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## Opinion and Perspective

# Communication and Conflict: Japanese Views of Foreign University Instructors

James P. Lassegard  
*Hosei University*

Michio Tajima  
*Nihon University*

The number of foreign, or “international”, faculty in Japan has been rising at a steady pace over the last few decades, with the percentage of full-time foreign faculty rising from approximately one percent of the total number in 1990 to close to four percent in 2015 (RIE, 2016). Part of the growth in international faculty can be attributed to the emphasis over the last couple of decades placed on English language education, as well as newer programs which allow students to study subject content and obtain degrees in English.

According to statistics from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (e-Stat, 2018), 22,246 foreign instructors were working in Japanese higher education in 2018, representing a 4% increase over the previous year. Moreover, 8,609 of these faculty were full-time, while 13,647 were classified as part-time instructors. Aside from the fact that little is known about this group, foreign instructors by definition are more mobile than domestic teaching staff yet remain an essential component in the education of university students in Japan.

According to Huang (1918), approximately 2,206 full-time foreign professors are affiliated with faculties of linguistics, literature and foreign

language instruction. The National Statistics School Basic Survey (MEXT, 2016) also stated that nearly half of all non-Japanese university academics teaching at Japanese educational institutions were engaged in foreign language education. Despite these significant numbers, most research studies conducted on international academic mobility have been about the education and motivating factors of foreign students, and little attention has been paid to issues concerning foreign faculty working overseas (De Wit & Altbach, 2018; Rumbly & De Wit, 2017).

Even less research has been done on the experiences of international faculty living and working in Japan, including their motivations for being in Japan and their relations with Japanese colleagues. Foreign faculty, whether part-time, contract, or permanent faculty, are almost always a minority within their organizations and have few opportunities for significant discussions with Japanese counterparts on teaching and other important administrative policy matters at the university.

## **The Conference Workshop**

In light of this perceived gap in research, an exploratory workshop was organized and facilitated by the authors in November of 2018. Workshop participants were all attending an academic society meeting (*gakukai*) for English studies at a large private university in central Tokyo. The *gakukai* has a history of approximately 50 years, with a membership of more than 200, of which only 20 members are foreign. The purpose of this workshop was to acquire information about the many challenges foreign instructors have working at Japanese universities. Using focus-group type of brainstorming, we hoped that this data would provide possible themes and insights regarding how well-integrated foreign academics, both full-time and part-time, are into the life and fabric of Japanese universities.

The facilitators/authors primarily utilized the KJ Method to gather feedback from workshop participants. It is a relatively well-known method similar to concept mapping that is used to solicit opinions from various subjects during a short period of time. It is also considered an effective ethnographic technique in Japanese social science research (Sculpin, 1997). The authors/facilitators

themselves are university professors, and one of the facilitators had been a regular member of the *gakkai* for many years.

Participation in the workshop was voluntary. The total number of participants was thirty-three, the majority (27) of whom were Japanese nationals working either full- or part-time at universities in the Kanto area. An additional six participants were graduate students from different countries. Twenty-two of the participants were male and 11 were female. Participants were divided into seven groups of approximately four or five members by the facilitators, and each group was given a sheet of A3 paper and a number of Post-it notes. After a brief explanation of the purpose of the task, groups took approximately 15 minutes to discuss and write down on the notes their ideas and comments regarding foreign instructors. The participants came up with a total of 67 comments in both Japanese and English, and each small group was then given approximately one minute to summarize what they had discussed to the larger group using their A3 paper. This was then followed by a short debriefing by facilitators to conclude the workshop.

## **Workshop Data Analysis**

After the workshop, the 67 short written responses were collected, and all Japanese responses were translated into English by the authors. The authors/facilitators analyzed them, which subsequently resulted in four main categories of issues or thematic areas, although some themes appeared to be interrelated. The largest category, producing 29 responses, was related to a foreign instructor's teaching, such as methods, classroom management, interaction with students, and pedagogy. The second largest category with 21 comments involved communication issues between foreign and Japanese instructors. The third category comprised 14 responses dealing with the challenges foreign instructors have in dealing with university management. Lastly, four comments dealt with a lack of opportunities for foreign and Japanese instructors to share information about their teaching, curriculum, etc. The following is a thematic analysis of the comments.

## **Differences in Teaching Methodology— Impressions and Assumptions about Foreign Instructors (FIs) and Their Students.**

This category produced the largest number and variety of responses. A total of 18 responses could be considered assumptions that Japanese instructors have about classroom management, including foreign instructors' interactions with students. Some of the more common responses included the following:

“FIs cannot tell if Japanese students understand or not”

“FIs encourage more participation or student-centered classrooms”

“FIs might be careless when dealing with students”

“FIs cannot pronounce or remember Japanese students' names, which leads to a lack of communication”

“FIs have a hard time dealing with and evaluating students who do not respond in class”

A sub-category consisted of teaching assumptions or impressions of how Japanese students behave, and how they may perceive a foreign instructor's teaching. Comments representative of this include the following:

“Students find it difficult to follow instruction from FIs in English”

“Some students are too shy and too reserved”

“FIs do classroom activities which are not planned. It doesn't work because it's not what students expect to do”

“Students do too little speaking during lessons”

“Students are not familiar with discussion-style activities. They should be able to first think in Japanese and start with yes/no suggestions”

In the authors' view, it seems likely that there may be lack of understanding or first-hand knowledge among Japanese instructors of what FIs actually do in the English language classroom. It appears likely that some comments were based on information or hearsay that workshop participants have received from students over the years or merely their own assumptions. Nevertheless, these comments convey the sense that some Japanese instructors tend to distrust or negatively view teaching methods practiced by foreign instructors.

