II

Globalising Japanese History:
The Significance of Teaching in English in Japanese Universities

ROBINSON, Eleanor
Aichi Prefectural University

Abstract

Teaching lessons on Japanese history in English to students at Japanese universities may at first seem useful only for classes geared towards international students in Japan who are not yet familiar enough with the Japanese language to be able to sit regular Japanese classes on the subject.

However, this paper attempts to debunk this narrow concept and suggests that Japanese history courses in English for native Japanese students are also relevant in today’s “Globalising” society. The opportunity to study Japanese history in English will provide students with a new and refreshing perspective on the subject.

This paper seeks to examine the relevance and benefits of Japanese history courses in English. One key aspect of this topic is the issue of historical memory, or, historical memory loss. Why are some characters or events in history remembered, while others are forgotten?

In addition, some Japanese history scholars of Japanese nationality are unfortunately not always familiar with the English language. This is not a criticism, however: it merely notes that thus far there has often been a necessary tendency for them to focus on reading old Japanese language documents and source materials. In an in-depth examination of Japanese historical details, there is perhaps not always the time, resources, or necessity, for Japanese history scholars of Japanese nationality to access English language sources or produce their own research findings in the English language. In today’s “Globalising” society however, this current standard is becoming insufficient.

Therefore, this paper seeks to demonstrate the future possibilities for Japanese history education via the medium of the English language. What new nuances can the English language provide for Japanese history education?
Keywords: Japanese History, English Education, Historical Memory, Globalisation, New Perspectives.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper originated in a presentation given by the author at the JACET Chubu Forum in June 2012. The Forum considered the concept of studying the Liberal Arts through the English language. For the author, this idea is somewhat different to the basic concept of Content-based Learning in an EFL context. Although it can perhaps be incorporated into a Content-based EFL classroom situation, it is more than that. In studying the Liberal Arts through English, the English language itself should not be the goal. Rather, it should be the 'tool'. One of the best ways to learn anything is to be able to forget that one is actually learning it. In other words, many students may feel daunted by the prospect of having to study hard at a subject, of having to memorise facts, or in the case of language studies, memorise vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, etc. It is far better to become familiar with the target language through 'natural consequences', i.e. through usage of the language itself. Therefore, by studying a subject, for example within the Liberal Arts field, through the target language, a student should become more concerned with the content of the course of study; History, Geography, Literature. The notion that they are learning a language thus becomes secondary. This is one reason why study abroad is recommended to students. By becoming an international student in the country of the target language, the student is required to use the language as merely a 'tool' for communication.

This paper seeks to examine the relevance and benefits of Japanese history courses in English at Japanese universities for both international students and Japanese nationals. One of the first questions that comes to mind on discussion of this topic is why should a Japanese national bother to study Japanese history via the English language when they can, perhaps much more easily, study the subject in their own language, Japanese. Undoubtedly, the subject of Japanese history itself is much more widely written about and recorded in the Japanese language. However, this paper attempts to provide persuasive evidence for, and the significance of, studying Japanese history via the medium of English.
This research is still in its early stages, however, several areas for consideration become apparent when examining a topic such as this, and this paper will discuss each aspect accordingly.

- Teaching and Learning English in Japan
- Globalisation and Japan
- Current Japanese History Studies in Japan
- The Possibility of a New Perspective

2. TEACHING AND LEARNING ENGLISH IN JAPAN

For a native English speaker in Japan, teaching English has, in the past, been considered a relatively lucrative activity. That, however, now seems to be changing with the ever-increasing number of native speakers entering Japan, and for the Japanese student of English this can be considered a good thing, because there are increasing opportunities to study the language. However, along with the influx of native speakers comes the concern regarding quality of education. Not every native speaker can necessarily teach their native language. Explaining grammar, teaching techniques for remembering vocabulary, etc.; the teaching of language naturally requires a particular set of skills like any other form of teaching. Native specialists of English language teaching in Japan are naturally required to have degrees in English literature, linguistics and philology, or some form of formal T.E.F.L. qualification, such as the Cambridge certificate¹, etc. In the same way, teaching the Liberal Arts in English naturally requires specialists in the liberal arts subject being taught. Therefore, a course on history in English requires an instructor whose field of speciality is in history.

There is a somewhat unfortunate tendency in Japan to see the English language as 'cool'. Indicative of this is the prolific use of 'English' in advertising, design, such as T-shirts, and other areas where the Roman script is used merely for aesthetic purposes.

