

# Limits to the Internationalisation of Higher Education in Island Nations: Nationalism and foreign language education policy in universities in Japan and England

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**Abstract.** Japan and Great Britain are both island nations with long histories. Nationalists in both nations like to emphasise the things that separate members of ‘our’ nation from others across the sea, and this includes language. In the British case the arrogant assumption that ‘everyone else can learn English’ has led to a serious decline in the number of students who study foreign languages. In Japan, a certain amount of English is understood to be necessary for practical purposes, but nationalists warn against too much immersion in the language of an alien culture. These attitudes have helped to undermine the provision of advanced foreign language education that is necessary in a globalized world.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, foreign language teaching, higher education, England, Japan

## Introduction

Japan and Great Britain are both island nations with long histories. In both cases, the wall of water that surrounds them can be invoked by nationalists as a powerful symbol of what separates them from the rest of the world. In his survey of post-war relations with Europe, for example, political columnist Hugo Young characterizes Britain's image of itself as an island nation, separate from the rest of the world as "the mythology of the scepter'd isle" (Young, 1998, p.1). This is a reference to John of Gaunt's famous speech from William Shakespeare's *Richard II* (Act 2, scene 1) which describes the island of Great Britain as "This fortress built by Nature for herself." For nationalists like this, pride in their mother tongue is combined with an ambiguous attitude toward the languages of other nations. In the Japanese case, everyone recognizes the importance of learning foreign languages, especially English. However, some nationalists are concerned that there should not be “too much” English imported into the country lest it dilute or undermine the native Japanese language. In the British case, too many influential people in education dismiss foreign languages as unnecessary

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since the rest of the world can speak English. In the case of difficult foreign languages like Chinese and Japanese, this official indifference toward language instruction can almost lead to disastrous consequences, i.e. the closing down of key university departments that teach those subjects.

## **Part I. Nationalism and foreign language policy**

Writers on nationalism like Anderson (1983), Gellner (1983), and Hobsbawm (1990) have stressed the important link between national language and national identity in the development of the modern nation state. Starting in Europe, the modern nation states developed policies that would establish “standard” national languages within each country’s borders. Domestically, this entailed the marginalization of non-standard dialects and languages, like the Welsh language in the United Kingdom or the Ainu or Okinawan languages in Japan. National policies toward “the other,” i.e. the languages of foreign nations, also became a key issue. The study of foreign languages was essential for purposes of trade, information transfer, and diplomacy. However, national policy had to ensure that the foreign languages were kept in their place as secondary in importance to the mastery of a citizen’s “native” language.

### *Language policy and nationalism in the UK*

British nationalism has often been tied to the English language. However, centralized, coordinated policy has usually been lacking. Mass education only came to England after it was already a great power. Thus, as historian of education, Andy Green points out, “the need to forge national unity and consciousness through education was not a major factor in England” (Green, 1990, p.242). This fits well with the position of language policy expert, Dennis Ager who makes the following points.

British language policies prior to the late 1980s were . . . disparate and fragmented. Initiatives were taken officially, but often locally: by Local Education Authorities or agencies such as the churches (for education in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland), by local councils, the Post Office, the police and the Home Office immigration service, by the publishing industry (in dictionaries and reference works), without central coordination and usually without legislative frameworks (Ager, 1996, p.75).

The introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988 for the first time established national policy on language education in schools. However, controversy surrounded later amendments of the curriculum that allowed pupils to drop all foreign language study after the age of fourteen. Some schools were accused of encouraging some students to drop “difficult” subjects like foreign languages at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) level because they would probably get lower grades and therefore bring down the performance rating of the whole school. The GCSE results for

each school go toward placing the school on the national “league table” where all schools are compared. The accusation has often been made that the *quantity* of good grades (A,B,C) has become all important, encouraging schools to guide many pupils away from more challenging subjects like foreign languages where they might not achieve top grades. An unintended consequence of national policy, therefore, has been to reduce the number of children studying foreign languages to intermediate levels or above.

### *Language policy and nationalism in Japan*

The Japanese government has held for some time that improvements in English language aptitude are necessary for reasons of national interest. However, some Japanese linguists for example Suzuki Takeo of Keio University and Tsuda Yukio of Tskuba University oppose this policy because they want to resist “English language imperialism”, and they want to defend the Japanese language and culture. The title of one of Tsuda’s books on this topic is “a recommendation for bad English” (Tsuda, 2000). It argues that Japanese people should be proud of their inability to learn English properly.

