

## The Internationalization of Japanese Education: “International” Without the “Multicultural”

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*This paper focuses on the rhetoric surrounding “internationalization” in Japanese education. Internationalization is now used both in scholarly circles and in the media. Since discussions of internationalization are accompanied by calls for hiring more foreign faculty in higher education, increasing diversity, etc., one may be led to believe that the internationalization agenda also includes a multicultural one. However, a closer examination of 1) “foreign language activities,” routinely used interchangeably with “English activities” and 2) the rhetoric of so-called “foreigners,” shows that “internationalization” as used in these contexts lacks a multicultural perspective. The paper goes on to show that such views of “internationalization” without a multicultural perspective exclude those very populations which have the most to contribute to the development of a multicultural perspective in the Japanese context.*

**Keywords:** internationalization; multicultural; foreigners; Japanese education

### Introduction

There is something very peculiar about the present state of the policies calling for the “internationalization” of Japanese education. Governmental policies have trumpeted the need for “hiring foreign faculty” and increasing the number of students sent abroad, and in the case of higher education, a series of governmentally funded projects, such as Global 30, Top Global University Project, etc., have all pushed for such measures. The call for “internationalization” is echoed in university reform committees, board meetings of corporations, and the media; developing “global talent” (*gurobaru jinzai*) is a national agenda (Gurobaru Jinzai Ikusei Suishin Kaigi, 2012).

Since the calls for “internationalization” or more recently, “globalization”, routinely refer to the need to increase foreign faculty/students, and also note the importance of diversity,

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they give the impression that the ongoing “internationalization” agenda also has a “multicultural” agenda (Monbukagakusho & Nihongakujuutsu Shinkokai, 2014, p.3). “Multicultural” is understood here as respect for cultural diversity and the promotion of social justice (Banks & Banks, 1995).

On closer examination, however, there are inconsistencies in the calls for “internationalization,” implying that while internationalization may be being promoted, a multicultural perspective may be lacking. In other words, internationalization without a multicultural perspective is what seems to be happening.

What is meant by “internationalization without the multicultural”? What are its consequences? This article takes several key themes in the rhetoric of internationalizing Japanese education, and identifies inconsistencies (inconsistencies which follow a certain pattern), in an attempt to clarify what is actually being promoted.

## 1. The International and Multicultural in Foreign Language Activities

The inconsistencies related to the “internationalization” of education, and between the international and the multicultural in Japanese educational reforms, are nowhere better revealed than in the policies on elementary school “foreign language activities” (*shogakko gai-kokugo katsudo*). I thus start by focusing on these activities.

In 2011, “foreign language activities” became required in Japan for the fifth and sixth grades of elementary school for 35 unit hours a year. The government guidelines stressed that “foreign language activities” should emphasize listening and speaking rather than writing (grammar); they should try to “familiarize” children with foreign languages, to provide experiential opportunities to understand foreign culture and language, and to “develop an active attitude to initiate communication,” thus forming a building block on which later communication skills can flourish (Monbukagakusho, n.d.).

The push for elementary school level English was behind the various elementary school language activity reforms from the start. The Ministry had already designated two elementary schools in Osaka with a focus on English as part of international understanding in 1992.

The moment the period of “foreign language activities” became required in the curriculum for upper grades in 2011, Japanese newspaper headlines announced that “English” was coming down into elementary school. “Foreign language” was identified with “English.” On searching the top 20 article titles from Asahi Journal archives (Japanese) in 2011 (the year foreign language activities became required for the upper grades), the only language mentioned in the titles (searched under “elementary school and foreign language activities,” “elementary foreign language activities,” and “elementary school and English activities”) was English (1). In the years preceding this, “foreign language conversation, etc.” was implemented as part of international understanding in the period of integrated studies from third grade onward in 2002 (announced 1998). The 2016 Ministry survey notes that “in fifth and sixth grade English education, those classrooms implementing foreign language activities were 68,601, 92.3% of the total” (Monbukagakusho, 2016).

