

Enhancing Cross-border Learning Opportunities in Japanese Higher Education Institutions by Internationalizing the EFL Curricula

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Abstract

本質的研究では、日本の関西地方のある私立大学のグローバル・トピックスのコースの中で、5名の交換留学生を招いて、プレゼンテーションを講評し、自身の出身国についての質問に答えてもらった。授業後にEメールでの質問票に答えるという形で日本のEFL学習者と海外留学生がそれぞれ体験の振り返りをおこなった。学生によればもっとも興味深かったプレゼンテーションは日本および非日本のコンテキストにおける特定の話題についての比較・対照を含んだものであった。海外留学生にプレゼンテーション後に提示された質問の中でもっとも興味を誘発したものは、日本における海外留学生の生活をめぐるものであった。日本人学生、海外留学生ともに本コースでのアクティビティを自他の文化の理解に役立つと感じたものの、彼らは互いから得られた学びをさらに深めるようなフォローアップ学習を希望した。

In this qualitative study, five foreign exchange students were invited to observe presentations and answer questions about their country of origin in Global Topics courses at a private university in the Kansai region of Japan. After the activity, the Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students and non-Japanese university students reflected on the experience by completing a questionnaire via email. Students said that the most interesting presentations were those that included a comparative and contrastive analysis of specific topics within Japanese and non-Japanese contexts. The questions that were posed to the foreign exchange students after the presentations that sparked the greatest interest were those that revolved around the lives of the international students in Japan. Although the Japanese students and non-Japanese students found this activity helpful for their understanding of other cultures and their own culture, they recommended follow-up activities that would further their learning from each other.

Key words: internationalized curricula, global human resources, cross-border learning activities

Literature Review

Japanese universities attract 75,000 to 115,000 international students annually, with Chinese students accounting for over half of its international student population (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Since 2000, Japanese higher education institutions (HEIs) have managed to double the number of foreign students (Huang, 2006). In 2006, Asian students from China, Taiwan, and Korea accounted for over 90% of its international student population, which according to Altbach (2015) indicates that Japan's inbound strategies are more regionalized than internationalized. Japan's main challenges of attracting foreign students beyond Asia are heavily tied to the underlying difficulties of learning enough Japanese (Altbach, 2015) to be able to follow courses taught in Japanese (Wang, 2017). While inbound foreign students primarily from Asian countries have been on the rise in recent years, the number of Japanese students studying overseas has dropped by about half—from a peak of 47,100 in the 1990s to less than 20,000 in 2011-2012 (Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2014). When looking at the data in detail, it becomes apparent that although the number of Japanese students studying abroad to countries such as the United States has decreased, there has been a rise in the numbers of Japanese students choosing to study in countries in Latin America, Asia, and other countries that were not as popular in the past (Bradford, 2015). Nonetheless, since 2013, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been trying to reverse the negative outbound flow of Japanese students by implementing top-down policies targeted to developing *global jinzai* (global human resources), or Japanese students who have foreign language skills, communication skills, an understanding of cultures based on a Japanese identity, and the drive to become global leaders (MEXT, 2015).

MEXT, with its intentions of boosting the outbound flow of Japanese students, must address some of the challenges that Japanese youth face when deciding to study abroad. Despite the media and the public's blaming of Japanese youth for their inward-looking tendencies, there are practical reasons why Japanese students are not able to study abroad such as financial constraints, non-transferability of overseas credits, and Japanese job hunting and hiring practices that make studying abroad an opportunity cost for them (Bradford, 2015; Wang, 2017). Therefore, it may be more realistic, at least in the short term, for Japanese students to take advantage of internationalized curricula on university campuses that might help them become closer to MEXT's definition of global human resources even while remaining in Japan (Bradford, 2015). In other words, in addition to promoting

outward-bound programs to Japanese students, Japanese HEIs should also consider alternatives to studying abroad via internationalized curricula at home institutions that are aimed towards developing the global, international, and intercultural (GII) competencies of domestic and international students (Soria & Troisi, 2014; Urban & Palmer, 2014). As it stands, even in environments where international students abound on university campuses, such as in HEIs in the United States, Urban and Palmer (2014) claim that despite international students' strong desire to share their culture and background to domestic students, they are not engaged as cultural ambassadors who can contribute to the internationalization of higher education curricula.

