Japan through English

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Introduction

The Japan through English *(Eigo ni yoru Nihon kenkyu)* program was conceived for the purpose of resolving two separate problems. First, providing classes on Japan taught in English increased the opportunities for students enrolled at universities with which Rikkyo University conducts student exchanges to spend time studying in Japan, particularly those with limited Japanese language abilities. Second, these classes introduced Rikkyo University students with aspirations for studying abroad to the kind of class they might encounter during their experience in a non-Japanese university. From April 2001 the program commenced with classes offered under four categories: history, politics and economy, society and literature, and Japan in Asia. Students involved in exchange programs were joined by other Rikkyo University degree students drawn to the classes by the topic they covered or by the linguistic challenge they presented.

As an instructor of one of these classes I found the diversity of students to be a source of both stimulation and challenge. The diversity of the class in nationality and knowledge background served as the potential foundation for an active and creative exchange of ideas. On the other hand, the diverse range of language abilities and academic backgrounds compromised the depth in which critical questions could be addressed. After a brief summary of the program, this short discussion will consider the potentials and limitations of these classes by examining the course taught on modern Japanese history.

Program Description

The Japan through English program provided students coming to Rikkyo University from abroad with a multi-disciplinary introduction to Japan. These students originated from a wide variety of locations, including the United States, Europe, and other Asian countries. Their academic backgrounds ranged from the students whose studies focused primarily on Japan or Asia studies, to those with a peripheral interest in the region. While the primary reason for the students'

choosing to come to Japan to study was to strengthen their linguistic capabilities, these classes offered them a second content dimension to their studies while enabling them to earn additional credits as required by their home university.

The Rikkyo University student (primarily, but not limited to, Japanese students) came to these classes with different needs. Many had already been chosen to study at one of our exchange universities; others had strong aspirations to study abroad in the near future. These students attended the classes to acclimate themselves to English-based instruction. Students who were either interested in the topic or were seeking a means to strengthen their already advanced English skills occupied the remainder of the thirty seats allotted for these classes. The primary task of teaching students from these diverse backgrounds was to devise a syllabus that challenged, but did not overwhelm, the linguistic and academic capabilities of both the temporary non-degree student and the regular degree student.

The wide mixture of language capabilities among the students proved to be the biggest challenge in organizing a successful class. Even among the international students there were both native and non-native English speakers. Among degree students there were individuals who had spent time abroad as an exchange students and those who had developed their English capacity primarily through studying in Japan. Background knowledge posed a second challenge. It was assumed that Japanese students would make up in knowledge what they lost in linguistic capability. That is, the relative familiarity of the subject matter would allow them to actively participate in the class even if their language capabilities were comparatively low. In the best of situations, collaboration between students with language capability and those with knowledge background would narrow these gaps and promote intercultural interaction among the classes' participants.

Modern Japanese History

Anticipating that many of the non-degree students would come to Rikkyo University with at least a rudimentary knowledge of modern Japanese history, I focused the content of this class on a particular theme, rather than offer a general introductory survey class. The spring term concentrated on Japan's relations with the West, the fall term on its relations with Northeast Asia. The two themes overlapped as they dealt with the same time period-late Tokugawa *(bakumatsu)* to postwar Japanese history. The class gradually evolved to a pattern of lecture-discussion; assigned readings and lecture provided the students with the back-

ground they needed to discuss pre-assigned questions. This arrangement limited the amount of information that students gained from the class but enhanced their engagement in the process of learning.

Japanese history from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century tells a story of a country struggling to formulate a national identity that the Western powers recognized as "civilized," while still maintaining a sense of "Japanese-ness." Their country described by some to be a "semi-colonized" latecomer to the international community, many Japanese believed that the key to retaining sovereignty was to comply with the cultural, social, and political norms that the global powers recognized as "civilized." The initial period following Japan's "opening" to the West saw its administration circling the globe to study the institutions of civilization. Japan's adoption of these institutions, which included compulsory education, universal military conscription, constitutional government, and colonial expansion, presented an external image of a country dressed in Western garb while it retained an internal Japanese-ness.