As English activities took hold in Japanese schools, children could be seen playing games in English, or singing English songs with the classroom teacher or the Assistant Language (English) Teacher (ALT). Though some schools emphasized international understand-

ing more than English, and others the opposite, the fact that English was identified with foreign languages in general, remained the same.

Now, emphasizing English itself is not a peculiarly Japanese phenomenon, since non-English speaking countries around the world are placed at a disadvantage as the language of the international sphere is increasingly English (and perhaps Chinese). Thus, many Asian countries have emphasized English teaching. Even Japan's East Asian neighbors such as Korea and China, to which Japanese educational policy often refers, have implemented English education in elementary school. Japan is following suit (2).

What is "peculiar" about the renewed emphasis on "foreign language" is the rhetoric. Official documents routinely mix "foreign language" and "English" in a way that is confusing. "Foreign language" is a much broader concept than English, totaling over 7,000 languages (3), but this is hardly the image Japanese children receive in their "foreign language activities" at school.

A short example from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) homepage on "foreign language activities" will suffice. There is a governmental site on the subject, which is called the Elementary School *Foreign Language Activity Site* (italics mine). However, the sub-titles which can be accessed from the site read: "*English Note Teaching Material*," "Center Schools for *English Activities* etc. International Understanding Education," "Information Corner for Practices in Various Regions," and "Related Material" (italics mine). One senses a reluctance to say "English activities" outright, perhaps evading criticisms that the period is too narrowly focused on English. Since the actual content is English activities, however, it is difficult to write "foreign" when the actual details of the teaching material are in question.

Being in limbo, however, presents difficulties for both the logic of (neoliberal) "internationalization" for global competition, and for an approach that emphasizes multicultural coexistence. From the viewpoint of the former, a half-hearted focus on "foreign" language (in effect, English), detracts from the rigor of English teaching necessary to compete in the world. From the latter perspective, the interchangeable usage of "foreign language" and "English" is ideologically harmful, as it promotes "un-multicultural" behavior like saying "hello" in English to anyone who looks foreign, and, one might add, without being able to communicate much more.

In a 2016 Ministry of Education survey on foreign language activities, the questions themselves mix "foreign language" and "English" interchangeably. When 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> graders were asked, "What would you do if a foreigner approaches you?", 47.3% of the elementary schoolers and 54.4% of the junior high school students surveyed answered "I would speak in English," while only 23.0% of the elementary school pupils and 14.7% of the junior high schoolers answered that they would speak in Japanese (Monbukagakusho, 2017). Moreover, the students were asked what they found helpful about the elementary school "English activities" in moving on to junior high English. The four most numerous answers were "reading the alphabet" (88.8%), "writing the alphabet" (83.9%), "simple English conversation" (82.8%), and "practicing English pronunciation" (75.8%) (Monbukagakusho, 2017). One might question the wisdom of teaching children to speak English to anyone who seems like a "foreigner," without being able to say or understand very much. In addition, who is this "foreigner"? Someone who looks like a tourist? Caucasian? Southeast Asian? Someone who looks different? One is left to wonder whether ethnic minorities who look similar to "Japa-

nese,” such as the Koreans and Chinese in Japan, are included. In fact, from the logic of “the multicultural,” an identification of “foreign language” with English is outright harmful. A point to which I will turn to next.

## 2. Issues of Exclusion

### 2.1. The Exclusion of Specific Ethnic Minorities from the Japanese Classroom

Why is confusing English activities with foreign language activities especially harmful in the Japanese context in view of advancing a multicultural perspective? I argue that it is because it shuts out Japan’s longstanding minorities and minorities from non-English-speaking countries using logic that is at first sight neutral, but which is in fact discriminatory. Let me explain.