These authors are concerned that Japanese people are over-eager to learn English and to absorb western culture. Suzuki (1999) places the problem in historical context by pointing out that when Japan was forced out of a state of self-imposed isolation at the end of the Edo period the new government decided that it was in its own interest to take knowledge and skills from the west. In order to do this it had to use the medium of the main languages of the west, namely English, German and French. The key point here for Suzuki is that these languages were not forced upon the Japanese by a colonial administration or a conquering army. Rather, they were seized upon by Japan’s elite as a way of furthering national development. Because these languages became a passport to development and power they came to be glorified by the Japanese people.

Following the Second World War the overwhelming influence of the United States on Japan’s rebuilding programme meant that the English language came to be emphasised at the expense of French and German. The post-war development of English as a global lingua franca furthered this trend so much so that the present day glorification of western culture is based on the medium of English. Both authors refer to the phenomenon of *eigo shinkô* or “English worship.” Tsuda refers to this glorification as a kind of illness and likens it to “Stockholm Syndrome,” the process by which the victims of a hijacking or a kidnapping can sometimes come to identify with and feel affection for their captors (Tsuda, 2000, pp.189-191). Both Suzuki and Tsuda believed that the glorification of a foreign culture goes hand-in-hand with an inferiority complex towards one’s own language and culture.

## Part II. Foreign language policy problems in England and Japan

In the case of foreign language education, what is possible at the higher education level is strongly influenced by policy and practice in the secondary schools that feed the universities. In the case of foreign languages taught widely in the secondary school system (like French and German in England, and English in Japan), universities can begin their programmes with the requirement that first-year students have already achieved an advanced level of the target language. However, if there are problems or shortcomings with the secondary school curriculum, these will have to be faced by language teachers at the tertiary level. Therefore a brief discussion of the situation regarding national policy in both countries is presented below.

### *The foreign language education problem in England*

One of the most serious problems facing those who try to promote foreign language education in England is the lack of a perceived need to learn foreign languages because “everyone speaks English.” Advocates also regret the fact that foreign languages have recently been made optional at the GCSE level, usually taken at the age of 16, meaning that any pupil who so desires it can “drop” foreign language study after the age of fourteen and never pick it up again. The GCSE was introduced in 1988 as a replacement for the preceding examination system that separated “academic track” pupils who took the Ordinary (‘O’) level examination from the majority of students who took the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE) examination. In foreign languages this was seen as an opportunity to correct some of the faults of the previous system. These faults were laid bare by an Her Majesty’s Inspectorate (HMI) report of 1977. It stated that much foreign language learning was “characterized by some or all of the following features; under-performance in all four language skills; the setting of impossible or pointless tasks for average (and in particular less-able) pupils and their abandonment of modern language learning at the first opportunity; excessive use of English and an inability to produce other than inadequate or largely unusable statements in the modern language; inefficient reading skills; and writing limited to mainly mechanical reproduction which was often extremely inaccurate.” (Jones, 1994, p.18) In a 2011 study of foreign language study, Lanvers found that “The assumption that English is enough, coupled with actions of tokenism to defuse precisely this accusation, presents a coherent rationalisation of a seemingly diffuse picture” (Lanvers, 2011, p.74).

### *The English language education problem in Japan*

In the teaching of numeracy and literacy and certain key subject areas like mathematics and science, the Japanese education system has received widespread praise. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the teaching of foreign languages, or rather English since this is the first language of choice in

almost all cases. Criticism of the methods used for teaching English is widespread (Aspinall, 2013). In addition to this, Japanese children and young people face some serious obstacles on the road to English proficiency. For example, they face the problem that there is little opportunity to use English outside the classroom. Most students studying English in Japan have very limited opportunities to practice English in “real” situations, i.e. where English is the appropriate method of communication between the student and another person.

There are also serious problems with the examination system. English entrance examinations to high school and university have often been blamed for encouraging students and their teachers to “study for the test.” Since these mostly test factual knowledge of written English, they do not encourage the study of English as a tool for communication. In fact students who spend time on English conversation practice instead of preparation are actually risking adverse consequences in terms of their chances to advance to a good school or university through the examination system (Aspinall, 2013, Chapter 5).

