

English as an international language for communication: review of learning and teaching philosophy and practices at university in Japan

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Abstract

Global networking is often achieved through the medium of the English language. Correspondingly, university graduates around the world must acquire adequate English language skills to become versatile mobile professionals capable of working in cultural and linguistic contexts and countries. But for Japanese students, the study of English as a foreign language is framed within Japan's history of resistance to foreign cultures and values that could potentially upset the country's societal harmony and unique culture and traditions. The question for Japanese university students is whether English proficiency is realisable without accepting some degree of cultural contagion. After all, learning a foreign language comes with the appreciation and experience of the temperament and idiosyncrasies of the alien cultures moulding the language. This paper is a review the literature about foreign language learning at university in Japan. It investigates why certain pedagogies are preferred, even though their potential for communicative competence is limited. It critically discusses the concerns for policymakers in Japan to design and implement English language programs that develop English language skills in students while nonetheless preserving – and even celebrating in a different language - Japanese ideals and values. The paper also assesses the potential of English as a culturally unprejudiced lingua franca for speakers of different first languages, and whether this potential can be achieved without a disguised reverence for native speakerism. The paper concludes with the proposal of foreign language teaching and learning frameworks that are appropriate to the Japanese context.

Keywords: lingua franca, cultural contagion, uniqueness