



Internationalization at Universities – True or False

# If All Lessons at Japanese Universities Were Conducted in English...

– Globalization Viewed Skeptically

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## The Illusion of Global Human Resources

There is currently an atmosphere in and around Japanese universities of innocently agreeing to what is termed the “globalization” of universities. Since even someone as obtuse as myself can manage to sense it, I think that this atmosphere must be totally pervasive.

Certainly, if you pay a little attention and take a look around you can see that, in the spaces where discourse on the role of universities takes place, the problem of globalization is being raised repeatedly. Unfortunately, however, you rarely come across an opinion that’s worth listening to.

On one hand, when views on globalization are communicated from within a university, in most cases it is either by the people that represent that university, or by those responsible for its globalization. Naturally, there is no way that messages issued by people in these kinds of positions are going to disagree with government policy. It is inevitable for the words that reach us to be boring ones that will never resonate in our hearts.

However, on the other hand, it is also possible to find people from outside of the universities speaking publicly about the universities and their globalization. What particularly stand out recently, are the comments made about this problem by people with titles like “business executive,” “management consultant,” “entrepreneur” and so on. Maybe it’s that these people—who have been (or at least, believe themselves to have been) reasonably successful in business—



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have now decided to qualify themselves to talk about universities.

Education is a topic with a low threshold, which anyone can say something about. But—and maybe this is the layman’s forte—it is not uncommon for the opinions of people from outside the universities who bring up the problem of globalization, while not boring, to converge into some bizarre and fanciful proposal based on an elementary misconception of the facts. (“G-type & L-type universities” is the classic example of this.) And it also seems like these kinds of proposals are causing sympathetic vibrations amongst the vague misunderstandings that are being supported within the government.

But regardless of whether they come from within the universities or are the opinions of laymen positioned externally, the viewpoints of people who agree with globalization do not differ at all in the sense that they are hoping that Japan’s universities will turn into some kind of modern-day magic lamp. When Aladdin rubs the magic lamp, a magical genie appears and grants his wishes. In the same way, by globalizing the universities and turning everything sideways (i.e. turning vertical Japanese script into horizontal English text), huge numbers of genies—so-called “global human resources”—will come spewing out of the universities to help the government and Japan’s corporations and so on...it’s a little creepy, but there are definitely more than a few of people who visualize the ideal university in this kind of way.

Of course, it’s just fantasy to think that these global human resources are going to come gushing naturally out of the universities just by globalizing them superficially; and increasing the number of classes taught in English and using huge amounts of tax money on projects to scrape together foreign students in the name of globalization support is just a pure and simple waste of money.

Rather, if all we need to do is make these so-called global human resources easily obtainable, and if the government is prepared to spend taxes on achieving this goal, then instead of trying to force Japanese people to study “useable” “living” English—argh...what horrible words—I think that it would be much more efficient, more constructive, and more beneficial to the average Japanese person living in Japan (although countries not friendly to Japan would probably criticize us and call it “colonialist”) if we devised some kind of system that made it so that foreigners have no other choice but to acquire an advanced level of Japanese proficiency, and then forced that system on other countries. Because if the current situation in which the Japanese language is not understood outside of Japan were rectified, and Japanese speakers ceased to be a rarity, then Japanese society, and the lives of Japanese people, should achieve a relatively “global” character even by just sitting quietly and doing nothing. (Of course, I don’t think that this kind of thing would ever happen in reality...) In the current sense of the word, “globalization” is nothing more than a consequence of educational and diplomatic defeatism.



## I Tried Teaching A Class in English, But...

This year it will be 16 years since I became a full-time university teacher, but so far I have not had any experience getting involved with campus governance. I have watched the “aerial battle” of university reform tepidly, from my carefree position in which, in return for not being given the right to a voice, I am also never held responsible. As far as I was concerned, globalization was a discussion from another world.

Nevertheless, this “atmosphere” of the affirmation of globalization has gradually become thicker and thicker, even around a faculty member of such carefree standing as myself, and since a few years back I began to feel a little suffocated.

