

# The Use of English in Japanese Universities: Producing Human Resources for a Globalized Market

Christopher Haswell

## Abstract

The number of international students in Japan is rising in line with global trends. Commensurately, so is the use of English in Japanese universities, as a medium of both instruction and inter-student communication on campus. English foreign language education is a key component of the language curriculum in Japan and has evolved in recent years to encompass the requirement to prepare university students for English-mediated instruction (EMI) courses. This development is linked to the oft-expressed interest of the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) to internationalize Japanese tertiary education institutions. This paper reports the development of the importance of English in Japanese tertiary education, the reasons for its position as a subject of special focus, and the long-term implications of this focus on English in Japan. This issue is one of the most important facing Japanese education, as it will affect how universities structure their courses, how schools and curricula prior to university level prepare students for the use of English, and how students use English both personally and professionally in their post-graduation careers.

## Introduction

English has long been an important part of the curriculum in Japan (Nunan, 2003), and its use has grown steadily to the point where there are now over 10 years of compulsory EFL classes, beginning in elementary school and continuing through into undergraduate university courses (Shintani, 2010). In addition to these courses, there is a growing availability of, and future potential requirement for, English-mediated instruction (EMI) courses in Japanese universities (Bradford, 2014; Brown, 2014). These are courses for non-language major students that must

be undertaken in English, and they are a significant development in a country where, despite its position as a required subject in university education, English can be considered a foreign language. The motivations and rationale for the language's growing importance are part of the narrative surrounding the use of English in Japanese language education policy.

English is now the primary tool that Japanese universities have for increasing their reputation in a competitive global industry. It should not be forgotten that the majority of Japanese universities are private institutions (MEXT, 2015), and that the domestic market for students is set to shrink dramatically over the coming decades (Bartneck, 2010). Private universities can react quickly to safeguard their personal interests; their financial independence, relative to other OECD countries, will assist private Japanese universities as they can exhibit financial and policy flexibility in their administration. The question remains whether they will. As Ninomiya, Knight and Watanabe state, "It is not an exaggeration to say that internationalization is a lifeline of [universities] ... in terms of increasing low enrollments and optimizing its research output and competitiveness" (2009, p. 125). This 'lifeline', in the form of international student enrollment or increased external/private investment related to improved international prestige, could be the difference between a university maintaining long-term viability or having to be closed.

This paper reports changes in the form and function of English use in Japanese universities and the language's direct link to efforts to internationalize the education industry. It considers the effect of international university rankings on Japanese government policy initiatives, and identifies what students and teachers should be aware of in relation to these policies. It concludes that English has grown into a subject that transcends its former role as a foreign language, and

that by considering the future uses of English in Japanese universities, and the changes that must be made in order to facilitate these uses, policy-makers, university administrators, teachers and students can better understand the effects of these changes.

### **International university rankings and the state of university internationalization in Japan**

It is not possible to consider universities as simply ‘internationalized’ or ‘non-internationalized’ in modern tertiary education. In fact, Foskett (2013) identifies five categories of internationalization: universities with the lowest level of internationalization are termed ‘domestic’ universities; the highest level of international universities are given the label ‘internationally focused’ universities; in between these are the labels ‘imperialist’, ‘internationally aware’ and ‘internationally engaged’ (from Jenkins, 2013, p. 3). For a university to be considered ‘internationally focused’ it has to have the recruitment of international students as a priority in order to produce an international environment on its campus. The number of internationally-mobile students is now 5 million and growing (OECD, 2014). Of this total number, less than 5% of them study in Japan, but that figure is sufficient for Japan to be ranked in the top 10 of student destinations (UNESCO, 2014), an indication of the diffuse nature of international student distribution globally. The number of international students in Japanese universities has actually declined from its peak in 2010 (JASSO, 2015), due in part to the global competition for international students (UNESCO, 2014).

