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Title	Impressions of a Malaysian Muslim Guest Speaker Living in Japan on Japanese University Students
Author(s)	ONO, Kaori
Citation	Bulletin of the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University. Studies in integrated arts and sciences , 3 : 1 - 12
Issue Date	2022-12-31
DOI	
Self DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15027/53568">10.15027/53568</a>
URL	<a href="https://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/00053568">https://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/00053568</a>
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# Impressions of a Malaysian Muslim Guest Speaker Living in Japan on Japanese University Students

ONO Kaori

Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University

## Abstract

This study examined the impact of a speech by a female Malaysian Muslim guest speaker on Japanese university students. The study examined how the perceived image of Malaysia and Muslims as “radical, solitary, and scary” changed after hearing a speech about Muslims in Japan. A Malaysian Muslim was invited as a guest speaker in an introductory “*Dounyuu Kougi*” Lecture at a medium-sized private university in western Japan. The speaker gave a lecture on Malaysian culture, religion, education, and life in Japan as a Muslim. After the lecture, two questionnaires were administered to the 95 students: a pre-lecture Likert-scale questionnaire and a semi-structured questionnaire. Qualitative data analysis categorized the responses into: “Japanese students’ stereotypes and prejudice toward Malaysian culture and Muslims,” “Japanese students’ past knowledge of Malaysian culture and Muslims,” and “Japanese students’ interest in learning more about Malaysian language, culture, and religion.” After transcribing the comments, the student data were further classified using Milton J Bennett’s model of intercultural sensitivity development, DMIS (1986,2011,2013). The survey results showed that Japanese students’ attitudes toward foreigners and other cultures improved.

## 1. Introduction

With the globalization of society, the number of foreigners living in Japan is increasing.<sup>1</sup> According to data from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs,

there are approximately 2.5 million immigrants<sup>2</sup> in Japan. Japan ranks fourth in the world in foreign immigration statistics (2015)<sup>3</sup> among the 35 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs data on international migration by country/region of origin for one year for about 200 countries/regions of the world. The number of foreign migrants to the 35 OECD member countries is counted, and the number of migrants to Japan is calculated as "those who hold a valid visa and have 9 Foreign nationals who plan to stay in Japan for more than 0 days" are included.

<sup>2</sup> In Japan, "immigrants" and "foreign workers" are distinguished as two different things. Japan maintains a stance of not accepting immigrants, but only foreign workers.

<sup>3</sup> Japan has 2.5 million immigrants, a small number compared to Europe and the U.S. The number of refugees accepted in Japan in 2019 was 44 (0.4% of the total authorized), also by far the smallest, but the number of foreigners who entered Japan in 2018 with plans to stay for 3 months or longer shows that Japan ranks fourth in the world with approximately 520,000 foreigners.

Furthermore, Japan ranks 26th in the world in the number of immigrant inflows, including developing countries, in 2019. The rapid increase in the number of foreigners living in Japan may be viewed as a reflection of the fact that Japan is a developed, economically developed, and relatively safe country to live in. Many workers and foreign students come to Japan to work or study. Japan is a member of the OECD, and as a developed country, it is time to consider the development of support measures and policies for foreign residents in Japan, just as other OECD countries do. In accepting foreigners, it has become very important to respect and ensure understanding of the diversity of different languages, cultures, and religions (Kawai, 2016 et al.; Seto & Izawa, 2011; Suzuki & Menjyou, 2007; Tokuda, 2019). Furthermore, the future of Japanese society as Komisarof (2012) emphasizes is the need for Japanese society to be more open and accepting of diversity as well as the importance of foreigners trying to adapt to Japanese society. However, while an increasing number of universities are currently developing measures to promote cross-cultural understanding, few have yet to develop measures to understand religious diversity. In order to fill this gap, this study aims to discover changes in the perceptions of Japanese students before and after listening to a guest speaker, a Malaysian Muslim living in Japan, and to explore the impact of these changes on perceptions among students. The following two research questions were examined for this study. 1. What image do Japanese students have of Malaysian culture and their religion? Is it possible to change that image in the short duration of a speech? 2. What kind of interaction between Japanese university students and foreigners living in Japan, particularly people from Asia, are important to build a mutually understandable relationship in the future?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Purpose of This Study