Problems with the formal English curriculum in schools and universities have led to complaints made by employers about the poor level of graduates’ English. Traditionally the main mouthpiece on education for Japan’s business community has been Keidanren (The Federation of Economic Organizations). A survey that it conducted of its member companies in 1999 found that their major concern from the perspective of industrial competitiveness was “the shortage of English language skills” of new recruits (Keidanren, 2000, p.19). Many also remarked upon the considerable time and cost they had to expend providing English language education themselves. Keidanren, therefore, published a report the following year that called for greater emphasis on communicative skills in language class in schools, for more native English speakers as teachers, and for smaller class sizes.

A flourishing private industry shows the inadequacy of English education in formal educational institutions. There is a massive, private *eikaiwa* industry in Japan upon which Japanese people spend each year roughly 260 billion yen (Aspinall, 2013, p.146). Anthropologist, Brian McVeigh describes some of the English taught here as “fantasy English” (McVeigh, 2000), but acknowledges that the success of the industry is due to the desire of many Japanese people to actually speak English and their recognition that they cannot learn this in the formal education system.

Since at least 1987, formal English language education policy has emphasized improving communicative competence. The Japanese Ministry of Education has authorized changes in the curriculum that introduce oral communication in English classes in high school (Ministry of Education, 2000). Reform efforts however have come up against the major problems. These problems include the cultures of learning and teaching in Japan, and the misuse of native-speakers of English.

### **Part III. Foreign language policy in higher education in England and Japan**

#### *Foreign language policy in higher education in the United Kingdom*

Periodically there have been concerns expressed in the United Kingdom about the lack of British students taking foreign languages at the post-18 level. Because of limitations of space this paper focuses on Japanese language and other foreign languages that are ‘difficult’ for English-speakers to learn.

If a student wishes to study Japanese as a major (single honors) subject of study at a British university he or she must choose from just seven universities: Edinburgh, Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester, Newcastle, Oxford and School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). A student wishing to study Chinese must choose from nine universities: Cambridge, Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle, Oxford, and Sheffield. Korean is available at two universities: SOAS and Sheffield. There are about 320 colleges and universities that offer higher education degrees in the United Kingdom. In comparison there are twenty-nine universities that offer Italian as a single honors subject and forty-three that offer German. In spite of the fact that higher education in the United Kingdom has greatly expanded in the last thirty years and in spite of the obvious economic and political importance of the East Asian region, there have been actual cuts in the provision of language and other courses related to the study of this area. During the 2000s, the Contemporary Japan Centre at the University of Essex, the Scottish Japan Centre at the University of Stirling, and the Institute for East Asian Studies at the University of Durham have all been closed down. Many of the academic and language-teaching staff connected to those institutions have been made redundant. The situation would probably be even worse were it not for the fact that some of the surviving departments, for example the Nissan Centre at Oxford University, were not funded by Japanese donations. Some of these donors could be forgiven the impression that British institutions will only study Japan if the Japanese pay for it.

This serious situation is largely due to the inability of area studies departments in British universities to compete on equal terms for funding with discipline-based departments, whether traditional disciplines like chemistry and history or newer, popular disciplines like media studies. The way that universities in the United Kingdom are funded has encouraged them to focus on those courses that either bring in large amounts of research funding, or are popular with large numbers of students that can be cheaply taught. This is a problem for area studies – especially departments that cover areas of the world with difficult languages. They cannot draw in the research funding that science and technology departments can, and difficult languages like Chinese, Japanese, or Arabic are expensive to teach because they require a low teacher-student ratio; a large number of contact hours; and also expensive travel budgets for students and staff.

Many people have noticed the serious lack of funding given to area studies departments dedicated to Asia and the Middle-East. Hugh Cortazzi, who was British ambassador to Japan from 1980 to 1984' wrote an opinion article for a Japanese newspaper in which he criticized the decision to close the Institute of East Asian Studies at Durham. In regard to this decision he made the following remarks.

The decision to close the Durham department was particularly deplorable. University authorities blamed the Higher Education Funding Council [HEFCE], which responded that it was up to the university. The university informed institutions with which it had exchanges in Japan and China of its decision before informing staff! Even worse was its failure to consult with donors to the department, including the Japan Foundation, the Daiwa Anglo-Japanese Foundation, the Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation and NSK Ltd. (*Japan Times*, July 30, 2003)

One year later Education Minister Charles Clarke finally succumbed to intense pressure relating to the crisis in East-Asian studies and in other vital areas that were under threat from the new higher education funding scheme, and ordered a major review of some key subject areas that included the teaching of the Japanese and Chinese languages.