The internationalization of Japanese universities is inextricably linked to the focus that many universities now have on international university rankings. The most popular ranking agencies of Times Higher Education (THE), Quaquarelli Symonds (QS) and Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) take account of the number of inbound and outbound overseas students at a university, as well as the number of international faculty and international institutional affiliations. Although not relevant to all universities, any institution interested in increasing their international reputation is aware of, and actively working to improve, their world ranking by close adherence to the metrics of the ranking agencies. Therefore, efforts to internationalize a university, or to raise its international profile, have significant effects

on administrative decisions regarding faculty hiring practices, curriculum contents, and the formation of an internationalized on-campus environment. Reported in The Japan Times, then-Education Minister Hakubun Shimomura stated that the Japanese government expected the best Japanese universities to be “strongly committed to advancing internationalization by collaborating with overseas universities, hiring more foreign faculty members, [and] increasing the number of degree programs in English” (p. B1). This clear policy statement is an indication of government rationale, but it should be of concern to universities that are not interested in, or are incapable of making, such changes. Universities face being left behind in the push to increase internationalization, and none of the above-outlined requirements can be instituted quickly or cheaply.

The importance of English in relation to university ranking cannot be overstated: the metrics of the ranking agencies privilege the use of English. This is not explicit, but the most recent rankings provide clear evidence: 21 of the top 25 universities are from the USA or UK, including all of the top 10, with only the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (Switzerland), the University of Toronto (Canada), the University of Tokyo (Japan), and the University of Singapore from outside these two countries among the best in the world (Times Higher Education, 2015). A closer look at the methodology of the rankings makes the premium on the use of English even more apparent. In the THE, universities are ranked according to their “learning environment” (30%), “research production” (30%), “research influence” (30%), “industry income” (2.5%), and “international outlook” (7.5%) (Times Higher Education, 2015). As can be seen from these indicators, while the number of international students, faculty, and programs has an effect on a university’s rating, the far larger effect comes from the university’s ability to project its reputation and research activities internationally. To state more clearly, if a university wishes to produce influential research, and have that research be published and widely cited, they need to do so in the English language. The market for international publications is overwhelmingly in English (Ammon, 2001), and the Internet, a prime source for providing information about a university and its published works, is the most popular second language on the Internet (Shwayder, 2012). English is therefore the natural choice when deciding which language upon

which to focus a university's efforts.

## Internationalization policies

Global competition in this industry can be considered one of the main reasons why the international ranking of Japanese universities has become a funding criterion in recent policy initiatives (MEXT, 2014): the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT) is re-orienting the efforts of Japanese universities in order for them to be more widely internationally recognized and thereby make the tertiary education industry more internationally competitive. Policy efforts for the industry-wide internationalization of Japanese universities can be said to have begun with the push to have 100,000 international students, starting in 1983 (Kellem, 2014), which finally reached its target in 2004 (JASSO, 2015). A subsequent major effort was the Global 30 (G30), which aimed for 300,000 students by the year 2020 (MEXT, 2010); the funding for this project ended in 2013 with barely half that number present in the Japanese university system. The most recent initiative was the Top Global University Project (TGU), which aimed to increase Japanese university international outreach through focused attention to the metrics of international ranking agencies (MEXT, 2014). This included a specific requirement that the top-funded universities in this project (Group A) aim to be in the top 100 universities in the world by the end of the funding period. That would mean a large increase in the number of Japanese universities in the top 100, given that at the start of the project only two universities (Tokyo University and Kyoto University) were in the top 100 of the THE rankings (THE, 2014); six were in the top 100 of the QS Asia rankings (Tokyo University, Kyoto University, Osaka University, Tokyo Institute of Technology, Tohoku University, and Waseda University) (QS, 2015). The press release marking the beginning of the TGU did not specify which rankings would qualify as the standard being applied to the Group A universities (MEXT, 2014), but Japanese universities are still some way from achieving their goals in either.

The basis of decisions regarding funding, and the commensurate importance of English and international rankings for Japanese universities, can be seen in the selection of universities to populate the TGU. Changes from the G30 to the TGU Group A were

that the nine holdovers of Tokyo University, Kyoto University, Waseda University, Keio University, Tsukuba University, Osaka University, Tohoku University, Kyushu University and Nagoya University were joined by Tokyo Institute of Technology (TAIST), Tokyo Medical and Dental University (TMDU), Hiroshima University and Hokkaido University, replacing Sophia University, Ritsumeikan University and Meiji University, who dropped to Group B status, and Doshisha University, who were left out completely. Group B funding recipients are expected to be examples to other Japanese universities of what international universities are and should be. The reason that Doshisha University was excluded can be attributed to its relatively low ranking compared to the other universities in this funding bracket. Regardless of Doshisha University's efforts and successes during the G30 (It was the only G30 university to receive the top 'S' rating in both the mid-point and end of project evaluations (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science in Japan, 2015)), it was not capable of being considered for the TGU as it was not internationally competitive according to the above-outlined externally judged metrics. From this decision by MEXT to exclude Doshisha University from funding, it is clear that internationalization, which in the case of universities can be taken to mean the increased use of English for the purposes of international academic and institutional outreach, is the main criterion when universities in Japan are judged on their efforts to internationalize.