According to a survey of 1,634 Japanese university students on their attitudes toward religion (Kikuko Hirato, Yoshihide Sakurai, et al., Kokugakuin University, 2021), about 51.9% of Japanese students said they had no religion but were interested in religion, and 55% said they had a negative image of religion in general. Furthermore, while the number of lectures at Japanese universities dealing with cultural diversity is increasing each year, (Sonoda, 2019) states there are still few lectures on religious diversity. In recent years, however, the Japanese government has been actively accepting foreign workers, mainly from Asian countries, on short-term residency status as a measure to address labor shortages in an aging society with a declining birthrate<sup>4</sup>(Kawai, 2016 et al.; Seto, Izawa 2011; Suzuki, Menjyou 2007; Tokuda, 2019). Examples include the acceptance of Vietnamese and Filipinos in the medical sector and Indonesian immigrants in the industrial machinery manufacturing industry. In addition, Japan is considering expanding the residency status of foreign workers to allow them to reside in Japan<sup>5</sup> indefinitely with their families (Immigration and Residence Bureau, Ministry of Justice, 2021). Living in Japan with foreign families involves various problems such as language and cultural barriers and educational issues (Kawai, 2016 et 4 Since 2010, the population over 15 years old has not increased and is at a plateau, while the labor force has decreased

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<sup>4</sup> After 2010, the population of 15 years old and above will not increase and reach a plateau, and the labor force will decrease once around 2012, with no significant increase in the labor force.

<sup>5</sup> Accompanying family members (spouse and children) is possible if the requirements are met; period of stay: 3 years, 1 year, or renewable every 6 months.

once around 2012, with no significant increase. Accompanying family members (spouse and children) is possible if requirements are met, and the period of stay can be renewed every 3 years, 1 year, or 6 months (Seto and Izawa 2011, Suzuki and Menjyou 2007, Tokuda 2019). Acceptance and understanding of the religious and cultural diversity of foreigners will become extremely important for coexistence and co-prosperity in a globalized society. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to convey correct information about Malaysian culture and Islam, which are unfamiliar to students, to the students who will be the future leaders of Japan. The guest speeches were composed of topics not found in textbooks and familiar to the students. Specific guest speeches included: 1) Malaysia's education system, 2) about the culture (food customs such as Halal etc.), 3) Ramadan, 4) Muslim religious views, and 5) current Muslim women's fashion and trends. As stated by Sonoda (2019), guest speech is a method for acquiring knowledge, but there are still few studies that have specifically examined its effectiveness, such as how students understood it or whether it had any effect on the listeners, and the effectiveness is still unclear of its effectiveness. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze the effects of speeches given by Muslim Asian women to Japanese students using a grand theory approach, and to clarify the specific effects of the speeches. The theoretical framework utilized

in this research will be discussed in the next section.

**2.2. Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)**

The theoretical framework for this study employed Milton J Bennett's (1986,2011,2013) DMIS model, A Developmental Model of intercultural sensitivity, to classify the student data. The model consists of an *ethnocentric* stage (*denial,defense,minimization*) and an *ethnorelative* stage (*acceptance, adaptation, integration*). People in the *denial* stage tend to think that their culture is the only culture. Therefore, they are not concerned with other cultures and do not clearly understand the distinction between their own and other cultures. People in the *defensive* stage know that there are cultural differences but believe that their own culture is the best. People in the minimizing stage tend to simplify about cultural differences, which can lead to misunderstandings and communication problems. In the *Adaptation* stage, you are more likely to be culturally competent, able to adapt your behavior, to think and see things from different perspectives, and to be an effective intercultural communicator. Finally, *Integration* refers to a person who perceives himself or herself as an intercultural communicator, and it is not difficult for such a person to accept cultural differences, adapt his or her behavior, and become bicultural. Please refer to figure 1 as the following.