This interpretation differs remarkably from the history of Korea's response to this period. Not having a domestic alternative to the five hundred-year Choson regime made reform in Korean government much more difficult. Whereas the Japanese were able to dress the new Meiji regime with modern institutions, Koreans faced the task of modernizing an aged monarchy. As this change required adjusting the nests of power (including the Confucian ideology that formed the basis for legitimacy), reform movements had less of a chance of gaining influence in Korean politics.

Territorial expansion offers a good example of the kinds of dilemmas facing Japan and Korea at this time. Strong states, the Japanese soon learned, were those that first made sincere efforts to centralize into nations. This required a core group developing the institutions necessary to instruct the people of their status as subjects of an imperial (that is sovereign) state. Primary among these institutions were a centralized education system that taught the people their national history, national language, and national morals, an extended media to broadcast the accomplishments of the nation, and a political system that gradually allowed the people a voice in the running of their nation. As the nation-state matured it faced questions of military activity and territorial expansion–issues that determined its ability to first protect its homeland, and second to rally the support of the people for the welfare of the state.

Expansion provided the Japanese with a critical dilemma: whether it should extend itself geographically, diplomatically, or both. This dilemma was creatively portrayed in Nakae Chomin's "Discourse on three drunkards" *(Sansuijin keirin mondo)*. Here the liberal scholar presented three voices that argued the shape and form that their country could adopt: neutrality (like Switzerland), imperialist (like Great Britain), or diplomacy (the middle road). Nakae's purpose for writing this "Discourse" was to advance this third course. Japan, he argued, must remain geographically small but diplomatically large. Creating diplomatic alliances with its Asian neighbors would best serve its interests.

The "Korean problem," many Japanese would come to argue, prohibited their country from choosing either the neutral or diplomatic paths. With few exceptions Japanese agreed that the Korean peninsula's vulnerability to foreign subjugation compromised their countries security. Foreign advisors reinforced the belief that their government must act aggressively to strengthen its security. The path that Japan took toward molding itself as an expansion-minded country began with its belief in its neighbor's inability to modernize. Even Japan's first colonial acquisition, Taiwan, was procured after its successful effort to protect the Korean peninsula in the 1894-95 war with China. At least this was the argument that many put forth at the time.

Japan, however, had already advanced toward becoming an expansionist nation long before the late 1880s, when Nakae penned his "Discourse" and discussion on the "Korean problem" became a popular topic. Soon after the 1868 Meiji Restoration the new government took steps to strengthen its national security by incorporating Ezo (now Hokkaido) and neighboring islands, territories that Russia sought to absorb. To the south it annexed the Ryukyu Islands, at the time territory also claimed by China. The incorporation of both territories necessitated the nation absorbing peoples not traditionally considered to be "Japanese," peoples regarded so foreign that previous regimes at times had prohibited them from fraternizing with Japanese on an intimate level. In a more informal way, the Japanese had also successfully "opened" Korea to the world by enforcing "unequal treaties" that enhanced Japan's position on the peninsula and compromised Korean sovereignty.

Japanese expansion from the second half of the nineteenth century followed a pattern outlined by Yamagata Aritomo in 1890 at the opening session of the recently formed National Diet. Here the prime minister emphasized the need

to protect two "lines," Japan's "line of sovereignty" *(shukusen)* and its "line of advantage" *(riekisen)*. A strong national security required a state to protect its internal region as well as the contiguous territories at its periphery. As its line of sovereignty expand outward so must its line of advantage. Up until the advent of the Meiji era Ezo and the Ryukyu Islands had remained within Japan's line of advantage, but not within its line of sovereignty. Their incorporation, along with the addition of Taiwan and Korea, required Japan to gradually extend its lines of advantage onto the Asian continent; these new lines eventually intersected with those drawn by other Western powers, as well as with China. The clash that followed was predictable by the laws of physics: two forces approaching each other are destined to eventually clash unless one or both forces change direction.

The question posed by this history involves the process of modern development, largely defined at the time by territorial acquisition in a finite world. Given its ambitions to become a rich country with a strong military, did Japan have alternatives to the course it took from the late nineteenth century? Should, for example, Japan have given more serious consideration to either of Nakae's other two alternatives? Or, did Japan choose the correct path but manage it irresponsibly? Given the state of global politics at the time, and the fact that the Japanese received encouragement along the way from the powers that directed political trends, to what extent can we determine Japan's responsibility for the unfortunate results that its expansion policies eventually provoked?