In addition, Japanese people who study the English language are often admired and treated by society as somehow 'special'. A kind of unnecessary 'elitism' has grown up around the study of the English language. There appears to be a marked attitude that English and those that can use it are somehow special. However, English is simply
a 'tool' for the purpose of communication. In order to procure a good job after graduation for example, a student will naturally require other skills. Indeed, it is the author's experience that many language study graduates often feel disappointment on entering the job market. Many complain that they wish they had studied a more practical field like Business Studies in order to prepare themselves for the world of work. This is where studying the Liberal Arts in English will come into practicality.

3.1. GLOBALISATION AND JAPAN

For a country that spent roughly 250 years in almost complete isolation, then from around the 1850s onward, moved toward a policy of opening up the nation to the world, Japan is in a very interesting position in terms of its current policy regarding "Globalisation". Some might argue, with a degree of correctness that Japan is still in a form of isolation in certain aspects. However, the country has gone from almost complete isolation to a more open door policy in a relatively short period of time. Initially, Japan was 'forced' to open with the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853-4 and though reluctant at first, it has gradually come to recognise the benefits of an open door policy. Going from the small fan-shaped island trading port of Dejima in Nagasaki, to becoming the world's third largest global economy is no small feat. Now, there are a tremendous number of Japanese multinational corporations; for example, Sony, Panasonic, Toyota, etc, with bases in countries all over the world. There are also growing numbers of foreign corporations investing in Japan.

The situation at present is such that a growing number of Japanese corporations require their employees to use English during office hours. Companies, such as the Internet services company, Rakuten Inc., and the clothing brand, Uniqlo's Fast Retailing Co. Ltd., are two good examples of this.

In addition, Japanese culture is also spreading all over the world. The famous 'Hello Kitty' name is now a global phenomenon, and the 'anime' and 'manga' culture, which was once the territory of the Japanese 'otaku' (nerd/geek) is fast spreading in popularity throughout the world. The catchphrase, 'Cool Japan', which derives from former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair's concept of 'Cool Britannia', is recently being touted by organisations such NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation. The phrase was coined in 2002, and has helped the Japanese government promote various aspects
of Japanese culture around the world.

3.2. THE GLOBAL 30 INITIATIVE

In the field of education, however, the pace of globalisation is still a little slow. Nevertheless, there are gradual moves toward globalisation in this sector too. In 2009, the Japanese government established the Global 30 Initiative. By 2020, the Japanese government aims to have 300,000 international students studying in Japan and they plan to increase the number of Japanese students travelling abroad for study purposes. According to the MEXT G30 website, as of 2011 there were only 21,429 international students studying in Japan. The website gives an indication of the Japanese government's commitment:

"13 (sic.) universities were selected by the Japanese Government to be a member of the 'Global 30' Project.

"These selected universities aim to nurture internationally competent individuals by creating an academic environment where international and Japanese students can learn from one another and build lasting international bonds that will propel them into the international scene."3

The thirteen universities are Tokyo University, Kyoto University, Osaka University, Nagoya University, Tohoku University, Kyushu University, Keio University, Doshisha University, Waseda University, Meiji University, Ritsumeikan University, Sophia University and Tsukuba University.

The Initiative has come under criticism in some areas, not least in terms of the number, which was originally expected to be thirty, hence the name ‘Global 30’, but which in reality turned out to be only thirteen. Some critics have been quite scathing, suggesting that the Japanese government is not doing enough. Writing for the Mainichi Newspaper, David McNeill told his readers in December 2010 that,

"The government’s cost-cutting panel, which is trying to slash costs in a bid to trim the country’s runaway public debt, voted on Nov. 18 to abolish and ‘restructure’ the Global 30 project."4

Regardless of any criticism, however, the Japanese government will inevitably have no choice in furthering its policies of globalisation in the field of education. The demand is becoming ever higher because of the nature of the developing international
free trade economy, of which Japan is a vital part.

3.3 STUDYING LIBERAL ARTS THROUGH ENGLISH

Thanks to the general movement in Japan toward further globalisation along with government policies such as the Global 30 Initiative, the study of liberal arts through the English language is becoming more common and more necessary at universities across the Japanese archipelago.

One example of this particularly is in the field of Management studies. Although still in the early stages, some Japanese companies are gradually beginning to appreciate the concept of employees who hold an MBA.