An internationalized curricula is “a group of programs with an international name, content or perspective; it can therefore be used interchangeably with programs, subjects or courses” (Huang, 2006, p. 522). Internationalized curricula can also be informal cross-cultural opportunities on campus with individuals of different social, ethnic, or religious backgrounds that can broaden the minds of students who may, as a result of such encounters, find themselves equipped with GII competencies that are comprised of “knowledge about several dimensions of global and international cultures; appreciation of cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity; understanding of the complexities of issues in a global context; and comfort in working with people from other cultures” (Choudaha et al., 2014, p. 261). Choudaha et al. (2014) investigated the ways in which students could develop their GII competencies on campus through internationalization at home programs and discovered that interactions with international students, whether it be in the classroom or in more informal settings, contributed to students' self-reported development of GII competencies. Furthermore, they found that students who took advantage of the myriad of formal and informal internationalization at home activities reported the same and if not higher GII competencies than those who participated in study abroad programs.

MEXT's inbound policies of raising the number of international students in Japanese universities may internationalize Japanese HEIs if Japanese students are able to partake in opportunities that allow them to interact with international students. However, as it stands, many Japanese students are unable to prioritize such cross-cultural interactions because they are preoccupied with taking courses within their own discipline that are not necessarily oriented towards raising their GII competencies, they need to get other credentials, have to work at their part-time jobs, and are active in their social clubs or circles (Wang, 2017). Moreover,

they may find international students inaccessible as they are not regularly taking courses with international students. Finally, many Japanese students find that they must pay a special visit to places such as self-access learning centers or international student centers that often require them to overcome their inherent shyness that can prevent them from taking the first step towards becoming global human resources (Wang, 2017). It may also be necessary to consider that the internationalization of courses at HEIs in Japan may help alleviate the perceived burden of many Japanese people who envision communicating with non-Japanese as being unpleasant and as such would prefer to avoid it altogether (Kowner, 2002). Accordingly, in lieu of waiting for such cross-cultural exchanges to occur by the growing presence of international students on Japanese university campuses, who are often taking courses with other international students and socializing with other international students for the most part (Wang, 2017), it may be more effective if educators remain committed to fostering the development of global human resources by increasing formal and informal cross-cultural interactions between Japanese and international students. In this way, both Japanese and international students may benefit from strengthening their GII competencies and become global human resources who can benefit not only for Japan but also the world.

Research Design

This is a qualitative case study of 36 Japanese undergraduate students in their second year studying at a private university (see Table 1) and five foreign exchange students in their second or third year studying at a national university in the Kansai region (see Table 2). International student volunteers were recruited from a different university than the Japanese students in this study to ensure that the Japanese students did not have prior interactions with these international students.

Table 1. Profile of Japanese university students (2nd year)

Department	Number of participants
Business	6
Economics	3
Humanities	20
Law	7
Total	36

Table 2. Profile of non-Japanese university students (2nd or 3rd year)

Department	Country of Origin	Number of participants
Global Human Sciences	Taiwan	1
Global Human Sciences	Malaysia	1
Global Human Sciences	Bulgaria	1
Global Human Sciences	France	2
Total		5

The questionnaires in Japanese were emailed to the Japanese students approximately one week after the activity. The original questionnaire in English (see Appendix 1) was translated from English into Japanese by a professional translator who has been assisting the researcher with translation for several years. As the researcher is fluent in Japanese, she did the back translation from Japanese to English. International students were contacted via email several days after the activity and were asked to respond to the questionnaires in English within a week (see Appendix 2). The results were qualitatively analyzed using a thematic analysis methodology (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

The purpose of the study was to investigate the learning experiences as interpreted by the Japanese and non-Japanese students of a cross-border learning activity. The Japanese EFL students gave small group presentations that lasted approximately 10 minutes on Bulgaria, France, Malaysia, or Taiwan to international students from those countries in a Global Topics class. Prior to the visit from the international students, both groups of students wrote self-introductions of about two to three paragraphs in order to familiarize themselves with each other (see Appendices 3 and 4). The self-introductions from the international student visitors were intended to help the Japanese students write targeted questions that were asked to the international student visitors at the end of each presentation.

The following research questions were posed:

- (1) How did students feel about the preparatory phase of writing self-introductions to each other?
- (2) How did students feel about their participation and their peers' participation in this activity?
- (3) How did students think that this activity could be expanded for further cross-cultural interaction of Japanese and non-Japanese university students?

