded on the goal of nurturing culturally-intelligent communication specialists (Shoin University, 2014). Its approach connects the study of intercultural communication, human communication and linguistic communication with the specific aim of broadening students' global views, including the reality that the number of Japanese-Foreign worker dynamics will increase in Japan. Accordingly, students who possess high intercultural competency will be in high demand.

In addition to a variety of language courses available, including English, French, Korean, German and Chinese, the curriculum includes an abundance of theoretical (e.g., communication theory, intercultural communication theory, culture-interaction history, international relations, regional culture studies, international political history, corporate culture etc.) and practical-skills based classes (presentation, interpreting, translating, hospitality, marketing skills etc.) to assist students in obtaining the skills and knowledge necessary to work in multicultural settings.

Through the combination of theory and practice, Shoin University students are able to form strategies and equip themselves with sellable skills and knowledge to potential employers including foreign affiliates, international exchange organizations, trading companies, and international NPOs and NGOs (Shoin University, 2014).

#### Kobe University

Kobe University is the third example of direct instruction in the field of intercultural communication at tertiary level. This particular faculty is divided into four departments – Human Communication and Information Science, Contemporary Culture and Society, Intercultural Communication Studies and Area Studies. Interestingly, the Japanese name of the faculty is *Kokusai Bunka Gakubu* (Kobe University, 2014), which literally translated means *International Culture*

*Faculty.* However, due to the diverse range of content available with a focus on intercultural exchange at all levels, the university has appropriately chosen a liberal English translation that reflects its content.

The faculty approaches its input to educating Japanese university students in the area of intercultural studies with a focus on intercultural understanding, communication and global negotiation. Noteworthy is the effort it makes in preparing students for the workforce whom, according to the university (Kobe University, 2014), are mostly looking for work in international fields – i.e., multinational trading, financial and manufacturing companies, government cooperation agencies such as JICA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as international NPO/NGO organizations. Boasting a success rate of over 90% in student-employment placement directly after graduation, it is understandable why a number of the graduates point to the faculty's on-going pursuit of academic excellence. In particular, content-practicality in terms of working in multicultural contexts is pointed to as contributing to employment success.

#### Ryukoku University

Lastly, this section will look at the Faculty of Intercultural Communication at Ryukoku University, Kyoto. As clearly stated on its homepage (Ryukoku University, 2014), the faculty “offers a curriculum that aims to develop and train individuals who are able to accept and respect different cultures, and have the ability and character to engage in international communication in a diversifying global society, based on an understanding of their own cultures.” Students can select a major and minor from seven courses in the fields of cultural understanding (e.g. regional studies, international cooperation and arts and media) and language (e.g. English, Korean, French and Chinese).

In terms of foreign language education, students can choose from either a one-language intensive or two-language path with aim of nurturing student communication skills as a tool to explore foreign cultures. According to Ryukoku University (2014), approximately 40% of the student population in the faculty is made up of international (foreign) students. This suggests that Japanese and international students alike are provided with an ideal environment in which they can participate in intercultural communication on a daily basis.

### Other Tertiary Level Programs and Courses

In addition to the above-mentioned facilities, there are a number of Japanese universities that have established courses and curriculum that contribute to the expansion of intercultural communication education in Japan.

As mentioned in the *Introduction* section, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is placing more importance on the internationalization of Japanese universities through its G30 (Global 30 Universities) project. This project targets internationalization through student mobility from overseas by offering courses in English at Japanese universities. Currently, there are 13 Japanese universities that are part of the G30 project – Doshisha University, Keio University, Kyoto University, Kyushu University, Tokyo University, Meiji University, Nagoya University, Osaka University, Ritsumeikan University, Sophia University, Tohoku University, University of Tokyo, University of Tsukuba and Waseda University. According to MEXT, this initiative has spurred an increasing need for Japanese students to be more adept to multicultural environments not only related to education, but also to business, politics, society and the like. Changes in student mobility have arisen with an increase in overseas students worldwide from 2.07 million in 2000 to 4.12 million in 2010. As of 2010, Japan recorded a high of 141,000 overseas students (The Japan Times, 2013).