## **Language Issues: Inside and Outside of the Classroom**

The second largest category of comments, consisting of 21 responses, were related primarily to communication in English and Japanese languages with foreign instructors and some of the frustrations and challenges that exist. This category can be seen as somewhat overlapping with the others. Some representative comments were as follows:

“Foreign colleagues and students who can speak Japanese still expect other Japanese English teachers to communicate in English”

“We can’t ask FIs to do exam proctoring—which requires giving explanations in Japanese”

“FIs have difficulties filling in documents in Japanese, especially something to do with legal matters”

“Office instructions are only in Japanese”

“University meetings are with Japanese instructors who are not good at English”

While a few of the above comments appeared sympathetic with the challenges foreign instructors have with (particularly written) Japanese, the majority of comments implied that foreign instructors could be making more efforts toward improving their proficiency in Japanese. An underlying sentiment was that many Japanese instructors were frustrated at having to use English or to help FIs understand information in Japanese. Many comments involving language also pertained to the choice of language use in the classroom, and the assumption that Japanese students normally require explanations in Japanese to understand content. It may be justifiable to expect that FIs possess basic Japanese language skills that are useful in the workplace. However, whether the use of the L1 by foreign instructors is actually effective for students’ language acquisition is another topic altogether and outside the scope of this report.

## **University Management and Policy Issues**

The third largest category consisted of 14 responses related to university management and policy issues that FIs must deal with in their teaching careers. It

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seems as though these comments also were often interrelated with both language and teaching categories. Examples are shown below.

“FIs must deal with office staff who can’t communicate in English (about salary, taxes, etc.)”

“(There is) little university space to keep part-time teachers’ materials”

“Differences in salary exist between foreign and Japanese instructors”

“FIs don’t have a good understanding of school cultures in Japan”

“FIs can’t help with administrative work”

These disparate comments reflect both the large amount of administrative work that must be done at Japanese universities and the frustration that arises when many non-native instructors cannot perform these duties, or at least not as well as their Japanese counterparts.

## **Opportunities for Exchange: Community of Learning**

In this final category of comments, the issues were not so much between foreign and Japanese instructors, but those that exist between full-time and part-time instructors, with some representative comments including the following:

“(There is) little communication with Japanese full-time teachers. Full-time instructors should go more often to have chats in the part-time teachers’ lounge”

“FIs may not have many opportunities to ask questions about Japanese education environment”

“Since courses that FIs teach are different from Japanese teachers, there exist limitations in ways instructors can share information on curriculum, pedagogy, etc.”

It is likely this situation is rather common within higher education settings in other countries and is not particular to Japan. The teaching schedules of individual faculty vary widely, and the instructor is often preoccupied by preparing for lessons before and between classes that would preclude opportunities for meaningful discussion of teaching, curriculum, etc.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

This workshop presented a rare opportunity for mostly Japanese university instructors to express what they felt or thought about foreign instructors. The fact that so many of the comments could be considered negative was not anticipated by the facilitators/authors. However, it is not very often that we hear candid comments from our colleagues, and this workshop provided an insightful opportunity to learn about and discuss some of the challenges for both foreign and Japanese instructors. Moreover, we believe that the comments made by participants can be considered a fairly representative sample of perspectives held by many other Japanese instructors.

Regardless of category, language usage was often mentioned by respondents as a troublesome area, and many of the comments were directed at foreign language instructors' lack of Japanese language proficiency, or a preference to use their native language, in most cases English. Many foreign instructors can speak Japanese well enough to navigate through most administrative requirements of the job, although far fewer may have high reading or writing ability. Perhaps this can be considered unavoidable due to the amount of commitment required for foreign instructors to become proficient in written Japanese.

The most constructive comments were arguably those in the fourth category—concerning the lack of opportunities for foreign and Japanese instructors to share information about classes, curriculum, teaching methods, and student issues. It has been apparent from our experience doing research and working in higher education that exchange interactions between Japanese and foreign academics do not often take place organically. Without systematic institutional or organizational motivation and support, such faculty development (FD) is not likely to occur. Supporting FIs to learn Japanese and for Japanese office staff to improve their English can also be an important part of such FD, but it seems clear that there needs to be conscious efforts made toward enhancing the understanding of cross-cultural differences and communication between Japanese and foreign employees (Komisarof, 2016).

Another common practice at many universities has been for full-time faculty to provide administrative assistance and guidance to foreign (mostly part-

time) faculty and act as a de facto mediator in some circumstances. In light of the comments from this workshop, this practice may have to be reexamined. In order to provide more consistent support, there may be benefits in empowering administrative staff to take on more of the day-to-day issues of supporting foreign instructors. Lastly, finding ways to better synthesize and communicate shared curricular goals and basic university policies must be a part of this endeavor.

If more time and a comprehensive research instrument were available, perhaps many of these comments could be substantiated and explored further, providing not only problems, but potential solutions to improve the communication between foreign and Japanese instructors. Promoting collegial relations between the foreign minority and Japanese majority in the workplace is only one aspect of the issues concerning foreign faculty at universities. Themes such as satisfaction with work environments, cross-cultural adjustment issues, and how universities can better accept and integrate foreign faculty into the university community are also worthy of further investigation.

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## Author bios

*James P. Lassegard is Professor at Hosei University. He holds an M.A. from the University of Minnesota, and a Ph.D. in Educational Sociology from Nagoya University. His main research interests include intercultural education and communication, student and faculty international mobility and exchange. <j.lassegard@hosei.ac.jp>*

*Michio Tajima is Associate Professor at Nihon University. He holds an M.A. from Rikkyo University in English and American literature and TESOL qualification from Surrey University. His research interests include English for Specific Purposes, language learner motivation, and teacher education. <tajima.michio@nihon-u.ac.jp>*

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