## Forms of English in Japanese education

One significant area where the development of English use in Japanese universities can be observed is in the growth of English-mediated instruction (EMI) courses. These courses are used to deliver course content in English and exist in addition to compulsory EFL courses. EMI courses are by no means unique to Japan, and in fact Japan can be considered some way behind neighbouring Asian countries in their adoption of a strategy towards the integration of the English language into their tertiary education system: as part of the long-term preparation for EMI courses in universities, Korea adopted EFL classes beginning from age nine as far back as 1997 (Nunan, 2003, p. 600), and China did the same in 2001 (ibid, p. 594); Japan did not adopt this curriculum change until 2011 (Shintani, 2010). However, the fact that Japan is following the

trend is increasing evidence that EMI is considered not only desirable but necessary by MEXT for the long-term survivability of tertiary education in Japan. The trend itself suggests that this is a commonplace consideration throughout Asia. EMIs will ensure that English language proficiency will be part of the hiring policies and faculty development policies of individual universities, even absent any financial incentive from MEXT.

Efforts to internationalize universities through the use of English opens up the Japanese language education system to closer scrutiny. One problem that continues to hamper this system is that Japan has not had the same success in improving the English capabilities of their students relative to other Asian countries. Comparing the TOEFL performance of their relative competitors, Japanese takers had an average of 70 out of 120 for TOEFL iBT, compared with 77 for China and 84 for Korea (ETS, 2015). In order for future policy initiatives to be successful, the underpinning of English education needs to be considered very carefully. The length of compulsory English language education has been extended, initiative by initiative, but it is by no means guaranteed that this will lead to the increase in English proficiency among Japanese students expected by MEXT. Concerted evaluation of program goals, implementation strategies, and outcomes is necessary at every level of English instruction.

English proficiency is not the only factor that should concern Japan's English-use proponents. An additional problem is the fear, as expressed in research by Marginson and van der Wende (2007), Ishikawa (2009), and Vidal and Filliatreau (2014) that an increased focus on English and the metrics of international ranking agencies will mean that there will be a one-size-fits-all mentality in respect of university courses and course instruction. This will mean a move towards 'western' style courses, and a marginalization of current university course structures. Whether this is a wholly negative occurrence is arguable, but it is nevertheless a concern.

### **Globalized English and the native-speaker bias**

The position of English in Japanese universities is complicated by the variation that exists within the English language in the form of contextual performance varieties of English. This variation means that for some

university stake-holders the decision to increase the amount of English being used is as much ideological as it is practical. Chukyo University in Nagoya is the first university in Japan to boast a College of World Englishes and student mobility through study abroad programs was made compulsory by the university. The difference in such programs compared to those at other Japanese universities is that they are specifically targeted at giving students an international experience of English varieties that are not considered either 'native-speaker' or 'norm-providing' English.

Chukyo University can be viewed as something of a test case for the introduction of World Englishes into regular language courses in Japan, which have traditionally used American English textbooks (Matsuda, 2003). The university has a year-long course in 'Language Contact and Change', to "inform students' attitudes towards English" (D'Angelo, 2012, p. 126) in an era when the number of 'non-native English speakers' (NNES) is larger than 'Native English speakers' (NES). The stated aim of the university is to "get the students out there" (ibid, p.127), referring to studying abroad, in order to accelerate the students' "international exposure" (ibid.). As reported by Yoshikawa (2005), and Sakai and D'Angelo (2005), students at the university study abroad in Singapore for three weeks in their first university year. In addition, they have a 'study tour' to MacQuarie University in Australia. This university was chosen because "MacQuarie has a world-class linguistics department and is firmly rooted in Asia (25% of the population of Greater Sydney was not born in Australia)" (Sakai & D'Angelo, 2005, p. 327). The course designers at Chukyo wanted to "give an early awareness of new varieties" (ibid.) because "[the students] learn about the New Englishes in the class lectures and actually experience them in Singapore" (Yoshikawa, 2005, p. 352).

