

# **SOME ISSUES OF FOREIGN STUDENTS IN A JAPANESE SCHOOL: A PILOT STUDY IN MIE**

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This paper focuses on issues facing foreign students currently studying in a junior high school in Japan. A questionnaire was given to these students to determine what issues they face and the results are discussed below. The author introduces some measures to support the students by the school. In addition, the author makes some suggestions for creating a better environment of the “internationalized classrooms” and how it can be made and maintained.

This questionnaire, as a pilot study, was conducted in a junior high school of Mie Prefecture in February through March 2007. The questions the subjects were asked were (1) what language(s) they use to talk with their parents/families at home, (2) how much they use Japanese daily, (3) how much they usually understand the contents in social studies class, (4) how much they usually understand the contents in mathematics class, (5) if they are interested in studying Japanese, (6) if they are studying Japanese in a supplementary class, (7) if they are interested in studying English, and (8) if they are studying the languages of their own countries.

The results demonstrate the students’ multi-nationalization with a variety of their native languages. They also imply the necessity of comprehensive educational measures to help these students acquire/study Japanese as the instructional medium at school.

*Key words:* foreign students in Japan, Japanese as a foreign language, newcomers, language acquisition/studies, cross-cultural communication

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on issues facing foreign students currently studying in a junior high school in Japan. A questionnaire was given to these students to determine what issues they face and the results are discussed below.

More foreign people have come to Japan in order to work since the immigration control law was revised in 1990<sup>1</sup>. This revision made it easier for people with Japanese ancestry to get working visas.

Those who came to Japan mainly for the purpose of working after the 1990 deregulation are called “newcomers<sup>2</sup>.” Many of these tend to live in the cities that host manufacturing industry due to better job availability. Mie Prefecture<sup>3</sup>, where the author teaches English as a foreign language to university students, is no exception. It is no exaggeration to say that they work to support a part of Japanese economy growth and development. Some of them have come to Japan with their families. While parents work, the children are to study in schools. Many of the children, however, have language and social problems in Japanese schools.

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<sup>1</sup> The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) of Japan revised the immigration control law in 1990, which has deregulated the Japanese working visa application policy. This revision made it easier for people with Japanese ancestry, mainly from South America, to get working visas. In addition, this revision has allowed Japanese companies to enlarge the capacity of job trainees accepted from Asian countries. According to the MOJ (2007), as of 31 December 2006, the number of foreign residents who hold the certificate of alien registration issued by the Japanese government is 2,084,919 nationwide (It occupies 1.63% of Japan’s total population). Compared this with 1,482,707 of year 1997, 40.6 percent has increased. One of the main reasons for this rise is the revision of the immigration control law.

<sup>2</sup> Newcomers mean the foreign residents living in Japan, those who have been admitted to Japan mainly for the purpose of work after the 1990 revision of the immigration control law. The foreign residents, on the other hand, whose roots are from Korean Peninsula, are called “old comers.”

<sup>3</sup> According to the International Affairs Office of Mie Prefecture (2008) and Kusumoto (2006:4), as of 31 December 2007, the number of foreign residents who hold the certificate of alien registration is 51,638 in Mie Prefecture. The majority groups are as below:

- 21,338 Brazilians (12,516 in 1997; 70.5% increase)
- 9,019 Chinese (1,641; 4.5 times increase)
- 6,205 Koreans (7,625; 18% decrease)
- 4,764 Filipinos (1,059; 3.5 times increase)
- 3,787 Peruvians (1,565; 1.4 times increase)

Taking this situation into consideration, the author gave a questionnaire, as a pilot study, to the foreign students studying in a Japanese junior high school<sup>4</sup> located in Mie Prefecture. The results show that some of them have had difficulties in understanding the contents of the classes in Japanese. The author introduces some measures to support these students by the school. In addition, the author makes some suggestions for creating a better environment of the “internationalized classrooms” and how it can be made and maintained.

