

Japanese Language as an Organizational Barrier for International Students to Access to University Services: A Case of Aoyama Gakuin University

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ABSTRACT

In 2011, Aoyama Gakuin University (AGU) started a government-funded degree program (taught in English) to accept international students with limited or no Japanese language proficiency. However, the students faced obstacles in accessing all of the university resources provided. In this article, I investigated Japanese language as an organizational barrier for students accessing to campus resources. I utilized the case study methodology through participatory observation on campus and face-to-face interviews.

Keywords: International Student Services, Internationalization of Japanese Universities, Managing Diversity, Organizational Analysis

Japanese universities experience internationalization as an individualized process by engaging in organizational reform depending on their unique needs and challenges in response to changes in student demography. There are approximately 780 universities in Japan based on the MEXT funding classifications: national universities, prefectural/municipal public universities, and private universities (Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports, and Technology [MEXT], 2012), and these Japanese universities primarily admit domestic students. However, their student population by nationality alone is diversifying due to increasing short-term and degree-seeking international students' inflow into Japan (184,155 in 2014) (JASSO, 2015). Under such a change in the university student demography, the Japanese universities face challenges of assisting these international students and ensuring their academic success. Aoyama Gakuin University (AGU) is no exception to this change.

The issue of a language barrier when working with international students has been prevalent at AGU since 2011 when I was appointed as a faculty member working directly with English-speaking international students in a government-funded graduate program. As the program faculty coordinator, my primary responsibility was to improve the students' academic and social experience and ensure the successful completion of their studies by designing, implementing, and evaluating international student service activities. The students spoke of their difficulties navigating AGU without Japanese language proficiency. Since part of the funding agreement between AGU and the grant agency included program evaluation, the author integrated a monitoring and evaluation strategy for programmatic change by systematically collecting and analyzing data for existing organizational challenges. Having employed Lewin's Force Field Analysis (1951) as an analytical framework, the author set out to investigate the driving and restraining forces that impact international students' challenges caused by the language barrier at the university. The goal of this study aimed at remedying international students' difficulty in accessing resources in the English-taught program. At the same time, he questioned AGU's commitment to internationalization without having a comprehensive vision on improving student services for English-speaking international students.

I first examined existing literature related to the internationalization of Japanese higher education by closely looking at issues related to Japanese language as an organizational barrier for international students. International students spoke of the Japanese language as one of the major challenges for their experience in living and studying in Japan (Hiratsuka, et al, 2016). Lewin (1951) argued that driving and restraining forces exist in the defined field as his theory analyzes organizational changes by examining these forces. Altbach and Knight (2007) argued that internationalization becomes a reform strategy to respond to external forces among universities. Knight (1997) argued the internationalization of higher education is a process which drives the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into research, teaching, and services within university functions. Zha (2004) summarized a different area of issues pertaining to the internationalization of higher education including organizational aspects. Hiratsuka (2016) classified Japanese universities as Type II (Closed Natural) Organization based on Scott's organizational theory (1992) which explains that a characteristic of Type II Organizations includes internal resource coordination within organizational boundaries to meet the challenge of external realities. However, the current literature on Japanese universities' internationalization is often limited to the government policies on internationalization and higher education (Hiratsuka, 2016). Several studies pointed to organizational issues such as governance (Murasawa, et al., 2014; Yonezawa, 2013) but did not address internationalization. The only existing

literature on the organizational analysis of Japanese universities' internationalization process includes organizational dynamics (Breaden, 2012), intercultural conflict resolution in an academic organization (Ottman & Rogers, 2010) and organizational analysis of internationalization on a consortium of internationally-oriented Japanese universities (Hiratsuka, 2016). After reviewing the literature, I concluded that only a limited amount of literature exists that analyzes Japanese universities' internationalization at the organizational level. The literature review suggests that describing the case of a particular Japanese university to serve as an example of the current status of internationalization in Japan would make a contribution to the field.

