MINORITY LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN

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Introduction

Japan is regarded as a monolingual community traditionally owing to its geographical and historical reasons. However, with more and more foreigners rushing to the country in recent years, minority communities have formed and are getting involved in various aspects of social life in Japan. Although Japan has made progress in internationalization and globalization, unfortunately foreigners are not treated equally as to the question of language rights. Minority groups are expected to assimilate to the Japanese language and culture. There are seldom any substantial efforts that have been made to help Japanese people understand minority languages and cultures, and bilingual education for minority students is not supported by the government. It is true that minority people gradually get used to the Japanese way of thinking and doing things, but they often get confused about their own identities and lose their own cultures and languages at the same time. This paper discusses the drawbacks of the current language policies for minority groups in Japan by analyzing the possibility and necessity of further developing a more efficient language curriculum from a perspective of multilingualism and multicultural promotion. It is argued that bilingual education functions as a device to promote real intercultural communication and improves the relationship between immigrants and the host country.

In recent years, "intercultural communication" is the term frequently used in Japan to describe the features of a modern society. The promotion of intercultural communication is considered one of the current missions of both the central and local governments in order to help Japan become better involved in international society. Efforts have been made by the Japanese government to advance the internationalization process within the country, especially in the field of ELT (English Language Teaching). Special learning time for English is set up for children in primary schools and foreign teachers are employed to help create a foreign ambience in class.

It is clearly stated in the policy of MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2010) that the central government agency in charge of intercultural communication promotion which Japan aims at "cultivating Japanese citizens living in the international community." Consequently, the main purpose of establishing English classes for primary students is the intention of strengthening the intercultural competence of Japanese students so that Japan can hold a more favorable position in situations of negotiation with other countries.

However, the policy reflects only one side of the true implication of intercultural communication, which should signify a two-way exchange of ideas and information. It is noted that the Japanese government has put much emphasis on the issue of increasing the ability of Japanese students to convey various messages to other nations, but no sufficient attention has been paid to the question of how to receive and accept information from other ethnic groups (Zhang 2006; Kirk 2006; Oto 1995; Zhang and Mok 2009).

The situation of minority language education in Japan is explained from the perspective of intercultural communication, highlighting the significance of integrating bilingual education into the current foreign language education system and criticizing the trend of making use of intercultural communication theory based on a fragmented understanding. This study proposes that intercultural communication awareness and abilities of Japanese students can be strengthened if they are exposed to various foreign languages and foreign cultures.

Policies of Intercultural Communication Education in Japan

Before discussing the connotations of intercultural communication, it would perhaps be better to clarify the meaning of the more fundamental concept – culture. Culture "emerges as a very broad concept embracing all aspects of human life" (Seelye 1987:13) and "consists of all the shared products of human society" (Robertson 1981:55). It refers to "the deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meaning, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving" (Samovar and Porter 1994:11).

Intercultural communication can be defined as an exchange of cultural information between or among different ethnic groups. According to Lustig and Koester (1999:42), intercultural communication indicates "a

symbolic process in which people from different cultures create shared meanings" and intercultural competence relies mostly on "the capacity and ability to enter other cultures and communicate effectively and appropriately, establish and maintain relationships and carry out tasks with people of these cultures." In other words, mutual understanding is the most important feature of intercultural communication and efforts are needed to help students improve their abilities and capacities in order to accept foreign cultures. "An effective intercultural communication skill is being aware of cultural differences that exist among various cultures and finding the best approaches to minimize misunderstands, stress, and frictions that occur when an individual needs to interact with people of different cultural backgrounds or live within a different culture" (Oto 1995).

Japan is a heavily culture-bound country (Cornelius, Martin and Hollifield 1995). It is a society based on high collaboration, conservative spirits and self-discipline with strong cultural stereotypes (Zhang 2006). English is the prescribed language to be taught as the first foreign language in national junior high schools throughout Japan. In most cases, attitudes of Japanese people toward different cultures have been greatly influenced by this policy. The dominant force of English has diluted the distinguishing characteristics of other languages and cultures, and Japanese students are seldom offered any opportunities to experience and become exposed to other foreign cultures (Modiano 2001).

