

English and Intercultural Interaction in the Internationalisation of a Japanese University

Liang Morita

Nagoya University - Japan

Abstract

Researchers in internationalisation of higher education have been reminding us that the presence of international students alone does not mean that the institution or the students are reaping the benefits of internationalisation. Since the number of international students is readily measurable, many have focused on increasing the number and overlooked other less quantifiable aspects, such as intercultural interaction, which is beneficial to students and prepares them for their future work environment. This study on intercultural interaction in a Japanese university is based on data from three surveys involving 250 respondents in total. The author discusses the English-medium classroom, language issues and institutional support. She found that although English-taught courses may attract more international students, few Japanese students are present, and as a result depriving international students of valuable opportunities for intercultural interaction and restricting their social networks. The discussion also includes the dominant position of the Japanese language within and outside the university and Japanese students' anxieties about speaking English. The paper concludes that until English gains wider currency as a language of communication, international students need strong Japanese skills to lead a fulfilling life in Japan.

Keywords: *English, intercultural interaction, internationalisation, Japan*

Introduction

As a faculty member at a top national university located in one of the largest cities in Central Japan, the author has observed a frequent lack of communication and interaction between international students who speak little Japanese and their Japanese peers in class. This observation led to an interest in how well these international students were coping in a primarily Japanese-speaking environment and how much they were interacting with the Japanese, which developed into the objectives of this study.

In the past, international students had to sit for entrance examinations in Japanese and were therefore generally proficient in the language. However, due to the university's efforts to internationalise and to attract more international students, there has been an increase in the number of international students who gain admission via English, who may or may not have a command of Japanese. Under the government plan Global 30 or G30:1 to increase the number of international students to 300,000, more international students will be brought to Japan to attend English-taught courses, who also may or may not be proficient in Japanese. This has given the study urgency, since the number of international students in Japan will soon reach unprecedented levels. In addition, there is a scarcity of literature written in English on internationalisation or student experience in non-English-speaking countries.

Until relatively recently, the medium of education in Japan has been the national language, Japanese. That changed in the 1980s, when the government encouraged national universities to establish postgraduate courses and programmes taught in English (Ninomiya et al 2009). Later in July 1997, a government report on foreign students strongly encouraged the creation of English-medium programmes at universities to lessen the burden of learning Japanese for international students and to attract top students who would not usually consider studying in Japan. This is part of the plan to make Japanese universities 'international centers of learning' which attract students and scholars from all over the world (Tsuneyoshi 2005:67). Since then, there has been an increase in the number of English courses and programmes offered by universities.

However, outside the English-only classroom, English plays a limited role in Japan (Morita 2010). Most domains require Japanese and English is not an alternative. Japanese is the language of everyday life for the vast majority of the people (Seargeant 2009).

Although there are few studies published in English on the language experiences of international students in non-English-speaking countries, language difficulties and frustrations of non-native speakers in the US, Britain and Australia are well documented (Bretag et al 2002, Brown 2008, Hellsten and Prescott 2004, Zhang and Mi 2010). In the UK context, Coverdale-Jones and Rastall (2009) focus on the experiences of Chinese students. Robertson et al (2000) and Marginson et al (2010) discuss the language difficulties of non-native speakers in Australia. Marginson et al also found that international students with a good command of English interacted more with domestic students.

The benefits of intercultural interaction are widely known. They apply to both international and domestic students, one of which is to prepare them to function in intercultural contexts in their future workplace. This is a major aspect of the internationalisation of high education (Knight and de Wit 1995). In a globalised world, intercultural literacy, which refers to the competencies, understandings, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for effective cross-cultural engagement, is an important graduate outcome (Heyward 2002). Other benefits of intercultural contact include development of cross-cultural competence, improved language capability, and increased satisfaction with the total student experience and greater host communicative competence (de Wit 1995, Gudykunst 2004, Huntington 1993, Kim 1988, Toyokawa and Toyokawa 2002). However, the absence of intercultural contact is the norm in many parts of the world, described in studies such as Hanassab 2006 (US), Brown 2009 (UK), Coverdale-Jones and Rastall 2009 (UK), Dunne 2009 (Ireland), Volet and Ang 1998 (Australia), Robertson et al 2000 (Australia) and Campbell 2011 (New Zealand). Japan is no exception. Jou and Fukuda (1995) and Tanaka et al (1997) show that international students experience difficulties in making Japanese friends. Tsuboi (1999, cited in Ujitani and Volet 2008) found that a third of international students have no close Japanese friends.

