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# Internationalising The Curriculum In Japanese Higher Education

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## 高等教育におけるカリキュラムの国際化

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### Abstract

Globalisation is now a set fixture in our daily lives and internationalised curriculum in higher education is imperative in assisting students to develop global competencies and negotiate identities as global citizens. This essay first provides an overview of language learning contexts in Japanese higher education, followed by an exploration of multimodal approaches to language instruction. Recommendations for a variety of multimodal pedagogical practices will be offered and associated implications will be addressed.

グローバリゼーションは今や私たちの生活と切り離せないものであり、高等教育における、国際的視野に立ったカリキュラムは、学生の地球市民としてのアイデンティティの確立とグローバルな能力の育成を支えるために不可欠である。この研究では、日本の高等教育における言語習得の状況を概観した上で、言語教育におけるマルチモーダルなアプローチについて検討する。様々なマルチモーダルな教育的実践について提案し、その意義について述べるものである。

**Keywords:** internationalisation, English, tertiary education, Japan

### Introduction

Internationalisation and globalisation are complex terms and can be described in a variety of ways. From a higher education perspective, it has been suggested that, "internationalisation at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post secondary education" (Knight, 2002 in Huang, 2007 p. 48). This suggests that internationalisation is multi-dimensional, and a dynamic process of institutional change. Globalisation can be interpreted from many perspectives and is a major characteristic in our daily lives. It has had a considerable impact on the quantity and accessibility of knowledge worldwide and facilitated an increase in global interdependence. A close relationship exists between globalisation and internationalisation, and the internationalisation of higher education is not only an agent of globalisation, but also a response to globalisation (Huang, 2007).

As a result of increasing global interconnectivity, there is a growing trend in universities implementing new technologies into the curriculum to help students develop global competencies and increase their marketability (Patterson, Carrillo & Salinas, 2012). Recent literature has suggested that the internet is now

the main source of information for students who belong to the “Net Generation” (those who have grown up with digital technology), and consequently, change in universities is a requirement as opposed to an option (Jones, 2011). Curriculum in modern classrooms has demonstrated several innovative uses of new technologies including blogging, personal digital assistants, text messaging, and online communication tools such as Skype, to enhance teaching and learning, and to provide students with opportunities to communicate beyond the classroom context (Walsh, 2007; Patterson et.al., 2012).

This essay discusses the internationalisation of curriculum, primarily in language learning, in Japanese higher education. Here, it will be argued that to promote a curriculum that is more responsive to contemporary shifts in globalisation, educators in this context need to adopt a multimodal approach to facilitate intercultural understanding and communication, and to prepare students for a future in an increasingly globalised world. First, an overview of teaching contexts commonly found in Japanese higher education will be provided and reasons for requiring an increasingly internationalised curriculum direction will be identified. Next, multimodality will be explored, highlighting its usefulness in addressing deficits, and its potential to enhance internationalised curriculum. The final section will focus on recommended teaching practices to further internationalise curriculum in Japanese tertiary education, and the implications of implementing a multimodal approach will be addressed.

## **Context**

In Japan, the Japanese language has traditionally been the sole medium for academic instruction from kindergarten up to tertiary-level education. However, as a still relatively recent development, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English Medium Instruction (EMI) have become popular pedagogies adopted by the majority of Japanese higher education institutions, both in the public and private sectors (Toh, 2016). Currently, these contexts could be described as internationalised due to factors such as the presence of native English teachers from diverse backgrounds, the increasing presence of students from varying cultural backgrounds, and access to world maps and the internet. In addition, the teaching practices adopted in classrooms are in themselves representative of an internationalised classroom. Instead of the traditional grammar translation method of language teaching still regularly utilised in many junior high and high schools throughout Japan, the Western-influenced ‘communicative approach’ is used to engage students in discussion on a range of topics including ‘culture’ and ‘stereotypes’, and to facilitate role-play activities focused on skills such as ‘making requests’ and their associated pragmatics norms.

Traditionally, Japanese students have been conditioned to be passive learners; however, in many contemporary Japanese universities, the curriculum is designed so classes are student-centered and student-led, and the role of the teacher is facilitative rather than directive, sanctioning a shift for learners from passive bystanders to active participants (Sakamoto, 2012). In some situations, after class, students are required to send written responses to teachers via email using the university intranet, which encourages appropriate written communication through an English medium by use of technological resources.