Findings

Out of the 36 Japanese students who replied to the questionnaires, 31 students reported that they did not have any interactions with international students. Among those Japanese students who did interact with international students, their cross-border interactions occurred about once a week in the self-access learning center where many of the international students spend their time socializing or helping Japanese students improve their English skills, in class with other international students, or communicating with international students on social networking sites such as Facebook. These findings support previous findings (Wang, 2017) that Japanese university students do not interact regularly with international students despite having access to them on campus, even if some of the Japanese students may represent those who are most aligned with MEXT's (2015) definition of global human resources due to their high English (foreign language) proficiency, study abroad experiences, and interest in learning about other cultures.

Setting the Stage for Cross-border Learning Activities

Prior to the in-class activity, it was emphasized to the Japanese students that the purpose of the self-introductions and the presentations was to demonstrate the spirit of *omotenashi* (selfless Japanese hospitality) by doing research on countries where the international student visitors were from, showing an interest in the international students' hobbies and background, and asking open-ended questions about their overall experiences (both positive and negative) in Japan. The preparatory phase was done via email, with students writing brief self-introductions in English to each other. The international student visitors shared their background and their reasons for wanting to study in Japan (see Appendix 3). The Japanese students, after reading the self-introductions from the international student visitors, wrote self-introductions and questions they had for the visitors about their countries or life in Japan (see Appendix 4). In this way, the international student visitors would have approximately two weeks to think about the questions from the Japanese students before visiting the Global Topics courses.

The Japanese students and international students indicated that the self-introductions were beneficial in setting the stage for the in-class activity. When the international students wrote self-introductions that included a myriad of details about their hometown, home country, and appreciation of Japanese culture, the Japanese students felt encouraged to reciprocate by writing detailed self-

introductions and asking targeted questions to the international students. In contrast, when the self-introductions from international students lacked specific details, it was difficult for the Japanese students to write insightful questions to the international student visitors because they could not focus their questions to the international students' unique interests and experiences. The Japanese and international students felt that the self-introductions could have been more beneficial if there were more follow-up opportunities for informal discussions and conversations between the Japanese and international students. Otherwise, for the international students, learning the names and hobbies of the Japanese students had little use. Unfortunately, given the time constraints of one class period (90 minutes), there was not enough time for informal discussions and conversations to ensue after the in-class presentation and Q & A activities. Nevertheless, as one international student said, the self-introductions "gave me opportunities to learn about the speakers, what kind of interest would be highlighted during the presentations, and made me feel part, for a short moment, of the class, as if I already had known about my classmates before." This familiarity via self-introductions made students feel as if they already knew the other group of students before even meeting them face-to-face, which may have made the transition to the in-class activity smoother.

Presentations beyond Stereotypes and Clichés

The Japanese students worked in small groups of three or four students, chose a country to research (Bulgaria, France, Malaysia, or Taiwan), and gave a group presentation that consisted of the background of the country (e.g., population, language, food, sightseeing spots, etc.), a sample itinerary of where they would want to visit if they were to have a chance to go to the country, and posed questions about the country (e.g., What do you think is the most delicious Bulgarian food?) and life in Japan (e.g., What is the biggest difference between Japan and Bulgaria?) to the international student visitors. The Japanese students said that the research that they conducted sparked their interest in actually going to that country and made them realize that their knowledge of foreign countries tended to be limited to clichés and stereotypes. Stereotypical thinking of foreign cultures is not uncommon as "the inherent comparison with foreigners [who are seen as being unable to understand their unique culture] makes many Japanese see their partners in a schematic and stereotypic way" (Kowner, 2002, p. 358). Many of the Japanese students felt that they should deepen their understanding of

various customs and cultures around the world before going abroad or when they were communicating with foreign residents in Japan who would certainly appreciate a richer understanding of foreign cultures that are just as unique.

Some groups, in addition to presenting on the overall characteristics of the country they chose, conducted research on a micro element of the culture such as desserts, fashion, or use of social networking services by analyzing the similarities and differences between Japan and the international students' country of origin. The Japanese students realized that the international students had the advantage of being the "experts" from abroad. Therefore, they tried to present a different perspective of the students' country and culture as seen by Japanese people, by comparing and contrasting cultures and customs from abroad with Japan. The Japanese students and international students were most impressed by the presentations that provided a critical analysis of the two countries because they could learn about another country while having a familiar point of reference of their own country.

The international students recognized the efforts of the Japanese student groups who gave presentations that went beyond stereotypes and presented information that could not be readily found on the internet. They mentioned that the critical analyses embedded in some presentations made them understand that what they often took for granted in their country may be perceived as strange or different from an outsider. According to an international student visitor, "being the one from the country, I have never paid attention on it, because I am accustomed to it, so seeing my country from foreigners' viewpoint is really a new and good experience." Another international student visitor said that the Japanese students "even mentioned the Bulgaria yogurt in Japan, and I think making a connection with Japan makes audiences feel closer to this country." Finding a common ground was helpful in building a bridge across borders, even if it may have been something as simple as having Bulgarian yogurt in Japan.