The purpose of this article is to present a descriptive case study of Aoyama Gakuin University by identifying the Japanese language as an organizational barrier for international students with limited or no Japanese proficiency to access to university resources. Since limited studies include organizational studies of Japanese universities, this study contributes to three main goals by diagnosing AGU's structural problem related to the Japanese language as an organizational barrier for international students: 1) developing a program-level strategy to improve international students' access to university resources 2) influencing AGU's internationalization policy formation through an evidence-based approach by affirming AGU's commitment to providing assistance to international students, 3) presenting AGU as a descriptive case of Japanese internationalization in higher education to contribute to the current literature.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study's design is qualitative by employing a case study as its main methodological framework (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2014). In order to increase its quality, the study also followed the general guidance of a qualitative study by Creswell (2014). The study focuses on Aoyama Gakuin University as a case and the unit of analysis is based on decision criteria, common and revelatory, suggested by Yin (2014, p. 51-52). I collected data from three different sources: field notes from direct observation on campus, a focus group with the international students in the program, and in-person interviews with three different AGU departments.

As the Faculty Coordinator of a scholarship program at Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo from 2011 to 2014, I managed a scholarship program, and worked directly with graduate international students in the program. This study comes from my professional practice as an international student advisor. The university at which I hold a faculty appointment as Faculty Coordinator and Assistant Professor, is a private university according to the MEXT classification (2012). In 2011, AGU developed and

opened an English-taught graduate degree program after receiving a request from a government ministry in Japan to fund a graduate degree program for international students. For its preparation, I was involved in a project for assessing the organizational condition of Aoyama Gakuin University; later, I later I was appointed as the Faculty Coordinator to manage the daily program operation.

Although the Tohoku earthquake in 2011 delayed the first phase of data collection in 2011 (originally planned for March, 2011), I conducted direct observation on campus regarding English accessibility at the beginning of the academic year 2011 under the supervision of a senior faculty member at AGU. From 2014 to 2016, I participated in collecting data for an organizational study funded and supervised by AGU's Faculty Development Department. First, I collected the data through direct observation by composing the field notes with photos to identify potential areas and locations on campus where possible language barriers existed. The student volunteers assisted me to gather data on the university's campus facilities, buildings, and services departments. Second, I gathered data by using a focus group of 10 international students, and in-person interviews with three (3) staff from the International Exchange Center (ICE).

This study draws on one analytical strategy and one technique proposed by Yin (2014): a case description development strategy and an organizational level logic model. As a descriptive case study, this study's analysis focused on a common and revelatory purpose, and the case description served as the main goal of data analysis and interpretation. As a result of the data analysis, I generated a logic model to summatively describe the organizational barriers of AGU in terms of language access. All analysis was conducted in English.

I was certainly aware of some methodological challenges, and made continuous efforts to critically evaluate analytical processes throughout the study to meet the criteria for Case Study and its methodological validities and reliability (Yin, 2014). Needless to say, such qualitative research design comes with its limitations; in order to minimize their impact, specific measures including triangulation and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2014) have been implemented to maintain methodological validities.

RESULTS

Direct Observation Field Notes

The study's field notes from direct observation demonstrated Japanese language as an organizational barrier in a variety of locations throughout the AGU campus. The result illustrated organizational-wide language barriers that prevent the international students without Japanese reading proficiency from accessing university resources. For example, trash bins have written instructions regarding four different materials. Without

TABLE 1: AGU's Language Barrier on Campus

Campus Locations	Objects	Japanese Notations Only (English Translation by the PI)
Campus-Wide	Trash Bins	びん・缶 (Glass Bottles, Cans) ペットボトル (Plastic Bottles) 燃えるごみ (Combustibles) 燃えないゴミ (Non-combustibles)
	Classrooms Signs	受講上の注意 (Classroom Conducts and Disruptive Behaviors)
	Emergency Escape Instructions and Map	非常用はしごの使い方 (Emergency Escape Ladder Instruction) 非常時の避難経路 (Emergency Exit Path Instruction)
	Building Signs	購買会 (Campus Bookstore) 一号館~十七号館 (Building #1~17)
Library	Homepage	調べる・さがす (Search Instructions) Aurora-OPAC
	Search Engines	[蔵書検索] (Publication Search) 選択してください (Function Selections)
	Xerox Machine Instructions	スタート (Copy) ストップ (Stop) リセット (Reset)
Cafeteria Areas (Building #7 Basement Floor and #17 Ground Floor)	Washrooms	男性トイレ (Male Washrooms)
	Washroom Directions	女性トイレ (Female Washrooms)
	Food Ticket Machines	メニューと食材 (Food Menu and Ingredients)
University Gym	Used Dishes and Cups Return Locations	返却場所 (Dishes Return Location)
	Building Signs, Warnings, and Instructions	大学体育館地下地図 (University Gym Basement Floor Map) 更衣室 (Changing Room) 更衣室盗難注意 (Warning Signs for Pick-pockets) トレーニングルーム使用上の注意 (Weight Room Instructions)

Japanese reading proficiency, the international students will not be able to follow the proper instructions for the trash bin. The below table illustrates only the most common examples. Although photos were taken during the direct observation, they are excluded from the table due to space limitations.