This study found that although English is gaining importance as the global lingua franca (Yano 2001), Japanese is a necessity for daily life, intercultural interaction and friendship, and participation in student life in Japan. English-taught courses and programmes may be convenient for international students, but they segregate them from Japanese students and deprive both parties of valuable opportunities for intercultural contact. This study serves as a warning against the assumption that students in English-medium programmes do not need Japanese skills.

The methodology and respondents will be introduced in the next section, followed by the main findings and discussion.

The study

The data collection process which took about a year from 2010 to 2011 started on a small scale involving only my students in my advanced English and Sociolinguistics classes as respondents. The instrument was an open-ended questionnaire I developed consisting of questions on whether they can communicate effectively in a variety of situations and who they interact with. The questionnaires were distributed in class and it was made very clear that participation was voluntary and does not affect their grades in any way. 46 questionnaires were given out and 22 were completed and returned (response rate=47.8%). 15 of the respondents are Japanese and among the seven international students, there are three Taiwanese, one Korean, one Chinese, one Brazilian and one from the United State. For convenience, I will refer to this survey as Survey 1. Tables 1 and 2 below show the respondents' level of study and the numbers of males and females:

	International	Japanese
Undergraduate	5	11
Postgraduate	2	2
Administrative staff	-	1
No response	-	1
Total	7	15

Table 1: Respondents' level of study.

	International	Japanese
Male	2	4
Female	5	11
Total	7	15

Table 2: Respondents' gender.

After reading through the responses in Survey 1, the author noted the issues raised and developed them into a multiple-choice questionnaire targeted at a larger number of respondents for a better sense of perspective. The questionnaire in the second survey (from now on referred to as Survey 2) consisted of 11 statements again on whether the respondents can communicate effectively and who they socialise with. They were told to mark the most suitable response among 'Strongly disagree', 'Disagree', 'Agree' and 'Strongly agree'. 347 copies of this questionnaire were put into international students' mailboxes at three institutions: the Graduate School of Languages and Cultures (GSLC), the Graduate School of International Development (GSID), and the Nagoya University Program for Academic Exchange (NUPACE). NUPACE runs an exchange programme, mostly for six months or a year, with partner institutions all over the world. These institutions were chosen because they have the highest numbers of international students in the university. 64 (32 from GSLC, 19 from GSID, 13 from NUPACE) were completed and returned, giving a disappointing response rate of 18.4%. Tables 3 and 4 below show the country of origin and gender of the respondents:

	GSLC	GSID	NUPACE	Total
Korea	3	-	2	5
Taiwan	5	-	-	5
China	18	4	3	25
Thailand	2	-	1	3
Laos	-	1	-	1
Cambodia	-	3	-	3
Indonesia	-	7	-	7
Australia	-	-	1	1
Sri Lanka	1	-	-	1
Bangladesh	-	1	-	1
Mozambique	-	1	-	1
France	-	-	1	1
Germany	-	-	4	4
Uzbekistan	1	1	-	2
US	-	-	1	1
Canada	1	-	-	1
Brazil	1	-	-	1
No response	-	1	-	1
Total	32	19	13	64

Table 3: Respondents' country of origin.

	GSLC	GSID	NUPACE	Total
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Male	5	12	3	20
Female	25	7	10	42
No response	2	-	-	2
Total	32	19	13	64

Table 4: Respondents' gender.

All the GSLC and GSID respondents are postgraduate students. At NUPACE, three are postgraduates and ten are undergraduates.