Chukyo University has made an ideological decision and a departure from previous efforts to use English in Japanese universities. It is a reminder for both Japanese policy makers and EFL teachers at Japanese universities that the sociolinguistic aspect of English language use is becoming as relevant to the debate of the growth of the language as the political rationale that is driving this expansion. Teachers at Chukyo are hired specifically for their acceptance of the goals of the program and their abilities to work within the mission of the college, with the intent that they

should be “like-minded in their dedication to a common philosophy” (D’Angelo, 2012, p. 129). Teachers are even prohibited from working outside the university in part-time teaching positions, a common practice in larger cities: “we have made an ongoing effort to try to weed out the ‘mercenary’ teachers who overbook their schedules” (Sakai, 2005, p. 325). These policies suggest that the university is attempting to maintain the ideological focus of the teachers they selected to work within the faculty. It remains to be seen how this ideological aspect of English use will impact other universities.

## Conclusion - The future of English in Japanese universities

Changes in the use of the English language in higher education are a reflection of the status of English internationally. The current course appears to have two, potentially divergent, futures: Japan’s higher education system continues to attract a growing number of international students, leading to an increasing internationalization of their tertiary education; equally possible is a system designed for an international market that just simply does not materialize. The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education noted that internationalization of student populations could be solution for the over-capacity problem facing Japanese universities (The Observatory, 2007). However, given the overall growth in the marketing of universities internationally, Japan may not be able to capitalize on its current advantages.

Root and branch evaluation of the use of English in Japanese universities is required. However, this is not a call for root and branch reform: the policies and the teachers are in place, and the methods and quality are in the process of developing. The way to approach university use of English clearly needs to be updated. However, in advance of this, an assessment of what MEXT is intending from the nearly 800 universities under their administration is required. The trends in internationalization can be seen to be having an effect on institutions related to, and independent from, MEXT efforts at encouraging reform. All the above facts lead to the conclusion that the use of English in Japanese universities is a far more complicated state of affairs than merely a foreign language that is a required credit. The language exists within a complicated nexus of the politics of globalization, the ideologies of

the teachers involved in its instruction, the state of internationalized English, and the aspirations for the long-term future of the Japanese tertiary education industry. There are no other subjects that can be said to share such an intricate and complex existence within Japanese universities.

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that English will continue its position as the pre-eminent foreign language in Japanese universities, and this position will develop as the requirement for its use becomes more widely mandated. This will come in the form of more EMI courses, preparatory courses for international study, general English classes, ESP classes to prepare for EMIs, and joint major courses including English. The generation of students who will have studied the full 10 years will enter the university system in 2021, and every subsequent generation of students will enter the tertiary industry increasingly familiar with the English language. As this situation develops, a clear picture of the motivations of national policy, the actions of individual universities in response to these policies, the opinions of teachers within the system, and the reactions of students in relation to the internationalization of their courses and classes will be of increasing importance.

## References

- Bartneck, C. (2010). Create Children, Not Robots! Proceedings of the 5th ACM/IEEE International Conference on Human-Robot Interaction, Osaka pp. 75-76. Retrieved from <http://www.bartneck.de/publications/2010/createChildrenNotRobots/>
- Bradford, A. (2014). English-taught degree programs in Japan. Paper presented at the 2014 APAIE Conference, Seoul, Korea.
- Brown, H. (2014). Contextual factors driving the growth of undergraduate English medium instruction programmes at universities in Japan. *The Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1 (1), 50-63
- D’Angelo, J. F. (2012). WE-informed EIL curriculum at Chukyo: towards a functional, educated, multilingual outcome. In A. Matsuda (Ed.), *Principles and Practices of Teaching English as an International Language* (pp. 121-139). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- ETS. (2013). Test and score data summary for TOEFL iBT tests and PBT tests. Retrieved from [http://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227\\_unlweb.pdf](http://www.ets.org/s/toefl/pdf/94227_unlweb.pdf)
- Foskett, N. (2010). Global markets, national challenges,