When Clarke announced this review he recognized that the government policy of encouraging individual universities to focus more sharply on their particular research strengths had had detrimental effects in some key areas. Therefore, it was necessary for the government to intervene to protect subject areas which may be in the national interest to preserve. He said "any sensible government needs to take a long-term view of what our students are studying and whether we have enough graduates in the subjects needed to help our economy and society thrive." (*Guardian*, December 1, 2004).

The review announced by Clarke was led by Sir Gareth Roberts and issued a report in June 2005. In relation to Japanese and Chinese studies, the report concluded that government intervention was required because these subjects were strategically crucial to the nation but were very vulnerable to closure because of the small size of departments. In order to provide more funds for key area-studies centres the review announced that the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) were putting forward £22million over a period of five years to be shared among centres focusing on: 1) The Arabic Speaking World; 2) China; 3) Japan; and 4) Eastern Europe. As a result of this initiative the White Rose East Asia Centre was established in 2006 as a joint venture of the University of Leeds and the University of Sheffield.

### *Foreign language policy in higher education in Japan*

In Japan, the question is often posed as to why professors do not teach more communicative English, or other kinds of useful English that can be used when students graduate and enter the world of work. The question thus posed assumes that Japanese professors who teach English language lessons in university see it as part of their job to prepare students for the use of English in practical situations. A brief perusal of the English lessons taught in almost any Japanese university and the people who teach them will soon reveal that that is simply not the case. Every university student in Japan must take a certain number of credits in English and usually another foreign language. This means that foreign-language instruction takes up a large proportion of any university timetable, and requires a lot of people to teach it. As in any other university system, Japanese academic faculty gain employment and tenure due to their standing as scholars in a particular academic field. This academic, scholarly outlook, however, can have negative repercussions when a professor is called on to teach a more practical subject like communicative English. The following passage, written by a Japanese and foreign professor in collaboration, makes the point well.

In Japan, to an even greater degree than in the West, scholarship is regarded as expertise on a narrowly defined subject, especially subjects associated with intelligentsia, philosophy, classical literature, anthropology or linguistics. The more classical and specialized the area of research, the greater prestige, for though it is generally assumed that 'anyone' can become competent in a foreign language; not just 'anyone' can comprehend Wordsworth or Shakespeare. (Kelly & Adachi, 1993, p.161)

Japanese professors regard highly specialised research into narrow academic topics as the most important part of their work. Problems arise from the fact that communicative foreign-language teaching is looked down upon as an academic pursuit by professors who hold this view. Not only were they not concerned with the lack of practical application of their lectures, they were actually proud, since the highly specialised, academic nature of their classes made them distinct from *eikaiwa* or *senmon gakko* classes. The well-known expert on language education, Yoshida Kensaku, told me (Interviewed in 2004) that when another professor observed his class and saw that students were involved in group discussions, he told Yoshida that 'you are not doing your job!' The more traditional idea articulated here was that it was the job of the professor to lecture the students and control every aspect of the learning process. Yoshida also said that professors like this are the old breed, and younger ones are often more flexible in their teaching. This is another reminder that the obstacles in the way of communicative language instruction in Japan's educational institutions are not insurmountable. Indeed, many Japanese professors and university administrators currently have to deal with the conundrum summarised below by anthropologist, Greg Poole following his analysis of discussions going on within the small university that was the subject of his ethnographic study:



Given that the goals of English instruction at university are often advertised as being to offer employability and credentialization, should not universities be concerned with training and hiring English professors with backgrounds in language teaching, business communication, and applied linguistics rather than literature, cultural studies and theoretical linguistics? (Poole, 2010, p.72)

It still remains the case, however, that the majority of Japanese tenured professors who are teaching the subject marked as 'English' on the timetable are members of the latter group, not the former.