Despite there being evidence of internationalisation within Japanese university curriculum, there are some areas where this context could become further internationalised. One example is that the classroom-

based content, prevalent in many university courses, primarily focuses on printed materials rather than promoting a multimodal approach. In addition, in EFL and EAP settings, students generally have less contact with English speakers from other cultures than in other situations. Consequently, it is essential for teachers to create opportunities for learners to develop a sense of their personal cultural identities and make connections between their lives and the world outside the classroom walls (Jewett, 2011). Several views exist concerning the impact of globalisation on identity. For some, globalisation threatens identity and promotes cultural homogeneity; for others, it enhances identity, and yet to others the impacts of globalisation on identity are both positive and negative (Sasaki, 2004). To promote internationalisation, teachers in Japanese higher education need to help students develop a global awareness from a global perspective, and alert students to both the positive and negative consequences that globalisation could bring to their local context.

### **A Multimodal Approach**

Multimodal literacy refers to meaning-making that occurs through reading, understanding, responding to, and interacting with digital texts and multi-media (Walsh, 2010). A multimodal approach can help students to develop multimodal literacy skills, or skills associated with new digital technologies, that are becoming essential for communication in an increasingly globalised world. By adopting a multimodal approach in Japanese EFL/EAP classrooms, teachers can prepare their students for new literacy practices, so they can use and manipulate new technologies and engage in cross-cultural communication (Walsh, 2010). In addition, by incorporating more modern technologies such as social media sites into the curriculum, learners can become empowered to 'produce' and share information about their culture and identity, rather than simply 'consuming' norms from outside cultures (Gee & Hayes, 2011).

Japan can be described as having a strong sense of national culture and national identity. According to Stuart Hall (1992), national identities are merely 'imagined communities' constructed from a discourse that organises our actions and influences our conception of ourselves. Increased exposure to other cultures through new technologies would not only offer students in these educational settings opportunities to compare and contrast their national identities with other national identities, but also allow learners to negotiate new identities and consider membership into other imagined communities on a global scale. Furthermore, as students in EFL/EAP settings have limited exposure to English in intercultural contexts, introducing the concept of imagined communities to students through new technologies such as social networking sites can engage students in language use, and help them recognise and establish their roles as English users in a globalised community or communities that transcend the classroom context.

Global interconnectivity is often viewed in terms of macro issues such as global economic activity, major health concerns and shared environmental problems. However, implementing a multimodal approach would offer students opportunities to explore globalisation from a perspective that focuses on micro issues such as negotiating identity issues in their community as it becomes increasingly transnational (Rizvi, 2009b). Particularly for students in Japan, who live in a society that is thought to be predominantly monocultural, a multimodal approach would incorporate a more cosmopolitan approach to teaching and learning to help students gain an understanding about the nature, scope and consequences of global transformations at a local

level in relation to a larger network of societies (Rizvi, 2009a).

## **Recommendations**

Since the mid-1990s, theorists have argued that on a global scale there has been a semiotic shift from the verbal to the visual, which has seen an integration of modes of meaning-making including the spatial, the audio, and the behavioural. Included in this shift are technological change and information technologies, which are transforming the ways we communicate and the processes by which information is produced, shared and accessed (Archer, 2006). Multimodality is a response to this shift in semiotic landscape, and refers to both a theory of communication and an approach to teaching pedagogy. As a theory of communication, multimodality accounts for diverse modes of meaning-making and addresses the relationship between semiotic shifts, globalisation, glocalisation, and formation of identity. From a teaching perspective, a multimodal approach incorporates a range of modes through which proficiency in multimodal literacies can be achieved (Archer, 2006). In these globalised times, more and more educators are adopting a multimodal approach that blends new and traditional literacies through creative teaching pedagogies in classrooms that are technologised to promote connectivity, inquiry, creativity and reflective dialogue to prepare their students for their futures in a globalised society (Cloonan, Hutchison & Paatsch, 2011).

