

“Internationalizing Japan”

My Experience of Teaching in English at Japanese Universities

By Reinhard Drifte



Author Reinhard Drifte

Since 2003, I have been teaching intensive courses, in English, on Japanese foreign policy at various Japanese universities. For Japanese universities, such courses taught by foreign visiting professors are an opportunity to increase the number of courses taught in English, which is now strongly encouraged by the Japanese government. Universities are invited to apply for multi-year funding to teach more courses in English, the aim of which is to equip Japanese students with better language capabilities to cope with globalization and to make them more “international”, but also to offset the country’s diminishing student numbers by attracting foreign students.

The Global 30 Project for Establishing Core Universities for Internationalisation was launched in July 2008 to select universities that will function as core universities for receiving and educating international students. Under the G30 Project, Japan is attempting to increase the number of international students from 137,756 in 2012 to 300,000 by 2020. In 2009, 13 core universities were selected, including two of the universities where I have been teaching.

English Language as a Hurdle

It is well known that Japanese are poor users of foreign languages. This has nothing to do with genes but only with poor foreign language teaching, which is focused on reading ability and preparing the students for examinations, notably university entrance examinations. The long-running Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme has been a considerable help in exposing students from primary to high schools to the fact that foreign languages are actually also spoken. The JET Programme, however, aims not so much at spoken fluency but at a wider target of intercultural encounters. Given these conditions, it is not easy to teach Japanese students at university, who have had a passive learning experience without much teacher-student interaction. Added to this is also (for them) the sometimes demoralizing fact of their being in classes with many other foreign students who are often more talkative and/or are native English language speakers.

To be fair it is a big jump from learning a foreign language as a course subject to actually using it to learn about other subjects. As a teacher, I

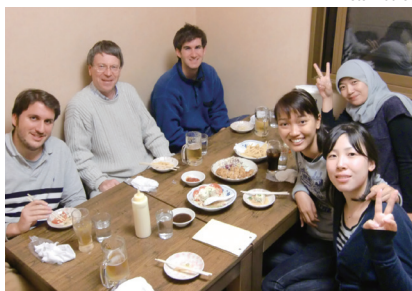


Photo: Author

Enjoying intercultural exchanges after class

am enjoying most classes with a mixture of Japanese and non-Japanese students, although the language ability of many of the latter is not necessarily very good. Asian students also come from a more passive learning environment,

and they are often from disciplines which have nothing to do with my courses on Japan’s international relations. Teaching students with such diverse backgrounds and without knowing what they do already know is quite a challenge. In order to help my students to better follow my teaching, I use a PowerPoint presentation and also distribute it on paper, so that students are not focusing on copying what is on the screen but on what I provide in addition to the written words. In any case, such mixed classes can develop much greater dynamics than classes with only Japanese students.

Passive Learning Versus Interactive Learning

Apart from the language barrier, it is the passive learning experience of Japanese students which is the major challenge to teaching. Being used to regurgitating in examinations what the teacher has taught, it is difficult to retrain them to offer their own opinions and to participate in discussions. I try to overcome this handicap by demanding five-minute presentations by students on the required reading text of the session which is not to be a summary but a presentation of the main ideas of the text, and at the end having them offer their own opinions on what they like/dislike/miss in the text. If it is a class with Japanese and non-Japanese students, discussions start more easily when covering bilateral relations, notably Japan-Korea or Japan-China. Moreover, I make classroom participation and text presentation a major part of the continuous assessment to encourage greater student participation.

The phrase I use most often is, “Do you have any questions?” At the very start of the course, and again at the beginning of each day, I strongly encourage students to interrupt me any time to ask, if they have not understood something. I quote the Japanese saying *Kiku wa isshun*

no haji, kikanu wa issho no haji (“Asking a question is a moment’s embarrassment; not asking is a shame for life”). Again, the passive learning experience and Asian diffidence do not make it easy for Japanese and other Asian students to take up this invitation. I sometimes try to catch them out by picking out a more difficult term or event in the required reading.