## 2. QUESTIONNAIRE (SEE APPENDIX 1)

In order to conduct this research, a questionnaire was made. It includes eight questions as follows: (1) what language(s) they use to talk with their parents/families at home, (2) how much they use Japanese daily, (3) how much they usually understand the contents in social studies class, (4) how much they usually understand the contents in mathematics class, (5) if they are interested in studying Japanese, (6) if they are studying Japanese in a supplementary class, (7) if they are interested in studying English, and (8) if they are studying the languages of their own countries.

The author visited the junior high school and asked a teacher who is in charge of teaching and supporting foreign students to have them fill out the questionnaire. After each subject answered the questionnaire, the teacher gave it back to the author.

## 3. SUBJECTS

The subjects are foreign students who are studying at a junior high school located in Mie Prefecture. Eleven out of 15 foreign students enrolling at the school completed the questionnaire. Considering the variety of the subjects’ native languages, the author prepared the questionnaire in four languages: Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese, and English. The subjects’ profiles are as follows:

Sex: 4 males, 7 females

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<sup>4</sup> As of April 2006, the total enrollment is 517.

School year (Class): 2 first-year students, 4 second-year students, 5 third-year students

Age: two 13-year olders, four 14-year olders, and five 15-year olders

Nationality: 6 from Brazil, 2 from Peru, 1 each from Bolivia, China, and the Philippines

Place of birth: 3 in Japan, 8 outside Japan

Period of stay in Japan: 6 years and 8 months on the average, the longest for 14 years and 3 months, and the shortest for 7 months.

#### 4. RESULTS (SEE APPENDIX 2)

##### 4.1. QUESTION 1: WHAT LANGUAGE DO YOU USE MOST WHEN YOU SPEAK WITH YOUR PARENTS AND/OR RELATIVES AT HOME?

It is clear that each subject uses her/his native language at home. In addition, one Brazilian and one Peruvian answered that they use Japanese as well as their first languages Spanish and Portuguese.

##### 4.2. QUESTION 2: IN YOUR DAILY LIFE, ABOUT HOW MUCH DO YOU USE JAPANESE?

This question asks how much each subject uses Japanese in her/his daily life. On the average, it is 65 percent approximately. On the whole, the longer she/he stays in Japan, the more she/he uses Japanese for communication. It is likely that each subject uses her/his native language more at home while she/he communicates in Japanese outside.

4.3. QUESTION 3: IN YOUR SOCIAL STUDIES CLASS, ABOUT HOW MUCH DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE CONTENTS? AND QUESTION 4: IN YOUR MATHEMATICS CLASS, ABOUT HOW MUCH DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE CONTENTS?

This is a question asking the subjects about how much they think they understand the both class contents. On the average, the ratio of understanding they claimed is 49.4 percent in social studies class and 49.5 percent in mathematics class respectively. In social studies class, foreign students might have more difficulties in figuring out social elements of Japanese own. On the other hand, equations and calculation rules are universal. Due to this fact, the author had wondered if the subjects would feel that they understand mathematics better than social studies. The results, however, seem to show no significant difference. There are likes and dislikes depending on the subject/student. This might be a possible reason for the results.

Some subjects indicate that they are struggling to understand both social studies and mathematics. It is not certain, however, whether they have difficulties in the Japanese used as instructional medium in class or they feel difficult in understanding the contents of each subject. This should be investigated in a future study.

Especially for those who show low percentage of understanding in each subject, some language assistance should be given to have them understand the class better in Japanese.

4.4. QUESTION 5: IS IT INTERESTING FOR YOU TO STUDY JAPANESE?

Ten out of 11 subjects (91%) say that they have interests in studying Japanese. Considering the subjects' age, 13 to 15 years old, it seems reasonable to suppose that they are interested in Japanese, the language used in the society they live now.

#### 4.5. QUESTION 6: ARE YOU STUDYING JAPANESE IN A SUPPLEMENTARY CLASS?

Five subjects (45.4%) say that they are attending a Japanese supplementary class. For the foreign students, there is no doubt that they should acquire Japanese ability in order to understand the contents of the classes better. Especially, the students whose stay in Japan is short are recommended to attend the supplementary classes not only for learning Japanese but also for getting accustomed to school life in Japan.