- local strategies: the challenge of internationalization. In F. Maringe & N. Foskett (Eds.) *A review of globalization and internationalization in higher education: theoretical, strategic and management perspectives*. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis
- Ishikawa, M. (2009). University rankings, global models and emerging hegemony: Critical analysis from Japan. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13, 159-173.
- JASSO. (2015). *Result of an annual survey of international students in Japan 2014*. Retrieved from [http://www.jasso.go.jp/statistics/intl\\_student/documents/data14\\_e.pdf](http://www.jasso.go.jp/statistics/intl_student/documents/data14_e.pdf)
- Japan Society for the Promotion of Science in Japan. (2015). *Post-project evaluation results summary for the internationalization of the university network*. Retrieved from [http://www.jsps.go.jp/j-kokusaika/data/jigo\\_hyoka/hyoka\\_kekka/h21/h26\\_jigohyoukakekka\\_all.pdf](http://www.jsps.go.jp/j-kokusaika/data/jigo_hyoka/hyoka_kekka/h21/h26_jigohyoukakekka_all.pdf)
- Kellem, H. (2014). Research in internationalization of higher education: a brief overview. 国際学研究, 3 (1): 69-75
- Marginson, S. & van der Wende, M. (2007). To rank or not be ranked: the impact of global rankings in higher education, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11 (3/4), 306-329.
- MEXT. (2010). *Launching the project for establishing core universities for internationalization (Global 30)*. Retrieved from <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/highered/1302274.htm>
- MEXT. (2014). *Selection for the FY2014 top global university project*. Retrieved from [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/houdou/26/09/\\_icsFiles/afiel\\_dfile/2014/10/07/1352218\\_02.pdf](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/26/09/_icsFiles/afiel_dfile/2014/10/07/1352218_02.pdf)
- MEXT. (2015). *Japanese universities. 2015*. Retrieved from [http://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/koutou/shinkou/main5\\_a3.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/koutou/shinkou/main5_a3.htm)
- Nunan, D. (2003). The impact of English as a global language on educational practices in the Asia-Pacific region. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37 (4), 589-613.
- OECD. (2013). *How is international student mobility shaping up?*. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/EDIF%202013--N%C2%B014%20%28eng%29-Final.pdf>
- Quacquarelli Symonds. (2014). *QS world university rankings: Indicators*. Retrieved from <http://www.iu.qs.com/university-rankings/rankings-indicators/>
- Sakai, S., & F. D'Angelo, J. (2005). A vision for world Englishes in the Expanding Circle. *World Englishes*, 24 (3), 323-327. doi:10.1111/j.0883-2919.2005.00414.x
- Shimomura, H. (2013, September 2). Making Japanese higher education more international. The Japan Times, p. B1. Retrieved from [http://info.japantimes.co.jp/ads/pdf/20130902\\_global\\_30\\_universities.pdf](http://info.japantimes.co.jp/ads/pdf/20130902_global_30_universities.pdf)
- Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities. (2014). *Academic ranking of world universities 2014*. Retrieved from <http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU2014.html>
- Shintani, R. B. (2010). *A study on English education in public elementary and junior high schools in two prefectures in Japan*. Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University.
- Shwayder, M. (2012). One-third of world's population using internet, developing nations showing biggest gains. *International Business Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.ibtimes.com/one-third-worlds-population-using-internet-developing-nations-showing-biggest-gains-795299>
- The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education. (2007). *The growth of English-medium instruction in East Asia: the key to competitiveness?*. Retrieved from [http://www.obhe.ac.uk/documents/view\\_details?id=195](http://www.obhe.ac.uk/documents/view_details?id=195)
- Times Higher Education. (2014). *Times higher education: Methodology*. Retrieved from <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2014-15/world-ranking/methodology>
- UNESCO. (2015). *Global flow of tertiary-level students*. Retrieved from <http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx>
- Vidal, P. & Filliatreau, G. (2014). Graphical comparison of world university rankings. *Higher Education Evaluation and Development*, 8 (1), 1-14
- Yoshikawa. (2005). Recognition of world Englishes: changes in Chukyo University students' attitudes. *World Englishes*, 24 (3), 351-360.