If we recall Japan’s longstanding colonized minorities, they include populations such as the Koreans and Chinese in Japan, the Ainu of northern Japan who are Japan’s indigenous population, and the *burakumin* who are descendants of the castes discriminated against under the former feudal system. Then there are the “newer” types of foreigners who come as foreign labor, spouses of Japanese, etc. The largest language group in this category for children requiring Japanese as a Second Language education is Portuguese, followed by Chinese and Tagalog. The first is the language of the Brazilians of Japanese descent (Monbukagakusho, 2014). By nationality, the Chinese (29.2%) and the Koreans (19.0%) are the two major nationality groups, together constituting almost 50% of the foreign resident population in Japan (*zairyu gaikokujin*) in 2016 (Homusho, 2017). Both are countries near to Japan, but which have various historical and territorial disputes with Japan. People from these countries, when seen from a multicultural perspective, are crucial educational resources for children in understanding the responsibilities and challenges of Japan as a multicultural democratic society.

These populations, however, have a commonality—their everyday language usually is not English. For those who attended Japanese schools, such as most of the Koreans in Japan, it is not surprising that they would speak English no better than most of their classmates who are Japanese. The Koreans in Japan are brought up in the same monolingual environment of Japanese society and are subjected to the same English education that prevents Japanese students from acquiring usable English. Japanese educators do not assume most Japanese speak English fluently, given their own experience, and thus do not expect the regular Japanese to come to their classroom to introduce themselves in fluent English. Expecting Koreans in Japan who attended the same schools as these Japanese, to come to Japanese classrooms and to speak in fluent English about themselves would be adopting a double standard. In fact, the reason most Koreans in Japan speak Japanese and not English is because *Japan* colonized Korea, not the United Kingdom or the United States. The problem, however, when foreign language is identified with English, and English activities are given, is that such questions are not dealt with, and foreigners are divided into two categories: those who can speak in English and can thus be invited as guest speakers, and those who cannot.

In short, it is disturbing from a multicultural perspective to identify “foreign language” with English and to define English activities as the period in which interaction between foreign/ethnic minority guests and Japanese students occurs. It evaluates visitors to the Japanese classroom based on their level of spoken English, glossing over issues related to Japan’s co-

lonial history or the power structure of our world. It reinforces language hierarchies without questioning why they are there and what has sustained them. It makes it harder for foreigners/ethnic minorities without English skills to talk to Japanese students about their culture—and as we have seen, those excluded are the very populations most crucial from a multicultural perspective in the Japanese context.

This harmful identification of foreign language with English is not lost in those districts which have a visible and vocal ethnic minority movement. For example, the author used to be the international education consultant for Kawasaki, which has a strong Korean movement.

Since 1999, the Kawasaki Board of Education has had a system for inviting (minority) guest speakers who would push the children to become aware of and to participate in the building of a “multicultural coexistence society” (*tabunka kyosei shakai*). This guest speaker system is based on the Kawasaki City Alien Education Basic Act (Kawasakishi Gaikokujin Kyoiku Hoshin), and supports “foreign citizens etc.” who can introduce and instruct children in the cultures of various ethnicities, thus promoting learning for multicultural coexistence (Kawasakishi, n.d.).

The guideline notes that what is meant here by learning activities which aim for multicultural coexistence is activities targeting “both Japanese students and foreign students,” motivating them to respect various cultures and to strive to create a multicultural coexistence society. Here, the guideline is careful to note that:

This is *not* something that is intended to assist foreign language (*especially English*)  
(italics mine, Kawasakishi, n.d.)

The major motivation to set up the multicultural coexistence guest speakers came from the Korean minority movement. If these multicultural guest speakers were identified with those who were to describe their culture in English and to engage in English activities, this would virtually disadvantage the Koreans in Japan who do not speak English fluently because they were raised and educated in Japanese schools. Those who attended the Korean schools in Japan would be able to speak in Korean, but not in fluent English. The clause above is there to prevent such exclusion from taking place in the name of “internationalization” (identified with English), at the expense of “the multicultural.”

## 2.2. The Exclusion of Non-English Speaking Countries

The notice issued by the Kawasaki board came in a context in which foreign language activities—in effect, English activities—were entering the curriculum, and schools around Japan were making the shift to include English activities in their curricula. Wards like Shinagawa (in Tokyo) decided that in their ward, foreign language activities would be “English,” which would start from the first grade and feed into secondary school English (Shinagawa, 2013). The Tokyo Board of Education issued a pamphlet titled *International Understanding Activities Promotion Project such as English Activities etc. in Elementary School* (underlining mine, Tokyo Kyoiku Iinkai, 1999) in the late 90s. In retrospect, this is actually in line with the present course of events to turn elementary English into a subject, and the sharp increase in private schools in the urban areas (greater Tokyo and the Osaka triangle) which decided to include English (30% of schools in 2017) in their junior high entrance examinations (4).