Classroom discussion on these issues potentially could have developed into explosive chaos given the student makeup of the class: English and Chinese (Hong Kong), German and Polish, Japanese and Japanese-Korean, American and Philippine, and Caucasian and African-American. While producing no definitive results the discussion did require the students (and the instructor) to rethink the nature of conflict in general, and specifically the conflict which engulfed much of the world during the middle of the last century. It also required the participants to stretch their understanding of this period beyond that which many of the history textbooks assigned by compulsory education permitted.

Most students concluded that given the circumstances of this time period Japan had taken the most practical path to development. If this was the case, then is it fair to burden one side (generally the losing side) with complete responsibility for the resulting conflict? Is there not a global responsibility that is shared among all nation-states to work together to resolve conflict through peaceful

means, rather than by taking to arms? If we assume this to be true, it then follows that all participating parties must accept a share of the responsibility for times when two or more members rely on violent solutions to settle their differences.

Reassessing blame does not lessen Japan's responsibility for this period of history; it does insist that the global powers at the time join Japan in seeking to understand this history from the perspective of the peoples they victimized. How did the actions of these states impede the development of the territories that they colonized? How does this history frustrate their development at present? To what extent should each party assume responsibility for the postcolonial problems formally subjugated states carry with them to this day? These questions, though beyond the direct scope of the class, indirectly surfaced in discussion within the context of Japan's wartime responsibilities.

Conclusion: Reflection and Reconsideration

The Japan through English classroom provided the venue for bringing together peoples from different nationalities and backgrounds. These unions of culture integrated the exchange student to a greater degree into the Rikkyo University community. From an academic perspective, however, this mixture presented several pedagogical problems. The first concerned subject material. It was assumed that the majority of students would bring to the class a foundation in Japanese history from which to build. Exchange students would come to Japan with a basic knowledge of modern Japanese history; Japanese students would have a more detailed understanding of their country's rise to a global power. Neither proved to be the case. The majority of exchange students came to Japan without having much background in Japanese studies; many Japanese students claimed to have no prior experience in studying this critical period of their national history. Thus it was often necessary to retreat back to the introductory level before returning to the main themes to be covered. Students taking their first Japanese history class thought the explanation incomplete; those who had passed this stage in their studies found the class at times slow and repetitive.

Recommending additional readings is a logical (but not practical) solution to this problem. Assigning extra work takes time away from the students other courses, in particular their Japanese language studies. For non-native English speakers additional reading adds extra weight to an already burdensome load. Getting through the assigned readings alone proved to be a chore that overtaxed

the majority of these students.

These problems combined limited the depth of the discussion that took place in the classroom. It was only when the theme of the class turned to the students' immediate backgrounds that discussion proved to be a useful endeavor. The alternative, limiting the class to lecture, is equally problematic: passive absorption of knowledge does not actively engage the student in the subject matter. Overcoming these problems requires students obtaining a rudimentary knowledge of the subject matter, even if it is through their native language. Increasing class contact time (by either offering a second class meeting or by scheduling extra discussion sessions during the term) is another possible solution to this problem.

A second issue concerns the linguistic diversity in the class. Mixing students with limited English abilities with the more vocal native speaker curtails the degree to which the non-native speaker can participate in classroom discussions. While this experience is useful to the student planning to study abroad (in that it confronts them with a reality that they will soon face), in the immediate sense it neutralizes potentially the most powerful asset of this class–its diversity. Exchange students come to Japan to interact with Japanese students; since much of the discussion in class directly concerns Japan their opinions are valued. Lack of sufficient background knowledge and limited language ability to express their views weakens the Japanese students' ability to contribute to the class. In addition to assigning readings in the students' native language, instructors should also seek alternative ways to directly solicit their participation. One way could be to assign more writing activities. Instructors might also allow students to gather their thoughts in group discussion before opening the discussion to the whole class. At times it might also be necessary to allow students to participate in Japanese, using the linguistic capabilities of bilingual class members to ensure that their ideas are understood by all class participants.

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