Doshisha University in Kyoto city is a private university that is well known for its international connections. Its famous founder, Niijima Jo, or as he is otherwise known, Joseph Hardy Neesima, travelled to the United States and graduated from Amherst College in Massachusetts, before establishing his now world-renowned university.

Doshisha University established its Business School with a Japanese MBA programme in 2004. In 2009, it began a Global MBA (GMBA) which provides classes entirely in English. The majority of students enrolled on the GMBA are predominantly international students from various nations around the globe.

Doshisha University is one of the Global 30 members and a look at the university website shows that there are a number of other programmes of study available within the field of Liberal Arts. Doshisha’s Institute for Liberal Arts, for example, is divided into three clusters: 1) Japanese Society and Global Culture, 2) Japanese Business in the Global Economy, and 3) Japanese Political Science and Global Studies.

Within the first cluster of Japanese Society and Global Culture, Doshisha provides a number of classes that are history related. They are: 1) Introduction to Japanese History, and 2) The Emperor System in Modern Japanese History. However, these courses do appear to be largely geared toward international students studying at Doshisha. This clearly demonstrates Doshisha’s efforts toward helping to increase the number of international students in Japan as stipulated under the Global 30 Initiative. However, the necessity is to provide courses in Japanese History to students that do not focus on what nationality the student is. An off-shoot of this idea may even help to uproot the current notion of “us and them” that sadly still prevails in Japan.
There may, at first, seem to be a difficulty in putting international students who have no background in Japanese history in a class with Japanese students who have gone through Japanese history classes at elementary, junior high and/or high school. However, by structuring a course appropriately, this difficulty can be overcome. In addition, unlike elementary, junior high and/or high school history lessons, university history courses should not be just about rote-learning and memorising names, events and dates. Rather, they should provide an opportunity for analysis of history, and the people and events that shape that history. A diverse class of students of different nationalities can also indeed help to develop a broad analytical perspective for any programme of history studies.

4.1. JAPANESE HISTORY STUDIES IN JAPAN

In Japan, the study of Japanese history begins at a young age. Since the post-war period, children in Japanese elementary schools have usually taken classes on Japanese history as part of their Shakaika, or Social Studies, classes. They learn about major events, important figures and some aspects of cultural heritage. At junior high school level, pupils learn about Japanese history as part of their ‘World History’ classes in accordance with the Ministry of Education Curriculum Guidelines (Gakushu Shidō Yōryō). At high school level, Japanese children are given a choice of whether they wish to continue studies in Japanese history. The pupils are able to choose the classes as electives in “Japanese History A” or “Japanese History B”. The “Japanese History A” course examines Japanese history from the perspective of Japanese history and lifestyle, the formation of modern Japan and the 19th century western world, modern Japan and international relations, and Japan and the world after 1945. The “Japanese History B” course examines the concept of history itself and looks at the ancient world and the society and culture of East Asia. It then goes on to examine East Asian society and culture of the medieval period, international relations and the society and culture of East Asia in the modern period, the formation of Japan and Asia in the modern period. It also examines Japan and the world in the First and Second World War periods, and finally looks at Japan and the world in the post WWII period. However, not all pupils choose to study Japanese History at high school level. Some choose to study Geography instead. There are some who believe that Japanese history should
not be an elective, but should be made a compulsory subject. Nevertheless, most Japanese children are given some background in Japanese history as part of their compulsory education. However, a well-recognised problem with history education at the Japanese school level seems to be the fact that a greater part of it requires simply memorising dates, names, events, places in order to pass the examinations. There appears to be less emphasis on discussion and analysis of history.

Aside from formal education, there is also an abundance of knowledge available in Japanese in other forms such as TV media, books, magazines, the Internet, etc., that are widely available to the broader population. Therefore, it is not difficult for the population of Japan to access information on Japanese history. The NHK Taiga Drama TV series is a very popular source of information on various aspects of Japanese history; the programmes are usually set in one particular era of Japanese history and portray some part of that history to the Japanese public with a series lasting for several weeks in a year, and each year is different. There is also a great influence on Japanese tourism thanks to these NHK programmes. For example, the 2010 Ryōmaden series about the life of the Tosa samurai, Sakamoto Ryōma (1835-1867) was very popular and the series created a boom in tourism sites related to Ryōma throughout Japan.