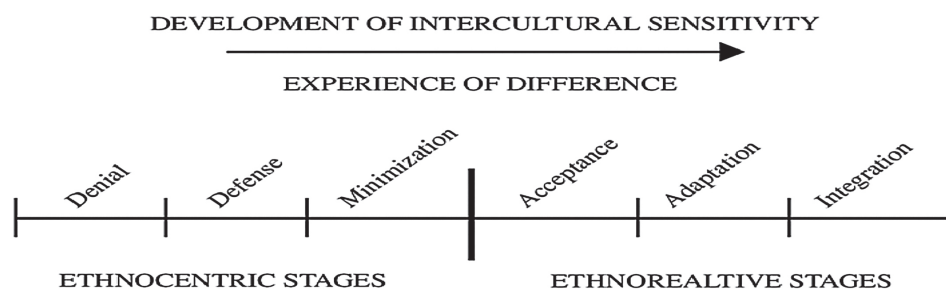


Figure 1. Milton J Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

### 3. Methodology

In this section, an overview of the actual lecture will be presented. The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of a speech given by a female Muslim guest speaker in an introductory lecture *Dounyu Kougi*, to freshmen of Japanese university students. In order to clarify the specific effects of the speeches two types of data were utilized in this study. The first was a Likert-type scale survey, and the second was a semi-structured questionnaire that allowed the students to freely express their opinions and impression of the lecture. Details of each will be discussed in the following sections.

#### 3.1. Data Collection

This study focuses on a guest speakers' speech given at the annual introductory lectures. "*Dounyu Kougi*" at a medium-sized private university in West Japan. The guest speaker was a CIR= (Coordinator for International Relations) from Malaysia, requested by the author for the second consecutive year. The introductory lecture is a class in which faculty members introduce their research area and content of their seminar class. The author's seminar is intercultural communication, with the goal of the seminar to "learn about various issues in intercultural communication, deepen understanding of diverse values, develop problem consciousness, and cultivate the ability to logically consider what kind of awareness and behavior is required as an international person." The 90-minute lecture was divided into two parts. Part 1 comprised of a 45minute lecture by the guest speaker while part 2 was a lecture by the author. The author requested the speaker to be a guest speaker through the local international relations officer in the prefecture. Once the speaker had agreed to deliver the lecture several meetings were held with to discuss details.

It should be noted that the speakers focused not on knowledge that could be found in textbooks or on the Internet, but on authentic and relatable knowledge, such as stories of educational policies they have received as Malaysians, including anecdotes on their culture, daily life as a Muslim in Japan, as well as compliance with religious rules and regulations abroad.

#### 3.2. Quantitative Approach

A questionnaire on Malaysia and Muslims was conducted with 98 first-year students from the Department of English Language and Literature at the university after the "Introduction Lecture" on June 9, 2021. Participants were informed in advance that the data collected in the survey would not be shared with anyone other than for research purposes, and that anonymity would be maintained. Participants who agreed to this were asked to respond to the survey. 95 responses were collected from a total of 98 students. Before the speech questionnaire survey was given to the participants were as follows, from Q1 to Q5, with questions on a Likert scale answered from Google forms. Q1. Do you know about Malaysia? Q2. Do you have any Malaysian friends or acquaintances? Q3. From what sources do you get information about Muslims? Q4. Would you like to know more about Malaysia? Q5. Would you like to know more about Muslims?

#### 3.3. Qualitative Approach

This study focused on the participants' understanding of Malaysia and Muslims and the process of change in their cross-cultural perceptions. Following the guest's speech, the participants were asked to complete and then submit an A4 report form with their responses to the questions from the semi-structured questionnaire. The number of submissions

received was 84 from a total of 98 students. The semi-structured questionnaire questions were as follows. Q1. What role do you think language plays in a multicultural society? Q2. What kind of information about Islam do you see or hear most often these days? Q3. What kind of information do you have about Islam Q4. Do you think you can work well with Muslims Q5. Did your awareness of Malaysia and other Asian countries change after listening to the lecture? If yes, how did it change?