The excessive self-consciousness in the intercultural communication education policy of Japan has been investigated in ELT as well as in sociolinguistic fields. Zhang (2006) pointed out the deficit in foreign language education policy in Japan and demonstrated the importance of offering more opportunities to Japanese students to learn about other cultures. Aoki (2001) connected the strong self-culture consciousness to the reality of inefficient English education in Japan. Manifesting that lack of common sense in intercultural communication has become one of the factors hindering the development of intercultural communication education. Thorp (1991) and Neustupny (2000) analyzed cultural friction between Japanese and foreigners, drawing the conclusion that foreign cultures are considered negatively in this interaction because of the strong attachment to Japanese culture.

In sum, "active exchanges of ideas and genuine involvement become the basis for intercultural communication" (Zhang and Mok 2009). Willingness to engage with other cultures and accept new concepts from other ethnic groups is the first step to realize true intercultural

communication. Conflicts caused by misunderstandings and cultural differences can be solved by improving the intercultural awareness of all parties involved (Oto 2005).

As Harmer (1998:52) summarized the four tasks in teaching a foreign language – "there are four things that students need to do with a new language: be exposed to it, understand its meaning, understand its form (how it is constructed) and practice it" (see also McKay and Hornberger 1996) – students need to be exposed to the culture when they are being taught a foreign language. Seelye (1987:29) further emphasized that it is of crucial importance to teach culture to students at very early stages, that is, "during the first two years of foreign language study." It could be argued that a higher chance of solving the problem of conflicts among different ethnic groups would come with the efforts of introducing more information about minority groups within the country and helping Japanese students acquire a better understanding about cultural differences.

Minority Groups in Japan
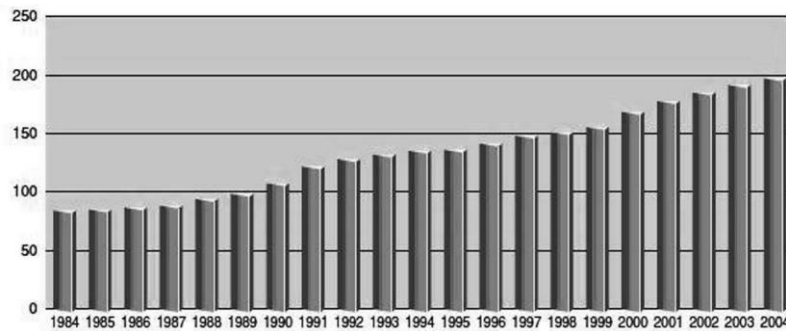
Table 1. Number of Foreigners in Japan
(Scale: Ten Thousand People)

Historically, Japan has not been a monolingual and monocultural nation. Minority groups such as the Ainu and the Ryukyuan were able to maintain their identities before the assimilation policy of the Japanese government in the 18th century. The Japanese government established regulations to "'civilize' the Ainu by converting them (often forcibly) to

Japanese customs and lifestyles" (Siddle 1997:22). Japanese was announced to be the only acceptable language in the classroom. Similar policies were established in the case of Ryukyuan. "The myth that Japan is a monoethnic, monolingual country is a fabrication, a strategy for creating a national identity….Japanese language and language policies have been used as tools by the government in its effort to assimilate minority cultures" (Kirk 2006).
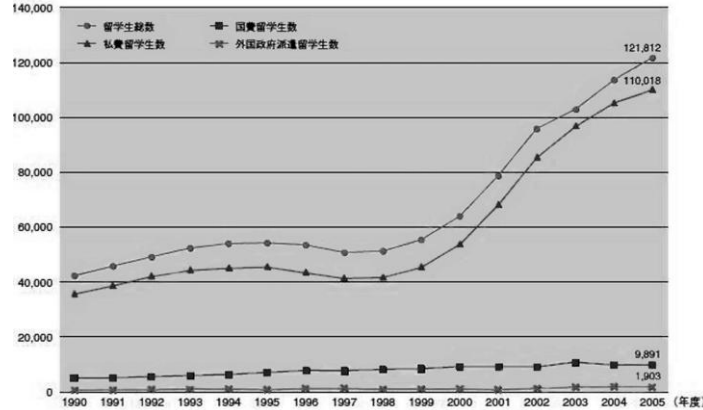