The influence of the G30 project has also led many non G-30 universities to revamp their curricula to offer more courses that help broaden Japanese university students' global outlook and act as a catalyst for heightened intercultural awareness. One of the pioneers of such programs is Sophia University even before becoming one of the G30 universities. The Faculty of Liberal Arts at Sophia University has been offering English-only courses through to graduation since 1949, making it the oldest university in Japan to do so. The faculty has three major English-only courses – Comparative Culture, International Business and Economics, and Social Studies – all of which are popular among Japanese students and overseas students (The Japan Times, 2013).

Akita International University (AIU) is another classic example of what can be achieved if a university places a global focus on its curriculum design. In 2004 it opened its doors to students pursuing maximum exposure to a global-focused campus and curriculum. Their mission is to foster intercultural communication skills (Akita International University, 2014). Its program features a number



of initiatives to stimulate foreign language and intercultural communication competencies including a compulsory one-year overseas study program as well as living in a dorm with international students. Norihiko Suzuki, the current AIU President, succinctly summarizes the universities mission as follows:

“The world in the 21st century has become much more globalized in terms of the transnational movement of people and communication. In such a globalized and intercultural society, people must establish their own “individuality,” enhance dialogue and mutual understanding with others, exert leadership, and take responsibilities for their actions. These are people AIU refer to as ‘global human resources,’ and strive to cultivate.” (Ibid: 1)

A closer examination of AIU curriculum shows how they strive to achieve their mission. Firstly, AIU provides an intensive EAP program in order to prepare students for their four years at university. English instruction is available in all subjects and is taught by instructors that are either Japanese or foreign nationals. The compulsory one-year study abroad program is worth 30 credits and is part of a comprehensive student exchange program with top-tier universities worldwide.

Finally, as introduced at the start of the paper, Nanzan University is worthy of mention under the non-G30 category. Nanzan University has a long and successful history in English language education and American and British related studies in the Faculty of Foreign Studies, as well as Japanese studies for overseas students through its Center for Japanese Studies. Additionally, since 2012 it has made efforts to enhance its English-only curricula through the creation of its *International Course Category*. This category has started to widen the possibilities of intercultural understanding and communication competence for its students (Nanzan, 2014). Students from first to fourth year are able to select courses from this category in English-only subjects with a wide theme-range from liberal studies through to more specialist subjects such as economics, business administration, operations research, migration, and intercultural business understanding. Through these subjects, Nanzan aims to provide students with the opportunity to enhance a variety of skills so that they can be active in the international community (O’Connell, 2013).

### **3. Discussion: Analyzing the Successes and Gaps of Intercultural Communication Education at Tertiary Level**

The previous section illustrated the dedicated effort by many universities in Japan to enhance intercultural communication competence and understanding through two approaches – (1) establishment of faculties dedicated to intercultural studies and (2) creation of English-only courses ranging from liberal studies through to specific skill-focused and content-based subjects. Taking this development into consideration, this section turns its attention to an evaluation of the successes and gaps that have appeared.

#### **3.1 Successes in Curriculum Design and Implementation**

In terms of success, the four universities with dedicated 'intercultural communication' faculties have made large strides in answering the need for a stronger focus on intercultural education at tertiary level in Japan. These universities share commonalities in the establishment of a strong base in intercultural communication and understanding education. Moreover, the curriculum design of each faculty's answers previously long-lingering gaps in intercultural communication education in Japan.

One clear and common success is their efforts to link language, communication and culture together through their curriculum designs. This is particularly significant when considering how culture is viewed in terms of its connection to language. As Duranti (1997) and Liddicoat (2002) have both stressed in past research, in order to achieve the end-result of producing better, more culturally-intelligent communicators, curriculum design must steer away from a 'static' (e.g. food, festival, music, religion) view of culture. Instead, it should focus on a more 'dynamic' (e.g. thought-processes, communication styles, behaviors, customs) view.