**3.3.1. Data analysis for Qualitative Approach**

The advantages of utilizing a grounded theory approach have been claimed by many researchers (Kinoshita, 2003, Toomey, 2019). According to (Toomey 2019), the advantages of using a grounded theory approach are " eliminating preconceptions and superimposed concepts, revealing communication data emerging from the insider's perspective, capturing the insider's relevant narrative and everyday speech activity, and capturing the relevant linking the dynamics of the relevant situation to the insiders' system of meaning interpretation". Therefore, this study used a grounded theory approach (Kinoshita,2006) for the semi-structured questionnaire to focus on various student comments and to enable theory to emerge from the data. The researcher coded the data into the following three categories as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories list of students' Image towards Malaysia and Muslims

Categories	Subcategories
<i>Negative Images towards Muslims</i> (53)	<i>Japanese students' stereotypes and prejudice towards Malaysian culture and Muslims</i>
<i>Background knowledge of Islam</i> (26)	<i>Japanese students' knowledge of Malaysian culture and Muslims learned in the past</i>
<i>Discovery of the Unknown</i> (17)	<i>Japanese students' interest to learn more about Malaysian language, culture and their religion</i>

Note: ( ) indicates the number of the participants who mentioned codes related to this category.

**4. Findings**

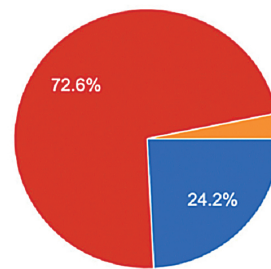
**4.1. Quantitative Approach Results**

The following section provides a summary of the results of the survey. The survey comprised of five basic questions, and here we discuss the data from the first survey of 95 students. The numbers in ( ) indicate the number of students who responded to the survey.

**4.1.1. Survey Questions**

There were five questions, and the results of the questionnaire survey are summarized below.

Graph 1. Survey result for Q1. "Do you know about Malaysia"? (n=95)



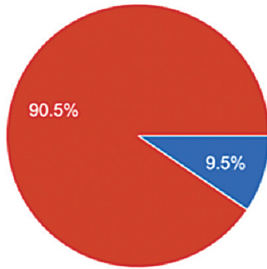
- 1. I know a little about it. 【23】 24.2%(Blue)
- 2. I don't know much about it. 【69】 76.2%(Red)
- 3. I know well about it. 【3】 3.2%(Yellow)
- 4. well informed 【0】 0%(Green)

Sixty-nine students responded, " I don't know much about Malaysia", 76.2% of the total, which



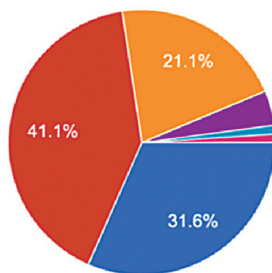
was the highest percentage. This was followed by 23 students who responded, " I know a little about it.," accounting for 24.2% of the total. Only three students, representing only 3.2% of the total, responded that " I know about Malaysia well".

Graph 2. Survey result for Q2 "Do you have any Malaysian friends or acquaintances?" (n=95)



No, I don't. **[86]** 90.5%(Red) Yes, I do. **[9]** 9.5%(Blue) Nine students responded to the question with "yes," they have Malaysian friends, and 86 responded with "no," they have no Malaysian friends. This was 90.5% (Red) of the total.