Depending on how things go, in the near future, maybe it will reach a stage where even the kind of subject that I’m in charge of teaching—the main subject I’m in charge of is the “Philosophy” of what was the old “General Education”—in other words, maybe even subjects that settle like dregs at the bottom of the curriculum will be forced to conduct at least part of our teaching in English? Or maybe, it will become such that we will be at a disadvantage if we don’t have a track record of teaching classes in English...? I can’t seem to get these kinds of unpleasant foreboding feelings out of my head. (I have an acquaintance who consoled me by saying, “It’s OK. If these university reforms go ahead, subjects like philosophy will be re-organized and snuffed out before the question of whether you should teach classes in English or not even becomes a problem,” but I’m afraid that didn’t make me feel much better.)

I thought to myself that now was the time to make myself the alibi of “I tried teaching a class in English,” before somebody else ordered me to. So, and mainly with this impure motive, I decided to carry out an experiment on a class not taken by many students. For one period a week, and for just half a semester, I actually conducted lectures—on the old “General Education” directed at 3rd year students and above—in English. The topic I set was Modern French Thinking. If universities are to become truly globalized, then it should become such that not only the top-selling “hard sciences” that catch people’s eye, but also the plain, slow-selling “soft sciences” have to be lectured in English too.

I won’t go into detail here, but from actually experiencing it I found out that teaching classes in English requires a great deal of time and effort, both in terms of preparation and performance in the classroom. I started preparing for it 6 months before the class began. Even so, I still ended up pulling an all-nighter every week the night before the class, and in the classroom it was a continual process of trial and error. It is a fact that this experiment was so painful for me—lacking either resolve or high aspirations, and having only the impure motive of trying to create an alibi—that I felt like I wanted to run away part way through.



Still, I'm sure that I also gained more than a few things from the ordeal of actually standing up in front of the students and speaking English. I think that it was worth the hardship...because it allowed me to see clearly that increasing the number of classes conducted in English is not only unnecessary, but also even harmful, and that it is nothing more than a waste of Japan's educational resources—which cannot be said to be at all abundant to begin with.

### **There is No Way They Are Going to Understand Something in English When They Don't Understand it in Japanese**

There is one thing that I realized when I saw the reaction of my students soon after I started teaching my class in English. It is that there is no way that Japanese students are going to understand something they hear in English when they don't even understand it when listening to it in Japanese.

I had a chance to explain the same content that I discussed in my class in English to one of the same students again, at another opportunity, in Japanese. I had a feeling that my explanation in English hadn't gotten through, and when I checked with the individual in question, I got the answer of "I don't understand." So, I made use of another class that the student was attending and tried reiterating the same thing again in Japanese. (Since a long way back, I can't help but wonder why, at times like this, students don't raise their voice and say that they don't understand.)

However, even after having it explained to them in Japanese, it seems that this student was still incapable of comprehending. What the student had to say was, "I understand more or less what you (Mr. Shimizu) are saying both in English and Japanese, but I don't understand clearly *what* you're saying...either in English or in Japanese." (!?)

It was then that I arrived for the first time at the simple and irrefutable fact that, regardless of language ability, it is impossible for the level of discourse at which Japanese students can listen and understand in English to exceed the level at which they can listen and understand in Japanese.

Furthermore, by acknowledging this fact, the next two points should also become irresistibly clear. The first point is that the level of classes conducted in English at a given university will never surpass the level of classes conducted in Japanese, and that as the percentage of classes in English increases, the average level of quality of the classes offered by that university will decrease in proportion to that increase. The second is that, in order to overcome this obstacle to conducting classes in English, a special effort is necessary on the part of the students themselves. These two points are an immediate consequence of the fact stated above. Although here should be nothing so obvious, I carelessly failed to realize this until I actually did the class and saw the reaction of the students.



## A Problem That Comes Before English: How Do We Get Them To Study?

Further still, assuming the two points above, we can derive the following type of conclusion. The expansion of classes taught in English—and therefore the globalization of the universities—has a certain distinct limit to it, and we must consider that classes in English will stop at something that is only for a special minority.

For some time, Japan's universities have all envisaged the enrollment of foreign students, and have held lectures for some subjects (for example, Japanese Affairs) in English. There is absolutely no problem with this arrangement because, in general, the objective of establishing these kinds of subjects is not so much for the purpose of education, but rather as a “sales pitch” towards foreign students, who are perceived as “customers.”

However, if universities are wishing for overall globalization, then circumstances will evidently differ. Because, to purposely make the majority of students follow the detour—because if it's the same content, it's clearly more efficient to explain it in Japanese—of taking classes in English, and to achieve some kind of benefit that is greater than that of them taking classes in Japanese, you have to get the students to study. Regardless of what language is used in class, as long as students don't study then globalization will never be achieved in reality.