Interviews with AGU’s Staff Members

The staff members recognized Japanese language exists as an organizational barrier for international students, and they identified the barrier as a challenge for serving international students.

**TABLE 2:
AGU’s Barriers and Facilitators Recognized by AGU Staff Members**

University Departments	Barriers (Japanese language)	Facilitators (English language)
International Exchange Center (IEC)	Automated Interface Units Information Communication Technology (ICT) Student Services Information University Signs Tests and Exams Crisis Prevention and Management	Communicate to the international students directly by email (not Portal) ICE staff members translate all necessary information Advocacy in administrative meetings to the responsible university faculty and staff Resident Assistant at the dormitory ICE staff members include the crisis management in the international student orientation.
Cafeteria	Menu and Ingredients Used Dishes & Cups Return Message Boards Emergency Exit Signs Emergency Maps Automated External Defibrillator (AED)	Identification by numbers and pictures (i.e. beef, pork, chicken)
Library	Signs and Maps Procedure Instructions Procedure Policies	One librarian with English proficiency (part-time) Instruction Manual Point-and-Talk Manual

For example, International Exchange Center (IEC) and Library staff members explained that Automated Interface Units (Xerox machines, student certification machines, and cafeteria ticket machines), Information Communication Technology (university website, university portal) and student services information (dormitory, social events, student ID card, lost & found, fitness center) are all in Japanese; they recognized that the language barrier limits access to services for the international students. The major part of the IEC staff assistance focuses on translating them to the students. These staff members also recognized their function as facilitators who assist the international students when they provide services in English. The interview data verified the existence of Japanese language as a barrier and English language as a facilitator for the English-speaking international students.

Focus Group with International Students

The focus group data illustrated Japanese language as a barrier in two ways. First, the international students confirmed the locations of the barrier at AGU as identified in the observation field notes. Second, they explained their difficulty of overcoming the barrier and expressed their frustration for not being able to access university resources without Japanese language proficiency. During the interview, some international students explained that assistance from individual staff members and students with English proficiency assisted them to overcome the existing barrier and increase access to university resources.

TABLE 3: AGU’s Language Barriers and Facilitators Recognized by International Students

University Departments	Barriers (Japanese language)	Facilitators (English language)
Educational Affairs	Educational and Social Events and Information	Two staff members’ assistance at the Education Affairs. A staff member at the study room provide verbal assistance to operate equipment
Library	Automated Interface Units and their Instructions No Sign/Instruction English Journal Subscription Information	ATM (a bilingual operation) One reference librarian provided instruction verbally/written when available.
Cafeteria	Cafeteria Ticket Machines Menu in the 17 th building	The 7 th building menu is in English; but still not sure about the dish.
Gym	Operation hours The fitness center machine instruction handout	
Information Communication Technology (ICT)	University Website University Portal	
Health Clinic	Doctors and Nurses Medicine	Staff from Japan International Cooperation Center (JICE) assistance A local hospital with medical translator

Japanese Language as a Structural Barrier in the Organization

The language barrier exists through the sole use of the written Japanese language on physical and technological structures of the university. International students therefore have no or little access to the university resources and critical information by themselves without reading proficiency in Japanese. As a result, the international students not only lack access to university resources but also sometimes lose out on some benefits available at AGU.

According to the IEC staff, the inability to independently access to university resources frustrates many international students. For example, the IEC staff members spend significant amount of time to explain and answer questions related to university resources by simply translating these structural functions into English for the international students. One of the students described the sense of isolation in their experience at AGU by stating, they are “almost an island here” (focus group, 2014). The Japanese language as a structural barrier, therefore, functions as an instrument of exclusion for the international students in regard to a variety of university services, facilities, and information.

Japanese language also functions as a structural barrier by unfairly contributing to communication breakdown when formal communication channels prevent the necessary university information from reaching to the international students. For example, one of the librarians indicated that the international students can access the major journal database through the library website without any additional costs, and the library even has English instructions available. However, the homepage only appears in Japanese, and one must go through several pages to get to such resources in English. Therefore, one international student explained that he purchased an article for his thesis, and did not know about the subscription available at the university library. Another student explained, “People only speak Japanese, and I am discouraged” (focus group, 2014).