Graph 3. Survey result for Q3. From what sources do you get information about Muslims? (n = 95)

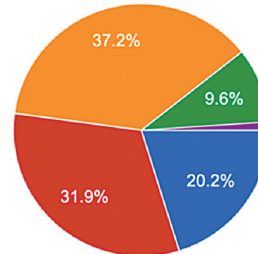


1. internet **[30]** 31.6%(Blue)
2. television **[39]** 41.1%(Red)
3. school classes **[20]** 21.1%(Yellow)
4. newspapers **[0]** 0%(Green)
5. books/magazines **[4]** 4.2%(Purple)
6. lectures/lectures **[1]** 1.1%(light blue)
7. other **[1]** 1.1%(Pink)

Most students obtained their information from

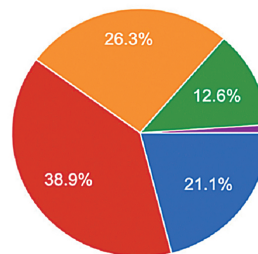
television and the Internet. Second most common was school classes.

Graph 4. Survey result for Q4. Would you like to know more about Malaysia? (n=94)



1. very much so **[19]** 20.2%(Blue)
2. agree **[30]** 31.9%(Red)
3. agree to some extent **[35]** 37.2%(Yellow)
4. not so much **[9]** 9.6%(Green)
5. not at all **[1]** 1.1%(Purple)

Graph 5. Survey result for Q5 Would you like to know more about Muslims? (n=95)



1. very much so **[20]** 21.1%(Blue)
2. agree **[37]** 38.9%(Red)
3. agree to some extent **[25]** 26.3%(Yellow)
4. not so much **[12]** 12.6%(Green)
5. not at all **[1]** 1.1%(Purple)

More than half of the students were interested in learning more about Malaysia and Muslims or wanting to learn more about them.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Approach

Qualitative results indicating Japanese university students' attitudes towards Malaysian

culture and their religion after listening to the guest speeches were classified into three categories: “Japanese students’ stereotypes and prejudice towards Malaysian culture and Muslims”, “Japanese students’ knowledge of Malaysian culture and Muslims learned in the past”, “Japanese students’ Interest to learn more about Malaysian language, culture and their religion”. In this section, each category group will be discussed individually.

#### **4.2.1. Japanese students’ stereotypes and prejudice towards Malaysian culture and Muslims**

Nearly 80% of the students responded that their image of Malaysian culture and Muslims had changed and became more interested after listening to the guest speaker's speech. The following student response indicates this point. This response has been translated into English for the purpose of this paper.

“Muslims are a little scary because of their strict rules of commandment and I feel like they are always at war with each other.”

Many of the student’s commented that they were surprised to learn that Islam means "peace" and that they were surprised to reflect on their stereotype images and their own past attitudes towards Islam as an extremist, dangerous, scary, exclusive religion realizing that they had ill-informed prejudices and stereotypes through the media.

Another student replied as the following comment.

*"Until today, I had not learned much about Malaysia and knew very little about it but learned that it is a country where cross-cultural communication is valued. Because it is a multicultural country, I was very impressed*

*with how people there mix languages and use their ingenuity to communicate with each other."*

Approximately 70% of the students stated that they had negative feelings towards Islam and 80% of the students didn’t know much about Malaysian culture before the guest speech. Many of the participants involved in this study commented that they became interested in cross-cultural communication after the guest speech.

#### **4.2.2. “Japanese students’ knowledge of Malaysian culture and Muslims learned in the past”**

Many students had up until now thought that Malaysia was a mono-ethnic country. By learning about the multicultural system in Malaysia, which is more advanced than that in Japan, many students expressed interest in learning more about it to incorporate these efforts to Japan.

*"I was very interested to learn for the first time that in Malaysia, people do not have only one native language like in Japan but mix multiple languages to communicate with each other."*

Many of the Japanese students were interested in the fact that Malaysia has achieved a multicultural society by respecting each other's cultures through communication.

In addition, many students were surprised to learn the true meaning behind Islamic religious rules. For example, halal means "to eat meat that has been processed in the most painless way for the animal" and that it is a way of caring for life than just a strict religious concept. Some of the students had taken classes on Islam in high school and felt that the topics of religion and culture had been covered more frequently in school education in



recent years. However, it became clear that most of them were mostly on knowledge of a religion with strict precepts that reinforced stereotypes in line with media images.