Due to Japan's strong sense of national identity, although it is not untouched by globalisation, many agree it has been less influenced than other countries (Sasaki, 2004). To further internationalise the curriculum in Japanese higher education, teachers need to create more opportunities for learners to use English in cross-cultural communication with people from diverse backgrounds, to promote global citizenship and develop skills required to function in an increasingly globalised society (Rizvi, 2009a). Fazal Rizvi (2009a) claims that educators' approach to teaching global interconnectivity must first address the social transformation of local communities through links with communities around the world. Based on Rizvi's argument, it is imperative for the curriculum direction to have a strong focus on the development of intercultural relations through social networking sites such as blog websites and digital communication tools like Skype, to offer students opportunities to learn about global interconnectivity through cosmopolitan learning, which aspires to help students develop different perspectives on knowing and interacting with others through cultural exchange produced by global networks (Rizvi, 2009b). As globalisation spreads, and its impact has a greater influence in Japanese society, students need to be prepared for the changes that will take place so they can protect and improve their local communities.

Another reason the facilitation of intercultural relations should play a key role in an internationalised curriculum is because it will be increasingly necessary for language learners in modern society to communicate effectively with people from diverse backgrounds, across a range of contexts. Eli Hinkel (2012) suggests that for this to be achieved, learners need "to become proficient in both the language and the culture of its speakers" (p.45). Hinkel argues that being aware of cultural norms allows learners to make informed linguistic choices that impact on the effect of communication, and because of the close links between language and culture, competencies in both are essential for successful communication.

In recent years, blogs have become a popular form of media used to engage students in literacy and

communication, and to facilitate individuals' production and interpretation of discourse (Liang, 2010). Using blogging as a pedagogical tool makes the cultural and social contexts of English communication explicit to language learners, and through interaction with multimodal texts, students can develop their virtual identities and engage in cultural exchange with a wide audience (Liang, 2010). Blogging combines new and traditional literacies, and, particularly for students in EFL/EAP settings, allows them to organise and circulate their diverse interests, knowledge, and experiences with a wider discourse community. Social networking sites such as blogs serve as digital forms of 'imagined communities' and allow people from different backgrounds, in diverse locations, to share information and negotiate identities. Furthermore, blogging encourages learners to compare and contrast how local communities are being socially transformed, through cross-cultural interactions with communities around the world (Archer, 2006; Rizvi, 2009a; Liang, 2010).

There is much literature to support the argument that identity, be it individual or national, is not a fixed concept and is instead dynamic and complex in nature (Black, 2009). Identities are profoundly connected to processes of globalisation, and as the world becomes increasingly interconnected, language learners in Japan will need to be prepared to negotiate new identities as they shift and develop across time and space (Hornberger, 2007). Through implementing more modern technology into the curriculum, students will be provided with opportunities to form new identities and consider their own cultural beliefs and how they relate to other societies in the world. Furthermore, through exposure to new technologies and cultural exchange, where conceptions of others and ourselves are defined relationally, students in Japanese EFL/EAP settings can develop a better understanding of global citizenship and mitigate cultural homogeneity (Rizvi, 2009; Gee & Hayes, 2011; Jewett, 2011).

Vlogging, or video blogging, has also been on-trend in contemporary institutions. Vlogging is particularly beneficial for students who are visual learners, to make topics relatable and facilitate comprehension (Social Media and the Classroom, 2012). However, instructors have to be mindful of school policies and privacy guidelines surrounding the use of visual multimedia in class curriculum to avoid inadvertent non-compliance, and in order to protect the privacy of their students. Blogging and vlogging through social networking sites such as YouTube creates opportunities for learners to interact with people from different backgrounds in 'virtual classrooms', and explore cultural norms in both written and spoken discourse. Through these interactions, students will have several opportunities to gain an understanding of and interpret cultural norms through language use in written and oral communication. Furthermore, through these interactions, English is promoted as an international language (EIL); "a language always in translation", that is used differently, in different contexts, in relation to other languages, to demonstrate to students how socio-cultural norms can inform behaviour and language use (Pennycook, 2008, p.38; Hinkel, 2012)

Lucas Walsh (2007) claims that the adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in education is fundamentally linked to processes of globalisation, and is required for students to adapt to the 'new realities' brought about by globalisation such as methods of information distribution, standardised 'best practice' in the global market place, and a growing interdependence of nations. The use of blog websites,

YouTube, and Skype also promote a student-centered approach which is consistent with current curriculum and offers students opportunities to develop skills to access, interpret and analyse information through independent learning (Walsh, 2007).