The last survey, referred to as Survey 3, uses a multiple-choice questionnaire with additional space for comments after each question. Respondents were asked to mark the most suitable response as in Survey 2. In order to achieve a higher response rate, the author approached her colleagues and distributed the questionnaires at undergraduate English classes at the university. All the questionnaires were completed and returned. The 150 Japanese respondents came from the faculties of Economics (41), Literature (36), Science (34), Law (16), Engineering (14) and Agricultural Science (9). 108 are males and 42 females. There were also three international students in these classes, all Chinese. In addition, 60 copies of the questionnaire were distributed in NUPACE students' mailboxes and 11 were completed and returned, giving a response rate of 18.3%. The respondents were all undergraduates from Korea (1), Taiwan (1), Hong Kong (1), Australia (1), France (1), Germany (3) and the U.S. (2).

The main findings

English

In Survey 1 and 2, the international respondents were asked if they were understood when they spoke English in three contexts: outside the university, within the university and with university administration staff. Outside the university, most of them (71% in Survey 1 and 67.2% in Survey 2) have been in situations in which they were not understood. Some of the respondents in Survey 1 felt it was not a problem but some are frustrated:

'Yes, [I have been in situations in which I was not understood in English outside the university.] when I just came to Japan, I was frustrated that most of the time my English can't be understood, even simple ones.' Taiwanese female graduate in Communication

'No! No! No! [English is not widely used outside the university.] Usually people can't speak English outside the university, even in some important places like train station.' Taiwanese female graduate in Communication

This is consistent with Yano's (2001) observation that English is used in limited contexts in Japan. Only a very small number of Japanese use English, with the exception of people in scientific or technical fields who read in English and those who use English in business-related correspondence.

In the university, all the international respondents in Survey 1 and 46.9% in Survey 2 have experienced difficulties in being understood in English. With university administration staff, 54% in Survey 1 and 28.1% in Survey 2 have been misunderstood. In Survey 1, a Taiwanese respondent pointed out that since she usually goes to the NUPACE office or GSID, she is usually understood if she speaks in English. This shows that some of the administration staff are competent in English, and they are posted in relevant and specific parts of the university.

Although it is not very common, some international students experience difficulties in making themselves understood to the administration. According to a respondent:

'... actually university administration staffs are not well-trained (in English) yet. Many foreign students who can't speak fluent Japanese have to struggle by themselves.' Taiwanese female graduate in Languages and Cultures

Based on the data, students need some Japanese. This is evident in the response below:

'... even though some of the international students can speak some Japanese (like me), there's still time when I misunderstand what people were saying. And it usually cause a lot of troubles if you misunderstand the administration policy.' Taiwanese female graduate in Languages and Cultures

The challenges faced by Japanese faculty members teaching English-medium courses are discussed in Tsuneyoshi 2005, Lassegard 2006 and Kuwamura 2009. Some of them lack overseas academic experience and find teaching in English an excessive burden. They experience difficulties expressing themselves in English and teaching in an unfamiliar style. 28.1% of the respondents in Survey 2 had difficulties communicating with Japanese professors due to their lack of English skills. A respondent in Survey 1 was dissatisfied with her academic advisor's English:

'... The first time I met my academic advisor, I talked to him about my plan of courses this semester and ask him for advice, and he seems puzzled and start talking about weather...' Taiwanese female graduate in Communication

In Lassegard's study, the majority of the interviewees found that their Japanese professors' ability to lecture in English was high, but expressed mixed opinions about some professors' ability to communicate in English.

In class, a respondent in Survey 1 noted that English-taught does not necessarily mean that student discussions and group work are conducted in English:

'I took an English-taught course this semester in which class discussion is necessary. Since the other Japanese students can't understand English much, they ask me if I can discuss in Japanese... Well, a big challenge for me!' Taiwanese female graduate in Communication, NUPACE

The author has also observed that in English-medium classes, Japanese students use Japanese among themselves. Interviewees in Lassegard's study were frustrated with the limited English abilities of Japanese students at presentations delivered in English and by the lack of feedback. In Survey 2, 67.2% of the respondents agreed that Japanese students prefer to have class discussions in Japanese. Japanese is necessary for full participation in classes where Japanese students are present.