In certain cases, a breakdown in communication can cause safety problems for the international students. Some international students come from places without earthquakes or typhoons. One student struggled to come to attend his class, and found out that the classes were cancelled due to a typhoon. These international students have no way of understanding the weather and emergency information on the university website without the reading proficiency in Japanese. The IEC staff are very concerned with this issue at the university. The IEC staff include some Bousai (防災 emergency preparation) activities in English during the annual international student orientation at their own discretion, but cannot include the larger university emergency plan in English because it does exist. They also cannot provide real-time messages in English during an emergency situation.

English Language Speaker as Relational Facilitator

Although limited in their availability and varied in proficiency, some staff and students speak English to assist international students. When available or accessible, these staff members or students translate information, and provide greater access to services and facilities on campus to the international students. For example, the IEC staff function as a major relational facilitator on campus by providing necessary translation for all university services. A few staff members in the library and the Educational Affairs office also provide general educational and administrative services in English. While their principle for serving international students focuses on answering questions by the international students at IEC, they may not be equipped to answer all questions at AGU. International students expressed their appreciation for assistance no matter how limited, their level of satisfaction with their experience changed positively when the English assistance was available to them. English-speaking students and staff members serve as relational facilitators for the international students on campus.

DISCUSSION

The current concern is the concentrated reliance on only a few departments and individuals on campus to assist English-speaking international students. IEC staff members play a primary role for assisting all AGU international students, but the IEC staff only can assist the international students so much. Some other staff members and students speak English on campus, but their voluntary assistance is not only unfair burden for them, but also is an inefficient way to provide university resources for the international students. The host university, in this case AGU, must provide university resources and services to all students regardless of their language proficiencies once enrolled.

I recognized possible existence of issues related to university members' competencies for intercultural effectiveness. AGU departments are sometimes unwilling or unable to interact with students from cultures other than Japanese culture. This inability to work effectively across cultures presents a challenge for AGU. The IEC staff recognized that staff members in other departments are often unwilling to interact with international students, and the IEC staff often receives phone calls from the departments for the international students. Unwillingness and/or inability to assist the international students at AGU raises an issue of AGU faculty and staff members' competencies for intercultural effectiveness.

The study's rich data left some interesting future possibilities for additional studies. As the original objective of this study focused on analyzing Japanese language as an organizational barrier for international

students, the study excluded data on issues related to cultural barriers and managing campus diversity. For example, through my direct observation and an interview with cafeteria's dietitian it became clear that 90% of the food menu items included pork products, providing very little options for students who do not eat pork for dietary or religious reasons. Currently, AGU, a Methodist affiliated university, has begun to accept international students from countries with large Islamic populations. Additional studies could uncover further issues related to cultural barriers and managing diversity in order to improve international students' lives on campus and enlighten the future of AGU's internationalization strategies.

Interpersonal competencies for intercultural effectiveness often focus on one's ability to build a bridge across cultural differences, and lacking such competencies among the host university members could function as a cultural barrier. Cultural barriers function as blind spots for the host university faculty and staff. For example, according to the IEC staff, tests and exams were designed in Japanese, and the international students could not answer them. Some courses were taught in English, but the class references and resource materials contain information in Japanese, according to one international student (a student comment in the focus group, 2014). Such cultural barriers possibly may signal the use of exclusive behaviors by the host university members, and may be perceived as prejudicial and/or discriminatory behaviors.

CONCLUSION

While the push for the internationalization of higher education has been driving Japanese universities to establish English-taught degree programs to attract more international students, universities services often do not provide information in English. Indeed, international students at Japanese universities clearly indicated that the Japanese language was one of their major challenges for studying and living in Japan (Hiratsuka, et al, 2016). The students require more assistance to ensure their success beyond simply offering English-taught courses and degrees.

The study provided evidence that the Japanese language exists as an organizational barrier for international students in the government-funded program at AGU through a summative evaluation. This study also provided evidence to articulate the existing organizational problem for the internationalization of higher education, and helped formulate a program-level strategy to facilitate access to the university resources to ensure international students' success in the program. There is a need, however, for AGU to formulate comprehensive internationalization strategies to further drive university reform in order to effectively manage student diversity.

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