Legitimacy of Different Interests & Opinions

My experiences have made me realize how one-sided the previous learning experience of the Japanese (and many Asian students) often has been. They are used mostly to hearing one opinion, that of the teacher, and that is what counts after all for the examination. I try to show the perspectives of both sides (whether “right” or “wrong”), the legitimacy of different interests, and how most issues are neither black nor white, but rather shades of grey. A good example is territorial or border issues, where students are taught only their government’s position. In the case of the disputed islands in the East China Sea, students have often learned only the name used in their country, either the Senkaku Islands or Diaoyu Islands. The same applies to Takeshima Island or Dokto Island. Much more important than teaching only a government’s position is to explain to the students the fundamental nature of territorial conflicts (a zero sum game, the close link to national identity, etc.), the complexity of these conflicts (political, security, economic, and international law aspects), and the role of precedent in other territorial or border conflicts which may further impede a solution. Particularly in the case of Chinese students I realized that teaching different national perspectives is hindered by their inability to differentiate between explaining another country’s position and agreeing with it. For them, explaining a position is equal to accepting and condoning this position.

Making Students “Think Straight”

We live in a world with an abundance of information and information “morsels”. Education therefore is very important in providing structure and context which in future will enable students to understand and better compartmentalize new related information and events. Often, when a student has been asked about an issue, they throw at me various bits of information, or try to explain something by mentioning aspects which are very remote from the core, or only tangentially relevant. The point is therefore to understand the hierarchical order of aspects.

Depending on the knowledge background of the students, I try to explain to them the larger context, the similarities of many issues in different countries, and the structure of issues. Many of the details of an issue I teach will soon be forgotten, but I hope that the knowledge of structure and context will remain. Often it will be enough if the students can develop a consciousness of the *problematique* or complexity of a given issue.

Another advantage of a class with students from several countries is that it helps Japanese students to get away from their perception of Japan’s “unique uniqueness” because differences are more in terms of degree than essence. In the end, all countries (as all individuals) are

“uniquely unique”. Is only Japan a country which values harmony, whereas, for example, Americans prefer confrontation? I try to explain that all people value harmony and that the difference lies in how much effort is invested and how much sacrifice is made (and conflicting values, like the value of individual fulfilment, are downplayed) in achieving it.



An international class at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto

Does Diversity on Campus Make Students More Internationalized?

The purpose of having non-Japanese students on campus (apart from offsetting demographic tendencies) is to facilitate intercultural encounters for Japanese students without their having to spend a long time abroad. However, this is not easy to realize in practice. I was giving a special lecture in one class this year, and all three Chinese students were sitting together, separate from the other students. This may be because of the current problems between Japan and China, but why were they then not at least sitting with other foreign students?

Although the classroom is probably the easiest place to bring the two sides together, intercultural encounters are made difficult by the language hurdle, and lack of opportunities to meet on, as well as off, campus. Japanese students in particular are shy and tend to avoid “uncomfortable” situations. I think universities have to try to create more opportunities and train Japanese students about intercultural encounters. Moreover, it will be necessary to improve the English language ability not only of the Japanese but also of the non-Japanese students, and to bring them up to about the same level.

I wonder sometimes about the impact of modern information technology on intercultural encounters. While they offer increased opportunities to learn about other countries, they also provide foreign students with the means to escape from the difficulty of intercultural encounters and to stay “closer to home”. In my field of international relations, I discovered that hardly any student reads a printed daily newspaper anymore, although universities provide them in the libraries (in several languages!). Instead, they read the websites of their own national papers. This cannot replace a printed daily newspaper: the students read only the free content, which is naturally limited, and “reading” often means only browsing the headlines. This does not provide the gradual build-up of background needed for understanding politics.

All in all, I have enjoyed my teaching in Japan and learned from it in many ways. After all, teaching international students together with Japanese students is a wonderful means of learning about Japan’s international relations.

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Reinhard Drifte is visiting professor at various Japanese universities and at Pau University in France. He is emeritus professor at Newcastle University in the UK.