Intercultural Interaction

Most of the Japanese respondents (93.3%) in Survey 3 are aware of the benefits of interacting with international students, including improved English skills and varied perspectives:

'[Interacting with international students] will improve my language skills.' Japanese male undergraduate in Engineering

'It is good to know new ways of thinking by interacting with people from different cultures.' Japanese male undergraduate in Engineering

'It is good to compare my point of view with [international students].' Japanese female undergraduate in Literature

International students in Survey 3 were also aware of the benefits:

'I think the only way you can ever really learn a language or culture is by immersing yourself totally – which requires native speakers.' Australian female undergraduate in Linguistics, NUPACE

Most of the Japanese respondents (62.7%) in Survey 3 were dissatisfied with current levels of interaction with international students. Comments indicating they desired more interaction were common:

'I want to interact with [international students] a lot.' Japanese male undergraduate in Engineering

'I want to be more involved [with international students].' Japanese male undergraduate in Economics

NUPACE (Nagoya University Program for Academic Exchange) students also wanted more interaction with domestic students:

'I would like to meet more Japanese students and know how real Japanese student life is and to be accepted into it.' American female undergraduate in Japanese, NUPACE

'I want more opportunities [to interact with Japanese students].' Hong Kong female undergraduate in Japanese, NUPACE

When asked about whether they engaged in intercultural interaction, only 41.3% of the Japanese respondents said they did. Many claimed there were no opportunities both in class and outside class. Most (76%) said there were few or no international students in their classes:

'I have never had a class with [international students].' Japanese male undergraduate in Literature

'There are no international students in my classes.' Japanese male undergraduate in Science

According to official university statistics, the proportion of international students is 9.1%. The figure varies widely depending on faculty. One in every two students is international in the Graduate School of International Development (GSID) but only three in a hundred are international in Mathematics. Depending on where one is, opportunities to meet or work with international students in class can be plentiful or rare for Japanese students.

For the minority who work with international students in class, interaction was limited to academic matters and did not develop beyond the classroom:

'Interaction with international students is limited to inside class.' Japanese female undergraduate in Literature

'These are some international students in my research group, so we talk about practical matters, but not private matters.' Japanese male undergraduate in Literature

NUPACE students also said there were few or no Japanese students in their classes:

'All courses are taught in English and nearly no Japanese students participate.' German female undergraduate in Japanese, NUPACE

'Classes for Japanese and international students are mostly separate.' German female undergraduate in Japanese, NUPACE

There are few Japanese students in English-medium classrooms because most Japanese students are weak in listening and speaking and would not be able to cope, despite recent emphasis on communicative skills in schools. International students who take only English-taught courses therefore miss out on opportunities to meet or work with Japanese students in class. These courses segregate international students from Japanese students to some extent.

Opportunities to meet outside class are also described as few and far between:

'There are some parties for international students, but not many. Moreover, not many Japanese go there.' Chinese female undergraduate in Literature

'It is good to see some international students in campus, but there is no chance to do something with them.' Japanese male undergraduate in Engineering

When NUPACE students did interact with the Japanese, it was mostly limited to members of a student organisation (Action Group for Cross-Cultural Exchange or ACE) in which Japanese students provide support for international students or the Japanese working at the help desk in the Educational Center for International Students (ECIS), where the NUPACE offices are located:

'I interact mostly with Japanese students involved with ACE or other associations welcoming foreign students in the university. Occasions to meet other Japanese students are quite rare.' French female undergraduate in Linguistics, NUPACE

'Apart from people at the help desk and ACE, I have few chances to talk to Japanese.' Hong Kong female undergraduate in Japanese, NUPACE

Some NUPACE students also spoke to Japanese students who wanted to practise their English. They have limited choice in the Japanese speakers they interact with. The Japanese choose them rather than they choose the Japanese. Many of them end up spending most of their time with other international students:

'The interaction I have with Japanese students is mostly due to these students' desire to speak with foreigners. But as things are now, the people I interact the most with are other foreigners.' French female undergraduate in Linguistics, NUPACE

'As a NUPACE student, I get the feeling that I spend most of my time with other foreign students and not that much with Japanese students. Most of the classes and events for foreigners take place at the ECIS, where not that many Japanese students spend their time. We get little information concerning the events organized by/for the Japanese students, making it hard to actually meet them.' French female undergraduate in Linguistics, NUPACE