The Lives of International Students in Japan

Although the Japanese students had many questions about the students' country of origin, they were most intrigued by stories about the lives of the international students in Japan. For example, the Taiwanese student spoke about elements of culture shock when she found that Japanese people were comfortable with being naked in public baths or when getting dressed with their circle (club) members. Similarly, the Bulgarian student said she found it interesting that the liberal

attitude towards being naked in public baths contrasted with the more conservative attitude that women should not wear revealing clothes. Other stories about being told not to speak in English or in their native language on public transportation by Japanese people or reprimanded for being too loud as is often associated with foreigners in the minds of manner-conscious Japan that expects their citizens to behave within their shared social rules (Kowner, 2002), hinted at elements of discrimination that foreigners might experience in Japan when they spoke in a language other than Japanese that would highlight their “foreignness”.

For the international students, this cross-border opportunity gave them an opportunity to share how life was as an outsider in Japan. As one student said, “I like to tell Japanese the things that they take for granted are not general and even weird or difficult to accept for foreigners. And I also like to listen to the explanation or the way of thinking about these culture things for Japanese.” The Japanese students said that the stories made them think about how they might experience culture shock when going overseas. When the Malaysian student spoke about her experience learning Japanese in Malaysia and how her Japanese teacher would teach in Japanese only, the Japanese students said that they realized how hard the international students had to study Japanese even before coming to Japan. In a country like Japan where English is often taught in Japanese in order to pass grammar-based college entrance exams, the Japanese students were impressed that the Malaysian student was taught Japanese in Japanese, rather than in her native language from the very beginning of her study of Japanese as a foreign language.

Discussion and Implications

MEXT’s outbound strategy of promoting studying abroad is not an option that is readily available to many Japanese university students at this time (Wang, 2017). Similarly, MEXT’s inbound strategy of recruiting more international students to study at Japanese universities may also have limitations as Japanese students and international students do not have much cross-border interactions, even if they may be able to access such opportunities outside of class (Wang, 2017). Accordingly, these quantitative outbound and inbound strategies of raising the number global human resources in Japan could be complemented by qualitative approaches such as the internationalization of courses at Japanese HEIs (Soria & Troisi, 2014).

This study provided an example of how courses at Japanese HEIs can be

internationalized, by having Japanese students present to international students about their country of origin and asking questions about their life in Japan. On the whole, both groups of students felt that the cross-border activity gave them a chance to learn about their own culture from an outsider's perspective and another culture from an insider's point of view. Japanese and international students suggested other cross-border activities that could be implemented to internationalize the curricula even more. For example, the Japanese students thought that the international students could give similar presentations on how they see Japan and ask questions to the Japanese students about Japanese culture. Japanese and international students found that informal activities where students can play traditional games, participate in sports events, tell and explain folk tales from their cultures, and have an international food festival could deepen their appreciation of global cultures. Another recommendation by a Japanese student was to have the international students and Japanese students work together to prepare and give presentations on their cultures. This idea was also advocated by an international student who said, "instead of listening to their presentation, I think it would be more interesting if we have enough time to discuss or talk more to them, about when they do some research about our country, what they think about life in and outside Japan."

International students studying at Japanese universities are valuable human resources (Urban & Palmer, 2014) who can bring their unique cultural values and experiences into higher education learning environments. However, their presence alone will not guarantee interaction between them and Japanese university students. For international students to have an impact on the internationalization of Japanese higher education, it is important that they are integrated with Japanese students within and beyond classrooms, in meaningful and purposeful cross-cultural learning activities (de Wit, 2011; Glass & Westmont, 2014) that may inspire both parties to become cultural ambassadors who can be the bridge that allows for a deeper understand of cultures, practices, and customs around the world.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire for Japanese Students (English Version) Feedback on International Students Project for Global Topics

1. What year are you in university? _____ year
2. What department are you in university? _____
3. How often do you interact with international students? (like at theグローバルゾーン or using SNS)
 - a. 0 days a week
 - b. 1 day a week
 - c. 1-2 days a week
 - d. More than 2 days a week
4. If you interact with international students at least one day a week, what is the reason why you interact with them? [Choose all that are suitable.]
 - a. I go to the グローバルゾーン and talk with them.
 - b. I talk to them on SNS.
 - c. There are international students in my classes.
 - d. Other ()
5. How much time did you need to prepare for this project in total outside of class?
 - a. 0-1 hour
 - b. 1-2 hours
 - c. 2-3 hours
 - d. More than 3 hours
6. You read self-introductions from international students. How helpful was it for you to read the self-introductions *before* doing this project on July 10/13?
 - a. Very helpful
 - b. Helpful
 - c. No opinion
 - d. Somewhat helpful
 - e. Not helpful

If reading the self-introductions were helpful 😊, why were they helpful?.