It is thus not surprising in such a context that teachers would be led to combine or replace international understanding education or “general” language activities with English activities. Asking foreign guests to speak about their country in English or to engage in activities using English became popular, and DVDs of songs to sing during English activities and related books were sold in stores. The best practices of Language (English) activities on websites of the government and teachers’ associations reflect this trend. These activities, indeed, brought in foreigners as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs)—mostly Assistant English Teachers (AETs)—and one could argue that children were interacting with someone from a different culture (international understanding), while being exposed to English. In actuality, the English component restricted what could be done in the classroom.

Other than the ideological problem cited above, the following are some of the issues surrounding English activities and “the multicultural.”

First, given the low level of English on the part of the children, the type of information that can be conveyed by the AET is minimal. Therefore, though the AET can bring instruments from their culture, coins, or ethnic clothing, or they can play games in English, it is impossible to explain anything sophisticated, since the children would not understand. As seen in the Ministry survey above, in which elementary school children surveyed thought that the number one aspect of English activities which would feed into junior high English was learning the alphabet, the level of elementary pupils’ English is not high.

However, in order for deep international understanding to occur through the ethnic guest speaker, the children need to understand what the speaker is saying about, for example, being an ethnic minority in one’s country. Ironically, since children are supposed to be exposed to a foreign language (English) in these foreign language activities, not listening to a Japanese interpretation of the guest speaker’s talk, English activity classrooms around Japan started looking similar in the use of games, songs, flash cards, and movement. The learning of other cultures takes place through symbols, cultural expressions such as songs, and movement, not words.

Second, identifying foreign languages with English sends the message to children that communication with “foreigners” is to take place in English, as seen in the previously cited governmental survey.

The emphasis on English is related to who comes as “foreigners” into the Japanese classroom. The governmental Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET programme) is a popular route for foreign youth to enter Japanese classrooms. In the three categories recruited, Assistant Language Teacher, Coordinator for International Relations (requiring a high level of Japanese language ability), and Sports Exchange Advisor, over 90 percent come as ALTs (5).

Possibly reflecting in part the fact that the first JETs were from core English-speaking countries—U.S., U.K., Australia and New Zealand—in 1987, and that the demand for English-language speakers is high in schools, etc., these countries still top the list in the numbers they have sent as JETs. In any case, I will call the patterns that these countries show the ALT pattern, since that they have far more ALTs than the other categories such as CIRs (e.g., U.S.: 2, 696 ALTs, 117 CIRs, 1 SEA; U.K. 381 ALTs, 28 CIRs, and 0 SEAs). There are also countries with more CIRs than ALTs. such as France, Germany, China, Korea, and Brazil—all non-English speaking countries. On the other hand, the Philippines, Singapore, Jamaica, and the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago all follow the ALT pattern, though their ra-

cial and cultural patterns are very different from the western English-speaking countries (6). The implication may be that English meets the needs of Japanese schools most, and those with English skills are more easily incorporated into the Japanese foreign language activities which are mostly English.

However, when foreign language activities and English activities are used interchangeably, and internationalization is associated with a certain type of foreigner, using English activities as the window of international understanding activities has troubling consequences. The promotion of “the international” without “the multicultural” risks limiting the diversity of ethnic guest speakers/foreigners that Japanese children are exposed to.

### 3. Foreigners, Internationalization, and Human Rights

I have argued that when “internationalization” is seen from the perspective of language, English and “foreign language” are often used interchangeably in Japanese elementary school English. There is another word, “foreigner,” which also has implications for the theme of this paper, international without the multicultural. This time, the word “foreigner” is not used interchangeably with a different word; rather, the same word is used to signify different populations.