#### 4.2.3. Japanese students' Interest to learn more about Malaysian language, culture, and their religion

The students also stated that their perceptions towards Malaysia language and culture had changed. And they also felt a sense of respect, empathy, and understanding towards other culture and religion.

*"Communication in "Manglish" is very important. I would like to learn from Malaysians and communicate with various people. "*

Furthermore, some students expressed a desire to interact with Malaysians and Muslims more than ever before, and to communicate with them and get to know them better. Moreover, after hearing the guest's speech, more students became interested in the unique English language, "Manglish" which is said to be an informal form of Malaysian English with English-based Creole characteristics, used primarily in Malaysia.

Q1. What role do you think language plays in a multicultural society?

Communication Tool (83)

Something that allows you to express yourself (1)

Symbols of diversity and culture (5)

Identity (2)

Most participants indicated that language plays a role in connecting with others and bridging different cultures through communication.

Q2. What kind of information about Islam do you see or hear most often these days?

Terrorism (11)

Extremist organizations (15)

War, fighting between Israel and Hamas (10)

Information that there are armed conflicts between neighboring countries, endangering not only the city but also its residents. (1)

The news that halal certification is gradually progressing in Japan (1)

The news that a Muslim family was run over and killed by a car in Canada (8)

News on coronas and religion (2), whether vaccine ingestion of new coronavirus is halal in Muslim countries

News about the lack of cemeteries that allow burial for Muslims (3)

We don't hear much (4)

Polygamy (2)

Others (37)

A few students brought up news they had seen before the guest speech, including news "about the impact of the new coronavirus outbreak on Islamic observances," and "whether the new corona vaccinations that are rapidly being distributed in Japan are regarded as halal in the Muslim world." Several students mentioned about the shocking news that happened the day before the lecture, "A Muslim family was run over and killed by a car in Canada simply because they were Muslim.

Q3. What kind of information do you have about Islam?

Strict image, many religious restrictions (55) Scary, dangerous, unsafe (13)

Extreme, violent (27)

Several students mentioned the classes they had taken on Islam in their school education. These students said that at first, they had a somewhat scary image of an unknown religion, but after learning about the religion in school, they learned about the historical background and discovered similar practices to those in Japan.

As for negative images, many students commented that they have a scary image of Islam and Muslims being engaged in wars and terrorism due to information from the Internet and TV. One student responded,

*"I have an image of many radical people, in fact maybe only some of them, but I don't know much about Islam, so I have that image."*

As a minority opinion that was a student that had seen information in a cartoon that:

*"Muslim women cover most of their bodies with national dress, but some wealthy women enjoy coloring their hair, nails, etc."*

*Another student commented that Islam has become relatively more familiar to them, indicating that there are more opportunities to deal with Islam from many sources.*

Q4. Do you think you can work well with Muslims?

One student commented, "Just hearing the word 'religion' for some Japanese may not sound good, but at least I am willing to coexist without prejudice." Another student commented as follows.

*"I feel that although there are Asian and European people living in Japan, Japanese people stand out and Japan exists on its own."*

*In places like the U.S. and Singapore, I can see people of various nationalities existing, but I don't think that is the case in Japan, so I think it would be good to have a more globally diverse mix of nationalities in Japan, and I would like to see more Muslims come to Japan. "*

On the other hand, a small number of students expressed some concern about accepting people from different cultures and religions.

One student said, *"I felt Islam had nothing to do with me."*

Another student had Islamic friends from high school and had a growing interest in learning about Islamic culture through manga.

Q5. Did your awareness of Malaysia and other Asian countries change after listening to the lecture? If yes, how did it change?

Nearly 80% of the respondents indicated that they had become more interested in Malaysia and Muslims after listening to the lecture, including the following comment.

*"I have been interested in Muslims since I had a Muslim friend once, but thought it was rude to ask questions about the religion he believed in"*.

The lecture had sparked his interest and he wanted to know more about it.