If reading the self-introductions were *not* helpful 😞, why were they *not* helpful?

7. You gave presentations and listened to presentations from students on the countries the international students are from. What, if anything, did you think was interesting when preparing and listening to the presentations?

8. You asked questions and/or answered questions at the end of the presentations. Which questions and/or responses did you think were most interesting? Why?
9. Which group's presentation did you think was the best? Why?
10. How do you think this project could be improved?
11. The purpose of this project was for Japanese students to learn more about the countries of the international students. If international students were to visit the class again, what other activities/projects would you want to do with them?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix 2: Questionnaire for Non-Japanese Students
Feedback on International Students Project for Global Topics

1. What year are you in university? _____ year
2. What department are you in university? _____
3. You read self-introductions from Japanese students. How helpful was it for you to read the self-introductions *before* doing this project on July 10/13?
 - a. Very helpful
 - b. Helpful
 - c. No opinion
 - d. Somewhat helpful
 - e. Not helpful

If reading the self-introductions were helpful 😊, why were they helpful?.

If reading the self-introductions were *not* helpful ☹, why were they not helpful?

4. You listened to presentations from Japanese students on various countries. What, if anything, did you think was interesting when listening to the presentations?
5. You asked questions and/or answered questions at the end of the presentations. Which questions and/or responses did you think were most interesting? Why?
6. Which group's presentation did you think was the best? Why?
7. How do you think this project could be improved?
8. The purpose of this project was for Japanese students to learn more about your country. If you were to visit this class again, what other activities/projects would you want to do with Japanese students?
9. Do you have any other comments? If yes, please write them here.

Thank you for your time.

Appendix 3: Self-introduction from International Student Visitor from France

Hello Global Topics students at (private university in Kansai region)!

Meet (international student visitor), a French exchange student coming from near the Swiss border. My home town is called Evian-les-Bains. Maybe you've heard about it, it is where the mineral water Evian is from. Living nearby Geneva, Switzerland, where your professor used to work, I would go abroad almost every week! Before going to Japan, I travelled for vacation in different countries, such as Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Germany, and even Tunisia! Have you been abroad too? :). Among my other hobbies, I like meeting new people, languages and discovering new subjects. I've recently started learning Italian besides Japanese and English, which are my main studies, with Economics as minor. I started to give an interest in Japanese culture during childhood, especially the language and writing system, making Japanese as my one of studies when I entered university. Since I'm in exchange in (national university in Kansai region), I've tried many sorts of Japanese food, but my favorite one is undoubtedly *Katsudon*! I'm happy to participate in your class, and I'm looking forward to talking with you!

Appendix 4: Self-introduction from Japanese Students

Dear (name of international student visitors),

We heard that you will be visiting our class in July. We are looking forward to your visit. We would like to share a few things about ourselves.

My name is (name of student), and I am from Nishinomiya in Hyogo prefecture. I am majoring in history at (private university in the Kansai region) and am in my second year here. My favorite food is gyoza. Near the JR station “Settsu Motoyama”, there is “Osho of gyoza,” which has delicious gyoza.

My name is (name of student), and I am from Sanda in Hyogo prefecture. I am majoring in psychology at (private university in the Kansai region) and am in my second year here. I like tempura, croquette, and Caesar salad. My hobby is to play games, so I will buy many games in July such as Persona 5, and so on, because I will get a bonus from my job. And I like window-shopping in Nishinomiya-Gardens.

We have a few questions for you that we would like to ask you.

1. What Japanese kanji do you like the best?
2. What Japanese words do you like the best?
3. What will you give as a Japanese souvenir to your friends and family?
4. Have you had any positive or negative experiences that made you happy, surprised, or uncomfortable since you came to Japan?

If you could answer them on the day you come, we would be so happy.

We are looking forward to your visit. On the day of your visit, we will also give a short presentation of your country. It would be great if you could provide some feedback to us about our presentation.