In a previous issue of *Educational Studies in Japan*, Tsuneyoshi (2007) analyzed Japanese social studies textbooks in elementary school and showed that the portrayal of “foreigners” is split into two. In the early years of elementary school, the foreigners who appear in the textbooks are temporary visitors from abroad, visiting schools, coming and going. Such temporary foreign guests in the Japanese classroom, and pictures of signs in English and in other languages in public places, are displayed in the textbooks as proof of the “internationalization” of Japanese society. The framework used to understand these foreigners is “internationalization.”

In sixth grade, Japanese elementary social studies textbooks deal with history. Here, “foreigners” appear alongside the *burakumin*, women, those with various physical and mental challenges, and World War II. Here, the “foreigners” are the ethnic minorities in Japan, the Koreans or Chinese in Japan, and the Ainu, as colonized populations. The framework used here is human rights and multicultural coexistence.

There is no explanation of why this shift from one type of “foreigner” to a different type of “foreigner” is occurring. In fact, since the context in which these “foreigners” are being discussed differs, the shift in the target may not even be conscious.

At the end of sixth grade, the context reverts back to the present, and the “foreigners” who appear in the textbooks are again understood using the framework of “internationalization.” They are temporary visitors, new foreigners, and not the long-standing ethnic minorities in Japan.

I have discussed how “foreign activities” is used interchangeably with “English activities.” The “foreigners” who are associated with English activities are understood using an internationalization framework. Such foreigners are seen as one indicator that Japanese society is internationalizing. Here, the image of foreigners is that of temporary guests, coming and going, consequences of the internationalization of Japanese society, and speaking English. This image goes well with Japanese elementary and secondary school students saying “hello”

in English and not feeling shy about talking to “foreigners.” It does not go well with the latter type of “foreigners” who appear in Japanese social studies textbooks under the framework of human rights and multicultural coexistence.

Distinguishing between the internationalization framework and the human rights and multicultural coexistence framework noted above helps us understand the latent distinctions of two types of “foreigners” in governmental proposals. When foreigners are discussed in relation to internationalization, the foreigners who come and go seem to be the target. When discussed in relation to historical discrimination, it is the Koreans and Chinese in Japan who appear as the “foreigners.”

For example, a major proposal on internationalization in the early years of the “internationalization” boom was the Central Council for Education’s proposal on the vision of Japanese education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Chuokyoiku Shingikai, 1996). In its chapter titled, “Internationalization and Education” (*kokusaika to kyoiku*), the proposal stressed the need for children who understand and respect other cultures, who “establish their selves (*jiko*) as Japanese, and as individuals” for the sake of “international understanding,” and who have “communication skills” including the basics of “foreign language ability.” There are two sub-populations listed under this “Internationalization and Education” chapter: (1) Japanese returnees from abroad, and (2) foreigners.

Returnees are now targeted as major players in the “internationalization” of Japanese education (Tsuneyoshi, forthcoming). The above-stated proposal calls for the enrichment of the education of Japanese children in foreign countries, incorporating and linking the education Japanese children experience abroad with the local language, local people, etc. When these children come back to Japan, the proposal calls for the enrichment of their education as returnees, including improving the exam system tailored for returnees, and maintaining the “foreign language” ability and “international qualities” that these Japanese children have acquired abroad. Noticing that there are more students who come back from Asian countries (mostly from Japanese schools abroad), the proposal also calls for “expanding the opportunities to learn Asian languages” and to utilize the opportunity for international exchange with Asian youth.

“Foreigners” are listed after the returnees. The section is labeled “The Improvement/Enrichment of the Education of Foreign Children Residing in Japan.” The section starts with the 1990 revisions to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act which made it possible for South Americans of Japanese descent to enter Japan legally as unskilled labor. This law is quite famous in the literature on the “new” foreigners who started entering Japan from the late 70s and especially in the 1990-2000s because of this change to the immigration law. The proposal goes on to say that “foreigners who require Japanese language instruction” are increasing rapidly in number because of the revision to this law, and that it is necessary to improve the system of receiving these foreign children into Japanese schools. Effective Japanese language instruction tops the list of issues (Monbusho, 1996).