Global learning is another growing trend in modern universities in their attempts to further internationalise their curriculum and create global citizens. According to Lynn Patterson, Paula Botero Carrillo and Rigoberto Solano Salinas (2012) "...global learning offers the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that students acquire through a variety of experiences that enable them to: understand world cultures and events; analyze global systems; appreciate cultural differences; and apply this knowledge and appreciation to their lives as citizens and workers" (p.183). Through global learning, students ideally develop global competencies including self-awareness, the ability to embrace diversity, and knowledge and skills that will enable them to protect and improve local and global communities. Global learning also provides opportunities for educators to highlight the connections between local and global contexts, which is particularly useful in EFL/EAP situations where there are often limitations for students to experience diverse settings. New technologies provide unique learning experiences, and make it possible for students to engage in intercultural communication online and experience new places and relationships that they would be unlikely to have access to in normal circumstances (Patterson et.al., 2012).

Due to the increased popularity, affordability and accessibility of smartphones, media players and tablets in recent years, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), or language learning that is enhanced through utilisation of hand-held devices, has become a prevalent pedagogical practice in both public and private universities across Japan. MALL and other forms of e-learning can offer students ubiquitous learning, and learning that adjusts to the pace of the individual learner, which is not always possible within a classroom setting (McCarty, Obari & Sato, 2017). Another benefit of MALL is that learners have increased access to other people utilising target languages, and resources on demand (McCarty, Obari & Sato, 2017).

## **Implications**

For successful implementation of multimodal components in Japanese universities, educators will need to be prepared for the challenges that exist when blending new and traditional approaches to teaching and learning (Walsh, 2010). Teacher training and development in modern technologies will be essential, and student assessment procedures will need to be reevaluated. Furthermore, because the strong sense of national identity that currently exists in Japan continues to inform policies at universities, teachers may be discouraged from designing curriculum that offers broad perspective and challenges the concept of Japanese national identity.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), often employs a top-down approach to the implementation of curriculum initiatives in Japanese higher education. One example was the enactment of the Global 30 Program, which offered 13 universities substantial government support to provide complete degree programs through an English-medium, in an attempt to attract large numbers of international students to Japanese universities and boost the international competitiveness of Japanese tertiary education (Goodman, 2016; Mock, 2016). This type of approach can generate hesitation for teachers

hoping to implement more unconventional, new-age technologies into curriculum, in the event that it contradicts university policy.

Although there are several merits, the implementation and effectiveness of MALL and other e-learning tools could be affected by institutional, cultural and geographic factors. The pedagogical practice of MALL is dependent on the availability and desirability of mobile devices within a local area, the accessibility of the Internet, and institutional policy (McCarty, Obari & Sato, 2017). Other challenges lie in the accessibility and management of remote human resources. It may be difficult to establish a relationship with people internationally, and even if a connection is established, scheduling Skype sessions could become problematic. In addition, students will need to be prepared for communication challenges that may occur and develop strategies for communication repair so activities do not result in negative consequences. When implementing activities that focus on interaction between different cultures, teachers will need to create a culturally responsive environment where they can use their cultural knowledge to cater for students' diverse learning needs and ensure learners from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to engage in successful communication and avoid intercultural tension (Hue & Kennedy, 2012).

## Conclusion

Although Japanese higher education has elements of an internationalised curriculum, the implementation of a multimodal approach would allow students to engage in regular cultural exchange through which they could negotiate identities, gain global competencies, and develop intercultural understanding. Through connections to communities around the world, Japanese learners could explore the social transformation that is taking place in their local contexts and become aware of the diverse ways globalisation influences Japanese society and the world. Increased use of new technologies would further internationalise the curriculum by helping students develop multiliteracies necessary for information distribution, the acquisition of knowledge, and intercultural communication in an increasingly globalised world. More exposure to people from diverse cultural backgrounds would provide opportunities for students to learn about language and culture through language use to help them communicate effectively.

Higher education institutions in Japan need to evolve as the impact of globalisation becomes more pronounced in Japanese society. Responsive education is essential to prepare students for the future, so they can function successfully as global citizens in a globalised world.

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