Duranti (1997) explains it best by emphasizing that human communication is a reflection of social structures (customs, behaviors, communication style differences etc.). Liddicoat (2009) supports this point by suggesting that if culture is embedded within language, then in fact, using language is itself a cultural behavior. Therefore, in the case of Japanese students using English as a foreign language, it then becomes an intercultural communicative act that requires pragmatic and culture-specific knowledge and intelligence to conduct effectively.

Surprisingly, the efforts made by Japanese universities are becoming widely recognized and positively evaluated by the Japanese business world. Japan often critiques itself for a so-called low number of English-competent employees as well as unfamiliarity regarding cultural-diversity in the workplace. As business becomes more borderless, the demand for high linguistic and cultural skills of new recruits will increase. To that end, Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) describes the recent efforts of the G30 universities and others with an intercultural-skills focus as both timely and essential. It points to the changes in the Japanese business environment that see less time and resources available to train new recruits through company initiatives and more pre-employment training necessary at tertiary level to create globally-minded people who can contribute to the company from an earlier stage. According to the Keidanren survey results, businesses now expect Japanese universities to nurture human resources with global skills through methods such as teaching specialized courses in languages other than Japanese; providing abundant opportunity and motivation for students to study overseas; including global business focused lectures within university curricula; and offering internship programs at overseas companies and NGOs (The Japan Times, 2013).

### **3.2 Gaps in Curriculum Design and Implementation**

The examples of success reviewed thus far suggest that substantial considerations have been made in intercultural education curriculum design at tertiary level. However, as will be described in this section, there are still a number of gaps to fill as intercultural communication education further develops at tertiary-level in Japan.

Firstly, with regards to specific focus points within the field of intercultural communication education, more transparency is required in connection to how the skills and knowledge obtainable through study in this field can benefit students in their future careers and lives. Intercultural business communication, as an example, is one of the many areas within this paradigm that requires specific skills and cultural intelligence acquisition to perform effectively in culturally diverse work environments. Yet, the way curriculum content is explained via various mediums still fails to link the input of such skills and knowledge with clear output possibilities. Kobe University is the only university among those with intercultural faculties that fully promotes the outcomes via testimonies from its graduates. This

gap suggests that these universities need to establish a clear framework and further publicity of how each course can benefit Japanese university students and help them in forming their career paths.

Secondly, while programs such as the G30 by MEXT and the data available from Keidanren provide insights into what intercultural work skills are required and expected in the global marketplace, actual career-oriented courses that go beyond delivering ideas of the demand and the ideal image of global human resources are still relatively scarce. Overseas study, therefore, is not the only option. Rather, with the influx of foreign-affiliated companies in Japan and Japanese companies using English as a in-house medium of communication, more focus within each university's curriculum should aim at ties with such companies to allow students the opportunity to experience culturally-diverse workplaces within Japan and to test their skills before graduating.

#### **4. Conclusion: Considering the Future**

This paper has explored the development of intercultural communication education at tertiary level in Japan. It began with a broad canvas of how intercultural communication studies have developed. Indeed, future prospects of further development look promising with the appearance of universities dedicating entire faculties to this field. Needless to say, other universities also seem to be investing more thought and effort into creating English-only courses that provide the benefit of enhancing students' intercultural understanding and competence. As this paper also showed, through MEXT initiatives such as the global 30 universities project, many Japanese universities have become conscious of the necessity for a global design in the future curricula.

To that end, the development of intercultural communication competence among university students in Japan should ideally be pursued in two ways – first, by providing opportunity for them to study intercultural communication and the various frameworks it encompasses, for example intercultural business communication; and second, by endeavoring to include cultural components in English language teaching. If this can be done, as Shibata (1998) proposes, the dilemma of universities producing fluent speakers of English with little intercultural competence can be avoided.

In concluding this paper, it is important to consider what can be taken from the knowledge gained from this study. Over the past decade, it can be said that Japanese universities have become cognizant of the important link between foreign language ability and intercultural competence. The firm base that has appeared from these efforts should now be used to guide strategies that further improve and expand initiatives that will result in nurturing more intercultural competent graduates that can be active in the ever-expanding global community.

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