It seems to be a pattern that when such proposals talk about “internationalization,” they tend to be associated with the “new” foreigners and their children, especially those who came as foreign workers as a result of Japan’s economic boom. It seems quite clear that the “foreigners” who are being discussed in relation to “internationalization” are the new foreigners who appear as symbols of internationalization in the social studies textbooks. These are the South Americans of Japanese descent (Brazilians, Peruvians), the spouses of Japanese,

etc., who came after the end of WWII for different reasons than the colonized minorities from East Asia. However, even for the new foreigners, take, for example, a representative new foreigner (newcomer) group, the Japanese-Brazilians: their mother tongue is not English, but Portuguese. As we saw in the beginning of this paper, groups who do not speak English are disadvantaged in a context in which international understanding becomes foreign language activities which are actually English language activities.

## Conclusion

The analysis of this paper suggests that the inconsistencies (e.g., slippage from foreign language to English, differentiating types of “foreigners,” perhaps half-consciously, depending on the context being discussed) in the rhetoric on the “internationalization” of Japanese education are actually consistent in some ways.

There may be numerous non-Japanese languages in the world, but when “foreign language” activities are discussed in the Japanese context, the dominance of English seems to be taken for granted to the extent that the interchangeable use of “foreign language” with English doesn’t seem to constitute a problem for educators.

When we look at the foreigners who are associated with “internationalization,” we are left with an even more problematic suggestion. The foreigners who are associated with internationalization largely seem to be those who came recently. It is assumed that they do not speak the Japanese language fluently. These “new” foreigners include foreign workers, spouses of Japanese, ALTs, and foreign tourists. Since Japanese language is assumed to be a difficulty for these populations, the image of the new foreigners who have lived in Japan for a long time, acquiring the Japanese language but not speaking English fluently, does not seem to fit nicely with the image of “internationalization.”

There are now a generation of descendants of Indochinese refugees and children of foreign workers who are being brought up in Japan, in Japanese. The “internationalization” image discussed above would have difficulty incorporating such populations. In fact, the image of “internationalization” does not seem to fit those foreigners who may not speak English fluently in general, such as those who come from countries where the mother tongue is not English.

The foreign population which seems to match most neatly the above-stated image of “internationalization” are the people from countries where English is spoken in daily life (English-speaking countries and their former colonies), or foreign visitors who do not speak Japanese and are trying to communicate in English. In fact, the image of “internationalization” described above probably best fits a situation outside Japan, where there are people of different linguistic backgrounds and there is a need to speak in a common language, which in the international public sphere is often English. The perspective is outbound. What seems to be lacking is internationalization with an internal, multicultural perspective.

If Japanese education is to recognize its historically discriminated-against ethnic minorities, its major new foreigner groups who do not speak English fluently, and the foreign nationals who reside permanently or for long periods in Japan—those groups which have the most to contribute to international understanding education in the Japanese context—the discovery of “the multicultural” within the internationalization framework is crucial.

## Notes

- 1 Asahi Shinbun article search service (Kikuzou II Visual). <http://database.asahi.com>, retrieved Jan., 2018.
- 2 Kyoikukateibukai Gaikokugosenmonbukai, 9<sup>th</sup> meeting, handout, [http://www.mext.go.jp/b\\_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo3/015/siryo/1265550.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo3/015/siryo/1265550.htm), retrieved Jan., 2018.
- 3 Ethnologue: Languages of the World, homepage, <https://www.ethnologue.com/guides/how-many-languages>, retrieved, Sept., 2017.
- 4 Shiritsu chugaku, Eigo no nyushi ga kyuzo Shutoken/kinkiken no 3 wari. Asahi Shinbun (news-papers) digital, Jan. 18<sup>th</sup>. <https://headlines.yahoo.co.jp/hl?a=201801-18-00000077-asahi.soci>, retrieved Jan. 2018.
- 5 Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme homepage. <http://jetprogramme.org/ja/positions/>, retrieved Sept. 2017.
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