That said, as indicated by the results of the various surveys that have been conducted over the past few years, the majority of Japanese university students these days are not in the habit of studying, and take it for granted that they can get through without it. Getting students like this—for whom study time outside of class is essentially zero—to study is going to be an incredibly difficult task. This is because, in order to educate students who will never be lured into studying if left alone, we will have to procure an enormous amount of fresh resources (i.e. manpower) and rob the students of their route of escape. Undoubtedly, it won't be until they are placed under an environment like this that students will start to study, classes run in English will produce results, and globalization will be realized.

Without sufficient educational resources, there is no way that globalization will happen. For example, it is generally considered that university lecturers setting frequent tests, asking students to hold discussions during class, setting homework, making students write papers and so on are all effective means of getting students to study. Certainly, whether they like it or not, students are surely spurred into studying by these measures. However, in the case of the humanities, if you carry out such tests then they will at least require you to grade papers. If you are thinking of making an effective discussion take place, then you have to get the students to read the necessary literature, and check in advance whether they have grasped the content (because there is no way that students



are going to passively accept to read and try to understand the content of that literature just from being ordered to read it.) If you make students hand in homework, then somebody will have to run their eyes over it (because the moment they realize that the homework they have submitted is not being checked, then a tremendous cutting of corners will begin.) Naturally, if you decide to have students write a paper, you have to make repeated and detailed comments about topic selection, writing structure, sources they should reference and so on, and then on top of that you have to read and correct their manuscript (in order to prevent plagiarism and maintain quality.) The educational resources required for globalization are human resources: the manpower needed for feedback and supervision.

Of course, many universities are unable to spur students into studying through methods such as these, because the human resources available to them are so lacking. Until now, Japan's universities have defined themselves as places for those who want to study to do so under their own initiative, and have concentrated their educational resources into high-level support for the small number of students who will study without being supervised. The cost of obtaining these educational resources has been covered by the tuition fees, which the majority of students—with their low motivation to study—continue to pay silently into the university. Especially in the humanities faculties of private universities, where the number of teaching staff is relatively low in comparison with the number of students; if they don't work under the premise that a large part of the student body is made up of passive students who have no intention of "getting their money's worth," then it becomes difficult for them even to support the small number of ambitious students.

In contrast to many of Japan's universities, a number of world-renowned American universities have created environments that force students to study, through plentiful human resources that take on the role of supplementary educational duties (as typified by teaching assistants) and through the personnel costs needed to secure these human resources. In order to achieve the overall globalization of universities it is necessary to imitate this method of doing things, but in reality, there's no doubt that the number of universities that can actually imitate it will stop at a very small minority.

That said, as things stand currently, the right for universities to move ahead in a different direction from that indicated by the government may not even be recognized. And, if turning their backs on globalization is not acceptable, then only one option remains for the universities: to "pretend" to be globalized universities. What I mean by "pretending to be globalized" is to proceed along the difficult path of, on one hand, keeping the large number of students who are passive towards study within the university as a source of (financial) nourishment, while preparing and maintaining the study environment as necessary for the benefit of the small fraction of students who actively raise their hands and seek guidance—classes conducted in English are, originally, for



students like these anyway—while on the other hand, wearing the external appearance of a university that distributes educational resources equally amongst all of its students, in other words, the appearance of a modern, progressive and smart research / educational institution that is “open to the world.”

All of Japan’s universities will probably have no choice but to follow a path like this, and in actual fact it seems that many universities have already begun to follow this kind of path, a little at a time.

Of course, this is something that can’t be helped. As the ratio of students advancing to study at university rises, the proportion of the student body occupied by students who study under their own initiative will inevitably shrink to reflect that. The diversification of campuses in terms of academic ability and motivation to study is unavoidable.

But what awaits us along this steep and narrow road? What kind of new wounds will be inflicted on Japan’s higher education system—which has been run around for decades and incurred a great deal of damage, though the proposals for university reform that seem to be recommended off-the-cuff by the Central Council for Education, and by haphazard and paternalistic university administration—by the globalization support projects being pushed forward by Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. I just can’t help feeling that in the universities of the coming age we will find dry, stark landscapes, and the abandoned ruins of knowledge.

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