Some prior knowledge of Japanese history would help, but it is not absolutely necessary for a course at university level. In a classroom that is a mix of students who have had some formal prior education and students who have had none, the dynamics of the class would perhaps be such as to bring a fresh perspective to all students.

In addition, in order to study Japanese history, it is not strictly necessary to have native-level Japanese language skills. Knowledge of kanbun (Chinese writing) or kanshi (Chinese poetry) sōsho (Japanese cursive script), which many old documents are written in is also not strictly necessary. Even among native Japanese speakers, how many can actually read or use these old forms of writing?

There is a substantial and growing amount of data/sources on Japanese history in English. It is not the aim of this paper to provide an exhaustive list of publications on Japanese history in English. One example however, George Sansom's three-part series, A History of Japan, is old (all three books first published between 1958 and 1963), but it still provides a deep insight into Japanese history overall.
4.2. JAPANESE HISTORY SCHOLARS OF JAPANESE NATIONALITY

Aside from general Japanese history textbooks, in English or Japanese, naturally there is however, a vast wealth of writing, much of which goes into very fine detail about different areas of Japanese history, by historians of Japanese nationality. The unfortunate fact is that the majority of these detailed investigations and fruits of research are written only in the Japanese language. From a “global” perspective, this is a great waste of valuable research findings for the simple reason that a great number of those interested in Japanese history around the world are unable to access these resources without deep, prior study in the Japanese language itself. Therefore, although, as noted above, Japanese language skills are not essential for the student of Japanese history as the situation stands at present, there is a linguistic barrier for those unfamiliar with the Japanese language.

It would thus be of tremendous benefit to Japanese history studies if more sources were available in the English language, which is currently considered the lingua franca. Indeed, there are some, albeit limited, moves towards this trend. One example is the work of UrbanScope, an online journal of the Urban-Culture Research Center at Osaka City University. This journal provides a selection of translations into English of theses by Japanese history scholars.

Unfortunately, there appears to be a somewhat insular attitude among many Japanese historian-scholars with the view that there is no necessity for them to use English. However, in light of the trend towards a more globalised society in a variety of fields, including the field of education, there is indeed some degree of necessity for all scholars to develop their English skills. This necessity is likely to become ever more notable as scholars will continue to be required to deal with international competition.

In the fields of business and industry in Japan, the notion of, “survival of the fittest”, has already long been recognised. Many Japanese companies are finding that in order to survive, they need to become more “global”.

In the same way, Japanese universities are gradually, albeit very slowly, realising that there are such things as international competition and global standards, which they will have to contend with more and more in the future. The declining birth rate in Japan is being recognised as one of the reasons why Japanese universities are looking to enrol more and more international students. Provision of courses in English,
therefore, will continue to be a requirement for Japanese university survival.

5.1. HISTORICAL MEMORY AND A NEW PERSPECTIVE

In recent years, there has been a surge of scholarly, and other, publications that refer to historical memory, or loss thereof. In particular, University of London professor, Dr. John Breen's book, *Yasukuni, the war dead and the struggle for Japan's past* (2007), has been at the forefront of that recent surge due to the controversial nature of the book's topic and the media coverage that the topic has received.

Associate Professor of Hokkaido University, Dr. Philip Seaton, has also made the subject of historical memory one of his key areas of interest. Indeed, he includes a chapter at the end of the Breen book mentioned above. In addition, he has published a monograph entitled, *Japan's Contested War Memories* (2007).

The central character of this author's own research, Nakai Hiromu (1838-1894), is a good example of memory loss in Japanese historical circles. Nakai Hiromu played a key role in Japan's Bakumatsu/Meiji era history in saving the lives of several British diplomats: the then British Minister to Japan, Harry Parkes, Ernest Satow and Algernon B. Mitford, in an incident known as the Nawate Incident in early 1868. The Nawate Incident has also largely been forgotten by the history books.

Providing Liberal Arts classes in English on the subject of Japanese History brings about the potential for a broader range of nationalities able to participate in classes alongside native Japanese students. It also brings about a broader linguistic perspective. This, in turn, would inspire a more diversified dialogue among students and help them to develop a more global outlook. History and historical figures that have been forgotten, lost or ignored would have the chance to be remembered. This might even lead to better relations between nations in the long term.