Some respondents commented on the lack of opportunities to meet 'ordinary' Japanese students and one expressed her desire to interact with 'a more diverse range' of students:

'[I do] not really find it easy to make friends with Japanese students. I think it's easy to make friends with those from special school clubs such as ACE, which support international students; but for the other ordinary Japanese students met in class, it's difficult.' Taiwanese female graduate student in Communication, NUPACE

'I would like to interact with a more diverse range of students: Those who do not treat me any differently or slow down their speech etc.' Australian female undergraduate in Linguistics, NUPACE

Concerning the formation of friendships, 85.7% of the international students in Survey 1 and 51.8% in Survey 2 found it difficult to make friends with Japanese students. Japanese respondents in Survey 1 were also asked whether they made friends with international students. 60% answered 'yes'. Two respondents said they did so because they had been international students themselves and they received help when they were abroad. The experience of studying abroad enables Japanese students to empathise with international students in Japan and encourages them to make friends. 20% of the Japanese respondents in Survey 1 did not become friends with international students because of the lack of opportunity and another 20% attributed it to their lack of English proficiency.

74% of the Japanese respondents in Survey 3 felt that language was a barrier to interacting with international students and 66.7% felt anxious about such interaction:

'[I feel anxious about interacting with international students.] I am worried about my language skills.' Japanese male undergraduate in Engineering

'[I feel very anxious about interacting with international students.] I want to interact with them although I'm worried about my language ability.' Japanese male undergraduate in Science

Anxiety is a common feeling associated with intercultural contact. It affects our communication and is associated with avoidance (Duronto, Nishida, and Nakayama 2005). In Dunne's (2009) study conducted in Ireland, many host students, despite being the dominant culture group, experienced strong and persistent feelings of anxiety, which caused them to avoid intercultural contact.

In the Japanese context, domestic students' anxiety is related to insecurities about their English communicative abilities. Until recently, English education in schools consisted mainly of grammar-translation, which is word-by-word translation of English texts into Japanese. This has its origins in the earlier part of the 20:th century when the main purpose of English education was to decipher English texts from abroad in order to be informed of developments in the rest of the world (Morita 2010). Japanese undergraduates, with the exception of those who spent time abroad, are generally weak in communicative skills and are unwilling to or uncomfortable about speaking in English.

Language can be a barrier in intercultural interaction and friendship. Most of the respondents in Marginson et al 2010 mentioned language differences as obstacles to friendship. In this study, having a common language, either Japanese or English, is an important factor. The lack of English skills is a barrier:

'I would like to [make friends with international students], but I don't have any international students friends. I don't have any opportunity to communicate with international students. Moreover, I hesitate to speak poor English.' Japanese female graduate in International Development

'No [I do not make friends with international students]. Because I can't speak English fluently. But I want to make friends with them.' Japanese female

'No [I do not find it easy to make friends with Japanese students]. [Because of] lack of language ability (whether it's my Japanese or their English), shyness, and lack of interest toward Asians.' Taiwanese female undergraduate in Business, NUPACE

Japanese students interact more easily with international students who speak Japanese well:

'... At university, I have discussions with foreign students. However, their Japanese is very good, so I have no need to speak English.' Japanese male graduate in Economics

'[I strongly agree that language is a barrier to interacting with international students.] I talk to international students who are in Master's course and speak Japanese fluently.' Japanese male undergraduate in Literature

85.7% of the international students in Survey 1 and 82.8% in Survey 2 found it easier to make friends with other international students because they have many classes in common and participate in the same events. Some found it easier to relate to other international students and saw themselves as kindred spirits:

'Yes [I find it easy to make friends with other international students]. Maybe we have same problems and feelings.' Chinese male undergraduate in Engineering

'Yes [I find it easy to make friends with other international students]. We are in the same position: "foreigner."' Taiwanese female undergraduate in Business, NUPACE

In Brown's (2009) study in the UK, international students' feelings of being cut off from the host community helped to increase their attachment to the immediate community of international postgraduates, which offered belonging and shared identity. Feelings of isolation were also reported in Robertson et al 2000 in Australia.