It would be unfair to accuse all linguistics or literature specialists of failing to engage with the needs of their students for good and relevant English language education. An increasing number certainly prepare and teach good communicative English classes and are happy to separate the teaching part of the job from the research part. But even when this happens, most Japanese universities still fail to teach a useful English curriculum to their students because of the lack of coordination that goes on in the majority of English curricula. It is not uncommon, to cite just one example from many, to find the same student sitting in an 'English Writing I' class and an 'English writing III' class during the same semester, even though normal curriculum design would require the completion of one stage before proceeding to the next. In Japan it is common to find the attitude among university professors, especially senior ones, that what they do in their classroom or lecture theatre is their own private business and that it is only natural that each professor should want to teach their own specialty in their class regardless of what their colleagues are doing in theirs (Venema, 2007). The same applies to the syllabus they write for each course. The actual content of the syllabus is also considered to be their own private realm and cannot be criticised. It has been argued that Japanese modes of politeness and status make it extremely difficult for one professor to criticise the teaching of another (Suzuki, 1978, pp.138-39). Since tenured professors are chosen based on their research record, not their teaching experience, it is highly unlikely that the group of individual professors responsible for teaching English will happen by chance to teach a balanced and coordinated curriculum. Also, efforts to introduce meaningful class evaluations have in most cases been successfully resisted, meaning that even if curricula became more coordinated there is no mechanism for evaluating how they are delivered in practice.

The large number of classes that are taught by part-timer instructors in many private universities is also an obstacle in the way of curriculum reform, as is the preponderance of short-term contracts for many foreign-language instructors (Kirk, 2001). In this atmosphere it is extremely difficult to organise a coherent curriculum involving all English classes, and it is understandable that no serious effort is usually made. However, the fact must be added that in some universities coordinated curricula have been successfully introduced. One example of this is in Ehime University, a national university' where an English Education Centre (EEC) was established to coordinate English teaching

across the university (Blight, 2003). In this case opposition from English teaching faculty who saw their autonomy threatened was overcome.

There are also non-Japanese nationals employed at Japanese universities, the majority of whom are there to teach language or some aspect of their native culture, and many are only partially integrated into the day-to-day running of their institution. After 1982, newly hired *gaikokujin kyōshi* at national universities were limited to five-year contracts or less. Universities in the private sector were never bound by the legal restrictions that full-time staff could not be foreign, but there also the majority of non-Japanese faculty are hired on limited-term contracts, usually three years or five years, leading to the ‘musical chairs’ phenomenon of foreign teachers in a certain region rotating around the jobs available at the universities in that area.

McVeigh has written about the role of the native-speaker language teacher in Japanese universities in a way that will resonate with anyone who has experience of being in this position:

At some universities non-Japanese language instructors are viewed as a cure-all for whatever ails the institution. ‘They expect miracles just because I’m a native speaker’ quipped one British instructor. All too often non-Japanese instructors are regarded as ‘energizers’, entertainers, activators of students, ‘cultural ambassadors’, living tokens of some idealized and stereotypical ‘foreign’ culture held up as a mirror of Japan. (McVeigh, 2000, p.85)

The first experience of teaching at a Japanese university can contain many surprises for the Western-educated academic. The author arrived for his first teaching job at a major national university, having never taught at the university level before in any country. Instead of receiving orientation related to the required teaching, he was simply told by the head of the English department “you have taught English in high schools in Japan, so you don’t need any advice about what to do.” That was absolutely right: the conditions in the classroom were almost identical. Most of the rooms the author taught in were copies of high school classrooms with a podium for the teacher to stand on, a blackboard, and the students sitting at individual desks arranged in rows. Class sizes for most compulsory English classes were the same too: between forty and fifty students per class. Also, the level of spoken English was uniformly poor or non-existent, just as it had been in high school. He had the same advantages that he had had at high school too: the generally good behaviour of the students and their very high English reading ability. Life was also made easier as a new teacher by the fact that first- and second-year compulsory English classes shared a common textbook. The author was surprised to see that the book was a Cambridge University Press text designed for ‘false beginners’, the euphemism used in Japan and other Asian countries for students with good knowledge of the written language, but very low competence at the spoken language. He associated texts like that with *eikaiwa* schools, not with prestigious universities.

## Conclusion

This paper has considered examples of the effects, both intended and unintended, of nationalism on foreign language education policy in the higher education sectors in England and Japan. The majority of citizens in these countries are reared in a monolingual community, and for many of them mastering a foreign language can be a daunting challenge. This can be so without the interference of some members of the educational, political and cultural elites who claim that there is no need to learn any foreign language, and in fact that they should be proud of their monolingualism. In this way nationalism can have a detrimental effect on the curricula of universities in the global age. Young people in both nations would benefit from being exposed to more bilingual and multilingual role models in all levels of the education system. This would show them that mastering a foreign language is actually no threat to their sense of cultural identity.

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