## 5. Discussion

This section will begin by presenting the results of the quantitative data. The author will

then integrate the qualitative data to answer each of the following research questions. There are two research questions for this paper. Implications for research, theory, and practice are suggested, and finally, limitations are discussed. The first research question, 1. What kind of image do Japanese students have of Malaysian culture and religion? Is it possible to change that image with a short speech? Regarding the first question, the author found from the quantitative data that most of the students were not familiar about Malaysians and the Islamic culture and therefore due to the lack of knowledge, many of them mentioned in their comments that they had a stereotypical image of Malaysian culture and Islam as strictly precepts and combative until they heard the guest speech. However, after hearing the speech, their image of the religion changed after they learned that Islam means "peace," and that they found some similarities with their own culture. By finding similarities with their own culture, they felt a sense of closeness, and found that many of them commented that it was good for Muslims and foreigners from Asia to enter Japanese society because it broadens their perspectives. Many students also commented that they felt more willing to communicate with foreigners themselves and to help them more proactively than before. This seems to indicate an overall shift to the *Acceptance* Stage, which is classified as the *Ethnorelative* Stage in DMIS<sup>6</sup>, since the participants showed an attitude of accepting cultural differences and trying to respect each other. On the other hand, however,

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<sup>6</sup> Based on these narrative trends of the students, their DMIS stage before and after the guest speeches generally shifted from the Defense Stage, which is categorized as the Ethnocentric Stage where they stereotypically judge the other person's culture and religion based on their own culture, to the next stage, which is the Acceptance stage where they accept each other's cultural differences by getting to know the other person's culture and by learning more about the other person's culture.

there were a certain number of students who, even after listening to the guest speaker, were reluctant to accept the guest speaker, saying that they were a little uncomfortable with Muslims because of their different religion, culture, and language. Therefore, although the guest speech did not change the DMIS stage of some students, it is possible to have some impact on diminishing stereotypical images of certain cultures and religions for many students, suggesting that it may have raised their DMIS stage to a certain level. However, whether this effect is temporary or long-lasting, would be difficult to discuss based solely on the data from the current study. Regarding the second research question, what kind of mutual understanding between Japanese university students and foreigners living in Japan, especially those from Asian countries, is important in the future? It can be said that the students, by gaining knowledge about Islam, became more tolerant of other religions in the world, and this was one reason why they were more likely to be able to communicate with foreigners in Japan, it can be said that the students, by gaining knowledge about Islam, became more tolerant of other religions as well, and this was one opportunity for them to think for themselves about how they should relate to cultural and religious diversity in a global society. Several students also expressed their desire to proactively engage in communication by spontaneously reaching out to Malaysians and Muslims living in Japan and organizing events and training sessions, taking into account various religious rules and regulations. Although this time the educational activities were rather passive, the author thought that more active and interactive activities at the university and in the local community on a regular basis would further deepen mutual understanding of different cultures.

## 6. Conclusion

In this survey, about 80% of the students felt that their understanding of Malaysian culture and Muslims and other cultures had been deepened through the guest speeches, and some of them said that after listening to the guest speeches they felt obligated to support people from different cultural backgrounds in the future. Others commented that they subconsciously felt that they wanted to be agents of positive change in society. Furthermore, most of the students were now willing to accept other cultures instead of making decisions based on their own beliefs and their own cultural views, without thinking from an ethnocentric perspective that they had unconsciously held before. Most of the students showed some degree of increased motivation as a result of this guest speech, and many expressed a positive attitude about wanting to engage with further diversity in some way in the future. Since the survey was conducted only after the guest speech, additional research after the lecture should be conducted more extensively to further develop the discussion of the survey results in the future. Lastly, it should also be noted that this is a special situation that there are limitations to measuring the effectiveness of practices held in classrooms.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to express her heartfelt gratitude to Professor Bruce Lander of Matsuyama University for the insightful thoughts and suggestions and Teruyuki Tsuji of Hiroshima University for his kind support.

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