Most of the Japanese respondents in Survey 3 felt the university was not doing enough to encourage intercultural interaction. 70% felt the university was not encouraging and 60.6% felt it does not provide the environment or opportunities.

'The university should present more opportunities [for me to interact with international students]. I feel the Education Center for International Students is not open enough.' Japanese male undergraduate in Literature

'I guess [the university does provide the environment and opportunities for me to interact with Japanese students], but it is not enough. Chinese female undergraduate in Literature

'There are some evenings and trips organised but there is not much on a daily basis.' German female undergraduate in Japanese, NUPACE

One common problem was the lack of information on events:

'We get little information concerning the events organized by/for the Japanese students, making it hard to actually meet them.' French female undergraduate in Linguistics, NUPACE

'[The university does not provide the environment and opportunities for me to interact with international students.] I don't get enough information.' Japanese female undergraduate in Literature

Students are critical of what they perceive to be a lack of institutional support for intercultural interaction. Institutional support refers to aspects of students' university environment over which the institution exerts control and which may influence acquaintance prospects, including extracurricular venues and events, including clubs and societies and campus accommodation (Dunne 2009). Institutional support is critical because simply bringing together domestic and international students does not necessarily result in meaningful interaction between them or the development of valuable intercultural communication skills and international perspectives (Leask 2009).

Discussion

One of the major educational goals of the internationalisation of higher education is to prepare students to function in an international and intercultural context. Cultural diversity on university campuses creates ideal social forums for intercultural learning. (Volet and Ang 1998) In this study, we have seen that ensuring that intercultural interaction takes place is far from easy.

Although English-taught courses attract more international students, one of the drawbacks is that they segregate international students from Japanese students. International students who take only English-medium classes tend to have fewer Japanese in their social circles and miss out on valuable opportunities for intercultural contact. NUPACE students in this study were limited in their Japanese social circles, consisting of mainly of ACE members and those wanting to practise their English. English is a prestigious language in Japan. It is ironic that NUPACE students, many of whom are native speakers of English, should be in such a restrictive social position. One way to improve acquaintance prospects would be to encourage Japanese students who have stronger English skills to take English-taught courses alongside international students. Lecturers would have to provide extra language support for Japanese students. Likewise, international students with better Japanese abilities could take Japanese-medium classes.

Assuming that there are sufficient numbers of Japanese and international students in most classes, ensuring that meaningful interaction takes place is not easy. Studies have shown that students have a tendency to form monocultural groups. (Dunne 2009) Lecturers need to intervene. The importance of carefully structured and designed interactive and collaborative learning processes in internationalisation is stressed in Van der Wende 2000. Group work needs to be carefully managed and students need guidance and support to interact effectively in class. In addition, assigned tasks have to be carefully designed and structured in such a way that meaningful exchange of cultural information is necessary. (Leask 2009) The Nagoya University university-wide faculty development sessions may be a good place to develop the skills for managing group work.

For effective intercultural interaction to take place, there has to be motivation and reward for both domestic and international students (Campbell 2011). In Campbell's buddy project in New Zealand, intercultural interaction is 35% of the assessment of an intercultural communication course. Since the current English curriculum at Nagoya advocates communication, it would be consistent to start an intercultural communication course as an English requirement. This will put Japanese and international students in the same classroom and give them regular opportunities to interact. Although the interaction may seem forced at the beginning, students should gradually recognise its purpose and value.

Japanese language skills are a necessity in Japan. This has to be made very clear to all international applicants. Tanaka et al (1997) found that Japanese language proficiency was associated with adjustment. Japanese is also necessary for full participation in Japanese student life.

Kuwamura (2009) pointed out that given the direction towards greater diversity and capacity in the internationalisation of Japanese higher education, more focused attention needs to be directed towards the development of intercultural competence at both institutional and individual levels. With more international students coming to Japan than ever, now is the time for universities to provide the support students need for intercultural interaction.

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About the Author

Liang teaches English and sociolinguistics at Nagoya University in Japan. She was educated in Singapore and Britain and worked in Thailand before moving to Japan

Author's Address

Graduate School of Languages and Culture
Nagoya University
Furo-cho, Chikusa-ku, Nagoya 464-8601 Japan