Historical studies in the Japanese education system is often criticised for being nothing more than a process of rote learning in order to get a good grade in entrance exams. Remembering the 'who', the 'what', and the 'when' is generally not considered to be particularly useful for any other purpose than the entrance exams, and it is perhaps safe to say that a majority of students do not enjoy such forms of study, nor do they retain the information they have crammed into their cerebra for any great length of time. Almost as soon as exam season is over, all the hard work is often lost. Rather
than rote learning, an analytical study of history is more useful. Analysis of the past allows us to learn from it and prevent repetition of past mistakes. Counterfactual history analysis is also helpful and classes with such foundations allow us to examine the human condition more carefully.

5.2. A BRIEF CASE STUDY: HISTORICAL FIGURES IN ANGLO-JAPANESE RELATIONS

Although as yet in the early stages of development, in classes at Aichi Prefectural University, the author of this paper currently runs a course that focuses on historical figures that have played a key role in the history of Anglo-Japanese relations. A topic like this immediately requires an international or global perspective because it deals with two nations: Britain and Japan.

As part of the course, students are asked to choose a character, or characters, from the Britain & Japan: Biographical Portraits, Volume I-VII, series published through The Japan Society in Britain. For example, in one class, the students examined Natsume Sōseki and his time in London. Sōseki is well-known for having not enjoyed his time in London at all. However, during the lesson students came to the realisation that the time he spent in London was a large influence on his later literary works.

In another class, the students considered more recent history, and looked at The Beatles in Japan and examined how their short visit in 1966 affected the Japanese public and media at the time, particularly in light of their chosen venue of the Budōkan, which many right-wing groups found to be unacceptable as it was a sacred site for Japanese martial arts. The class also considered The Beatles influence on the music industry in Japan since that time.

In yet another class, the students considered the role of Satsuma samurai Godai Tomoatsu (1836-1886). He travelled to Britain in 1865 and later went on to become one of Japan's leading entrepreneurs, establishing the Osaka Chamber of Commerce and the Osaka Stock Exchange.

In this way, during each class students examine a particular character, or characters, from history and look at their lives and how they affected the relationship between Britain and Japan. This class has worked considerably well. However, in future classes it may be more beneficial to have two students give a presentation in
each lesson, with each one introducing a character, or characters, from both Britain and Japan in a similar field. In a class survey, a number of students pointed this idea out. For example, it may be more beneficial to do a class on both Godai Tomatsu and Thomas Glover in the same lesson, with one student presenting their findings on each personality, and thereby giving a clearer overview of the history of Anglo-Japanese relations.

The *Britain and Japan - Biographical Portraits* series already has seven volumes and therefore provides an ample selection of characters from both nations to choose from.

As part of the assessment of the course, the students are also asked to write two essays, one to be submitted mid-semester: the other to be submitted at the end of the semester. In the first paper, students are asked to consider the concept of 'counter-factualism', and ask "What if...?" In the second and final essay, students are asked to consider, "The Importance of People in History". Thus far, this new class has been successful and in the survey students noted that they were able to learn something of Japanese history through the new medium of the English language.

6. CONCLUSION

It has been the aim of this paper to examine the possibilities for, and demonstrate the significance of teaching Japanese history in English as part of the curriculum at Japanese universities. The research is still very much in the early stages and needs further investigation. However, from this preliminary look at the idea of teaching Japanese History as a subject within the framework of teaching Liberal Arts in English, the possibilities and potential for a productive area of study is clear. The trend of Globalisation continues to further promote the need for Japanese students to be able to communicate in English, and in terms of Japanese history, there will be an increased need for communication and discussion of Japan’s past as Japan continues to play a greater role on the world stage. Japanese History studies will therefore require much more discussion through the English language. This will assist Japan in developing better relationships with her neighbours and the rest of the world.
Notes

1 The University of Cambridge provides a selection of teaching qualifications, perhaps the most well known of which is CELTA. More information on these can be found at the organisation's website (http://www.cambridgeesol.org/sector/teaching/index.html).


3 Ibid.


5 This author was personally involved in the establishment of the G MBA programme at Doshisha in 2009-2010. The Doshisha Business School website (http://gmba.doshisha.ac.jp) provides a wealth of information about the programme.

6 Research is currently being carried out by Professor Phillip Seaton of Hokkaido University who covers this area of interest in more detail. See his website, http://www.philipseaton.net/ for more information in this regard.


References


Breen, John (ed.), Yasukuni, the War Dead and the Struggle for Japan’s Past (Hurst & Company, London, 2007).

Hirakawa, Suehiro, Japan’s Love-Hate Relationship with the West (Global Oriental, 2005).