**Table 2. Number of Accepted Foreign Students in Japan
(Scale: Ten Thousand People)**

Realities in modern Japanese society show a strong tendency for large populations of non-Japanese residents to get involved in the daily life of Japan. With the rapid increase of foreign students in institutions of higher education and foreign workers being employed or married in Japan, minority groups such as Brazilians, Koreans and Chinese have grown significantly in Japan. With this increase, conflicts between minorities groups and local residents have been occurring more frequently than ever before. According to the Japanese Ministry of Justice Immigration Bureau (2005), the total number of foreign residents in Japan reached 1,973,747, and the figure shows an increasing tendency (Table 1). Table 2 indicates the number of foreign students accepted by Japanese educational institutions at various levels. Many of them choose to work in Japan because Japan is in great need of a working population to overcome its demographic crisis. This has largely facilitated the employment of foreigners. The influx of immigrants began in the 1970s, but peaked in the 1980s and 1990s. Though the number of foreigners officially registered occupies only 1.63% of the

entire Japanese population, 52.9% of the foreigners are in their 20s and 30s, according to data from the Japan Immigration Bureau. They help solve the social problem in Japan caused by the unprecedented increase in retirees relative to the size of the work force, according to studies from the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2010).

Immigrants bring to Japan their native languages and cultures, and these have made a strong impact on every aspect of Japanese society. Unfortunately, Japan is not well prepared to accept new cultures and languages. This is because intercultural communication activities are carried out on the basis of a national policy that seeks to promote Japanese language and culture around the world. This often takes the form of a one-way delivery of Japanese culture, with little attention being paid to the idea that Japan needs to better understand other cultures and languages (Zhang 2006). As the minority groups started to "assert their ethnic and linguistic identities" (Riordan 2005), conflicts between immigrant groups and local communities have been observed in cultural encounters. Immigrants demand equal social rights and mutual understanding because they are contributing to Japanese society just as the local people do.

The coexistence of multi-forms of culture is the most distinguished feature of internationalization and globalization. "National political reactions can either welcome cultural diversity as multiculturalism, where cultural pluralism is accepted as an asset, or adopt assimilation, where minority cultural populations are expected to abandon their linguistic heritages and conform to the majority language and cultural norms" (Eckford 2007; see also Lotherington 2004). Policies in Japan towards intercultural communication "are inadequate to cope not only with Japan's present linguistic matrix, but also with the dramatic growth of immigration, which Japan relies on to fuel its growing labor needs" (Eckford 2007).

Enhancing Intercultural Communication in Japan by Promoting Bilingual Education

The problems with the language policies of Japan have been pointed out by many researchers. Eckford (2007) remarked that "the demand for efficient implementation of language policy in Japan is immediate." Kirt (2006) criticizes that the language policies of Japan are "far more inductive to a reinvigorated community." They have been characterized as being "non-interventionist," which implies a choice preferring "normal rapport between the main linguistic group and the minorities evolve on its own…. This almost invariably favors the dominant

group" (Answers.com, Language Policy, accessed Aug. 7, 2010). Vaipae (2001) classified the current situation of linguistic education in Japan into a category in which the language issue is being treated as a problem, rather than a right and a source. She further demonstrated her concern by stating the following in a publication created by a Ministry of Education Study Group: "There is no difference in enrolling foreign students….Teaching should be done according to the Japanese curriculum. There is no need for their native language education" (Ministry of Education Study Group 1996 cited in Vaipae 2001:199). Japanese is the only acceptable language in public schools and "MEXT continues to review texts for appropriacy in language and content as well as create a singular curriculum for the entire country" (Kirk 2006). Obviously, minorities in Japan are linguistically marginalized by language and policy because multicultural or bilingual education is not supported by the Japanese public education system (Eckford 2007).

The Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) Program is an educational plan set up by MEXT and integrated into public school curriculums. It aims, through this research and implementation, to lead to the "successful linguistic and cultural assimilation of new immigrants into Japanese society" (Eckford 2007). However, surveys conducted by MEXT (2005) show that at least 16% of children in need of JSL support did not receive such instruction. In some areas, JSL programs do not even exist or unqualified teachers are hired to fulfill the goal (Cummins 1997). The JSL program "facilitates the acquisition of the majority language, with little consideration paid to the education of the language minority students" (Garcia 1997).

Students of immigrants registered in public schools, especially children born to foreign parents, are in great need of bilingual education. Their linguistic deficiencies have prevented them from making progress in academic learning and they are compelled to adapt to Japanese society (Hayashibe and Jiang 1998). Furthermore, studies have shown that native language proficiency is the factor that mostly affects the Japanese language acquisition by language minority children (Cummins and Nakashima 1985). Well-developed linguistic skills in the first language will be transferred to the second language (Cummins 1998). Children with higher linguistic competency in their native languages tend to make faster progress in their Japanese learning. Therefore, "it is important and necessary that the students maintain and further develop their native language ability" (Mu 2006, 2008).

Bilingual education is a bifacial issue that determines much of the discussion. This is because bilingual programs "can be considered either additive or subtractive in terms of their linguistic goals, depending on whether students are encouraged to add to their linguistic repertoire or to replace their native language with the majority language" (U.S. History Encyclopedia: Bilingual Education 2008). The key point here is that bilingual education programs need be designed in a manner that is "linguistically, culturally, and developmentally appropriate for the students" so that the additive aspects are amplified and the effectiveness of bilingual education systems can be maximized (U.S. History Encyclopedia: Bilingual Education 2008). "The chances of developing functional bilingualism will be dramatically reduced if foreign students are not given a reasonable amount of exposure to their L1 (first language) and in addition are denied the chance of developing appropriate skills in their L2 (second language)" (Eckford 2007).

"Language is a powerful device to increase dialogue between different ethnic groups and strengthen mutual understandings with each other due to its close association with culture" (Zhang and Mok 2009). Thus, it can be used as a tool to help smooth intercultural communication within a multi-cultural community (Pavlenko, Blackledge, Piller and Dwyer 2001; Zhang and Mok 2009). "We need to collaboratively work toward a system dedicated to quality education for all students, a system that focuses on an individual's needs within society, not society's needs for individuals" (Cadiero-Kaplan 2004:107).

Conclusion

Since the Japanese government is planning to invite more visitors to the country and establish its image as a globalized nation, it should enhance the education regarding foreign languages and cultures, so that real intercultural communication is carried out. It is the responsibility of the host country to help immigrants preserve their original languages and cultural heritages through special educational and national policy integration. Generosity and tolerance towards minorities are required from all sectors of society, but the amalgamation process for minorities within the mainstream of the society may take much more time than expected. Bilingual education takes the advantage of minorities' linguistic sources, which act as a lubricant between the local community and the minority groups.

Minorities need to be better grasped so that mutual understandings can be reached between different ethnic groups. "They are not only eager to

acquire necessary information, which aids their acclimatization to the new social environment, but also anxious to attain a sense of being recognized, accepted and respected" (Zhang and Mok 2009). Therefore, innovative reconsideration about the bilingual education issue will make the current educational practices more effective for cultural integration. It is the responsibility of the host government to help immigrants and their later generations to complete their scholastic learning smoothly and obtain employment opportunities (Eckford 2007; Zhang and Mok 2009).

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