#### 4.6. QUESTION 7: IS IT INTERESTING FOR YOU TO STUDY ENGLISH?

Eight (72.7%) show their interests in studying English. The author mentioned the importance that the foreign students acquire Japanese to better understand the classes. In addition, the result indicates that these 8 subjects are interested in studying English as well. Since their native languages are not English, it may be quite natural for these students to have interests in English, the most widely used language around the world.

#### 4.7. QUESTION 8: ARE YOU STUDYING THE LANGUAGE OF YOUR OWN COUNTRY?

Nine students (81.8%) answered, “No” while only 1 (9.1%) said she/he studies her/his native language. It can be a serious concern. It is known that one may become adult with limited native language ability if she/he fails to acquire adequate amount of the language before reaching the critical period. In addition, if she/he cannot master Japanese to follow the classes at school either, she/he might face the “double-limited” crisis, the situation in which she/he cannot master either language. To avoid this situation, it is strongly recommended that the foreign students study their native languages consciously. It will also lead them to maintain their self-identity.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

### 5.1. STUDENTS' MULTI-NATIONALIZATION WITH DIFFERENT NATIVE LANGUAGES

First of all, as shown in the subjects' profiles, the multi-nationalization and multi-language phenomena are observed. There are 6 Brazilians, 2 Peruvians, and 1 Bolivian, Chinese, and Filipino respectively. It also means the majority of the subjects (9=81.8%) come from South America, and their native languages are Spanish and Portuguese. However, there are students with other nationalities such as China and the Philippines. In case these students need language assistance in order to understand the classes in Japanese, the teachers might have difficulties in communicating with them due to their different native languages.

### 5.2. POSSIBILITY OF LOSING NATIVE LANGUAGES

Answering Question 8, if they study their native languages, 9 subjects said they do not. This can be a serious problem. Ichikawa (2004:51-93) shows his concern over native Japanese children who have stayed and studied in English speaking areas for a certain period of time. They may have possibilities to become double-limited in both of these languages' operational capability. Focusing on the foreign students studying at Japanese school, it is no doubt that they need to acquire their mother tongues. While learning Japanese as the instructional medium of the classes, they should make efforts not to forget their own languages. Nishihara (1999:7) advises that foreign students should not be prohibited from chatting in their native languages at Japanese schools when they are out of class. In other words, she insists that they should not limit their use of their mother tongues in order to acquire Japanese quickly. From this point of view, what is important is clear: the foreign students should try to acquire and/or learn their native languages.

## 6. SOME MEASURES TO SUPPORT THE FOREIGN STUDENTS BY THE SCHOOL<sup>5</sup>

The followings are the measures by the school to support the foreign students.

### 6.1. OFFERING SUPPLEMENTARY JAPANESE CLASSES<sup>6</sup>

The junior high school offers supplementary Japanese classes for the foreign students. The students whose Japanese ability is not enough to understand classes are pulled out from the regular classes, and study Japanese in different classrooms intensively. The level and total hours offered in the supplementary class vary, depending on how high or how low each student's Japanese ability is. There are some possibilities that the operation of the supplementary classes gets difficult where each foreign student has different native languages, as this research has shown.

Amongst the five principal subjects taught at school, which are Japanese, social studies, mathematics, science, and English, the foreign students generally need to learn Japanese and social studies most in the supplementary classes. This is because Japanese characters and Japanese things are the main contents in these two subjects. Next, the students tend to learn mathematics and science by being pulled out from the regular classes. Since equations and symbols of elements are common to most all languages, the students may need less help to

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<sup>5</sup> The pieces of information described in the section of "Some Measures to Support the Foreign Students by the School" was obtained through the informal telephone interviews to the teachers who currently teach and who used to teach the foreign students at the junior high school where this research was conducted.

<sup>6</sup> There are two commonly used styles in supplementary Japanese lessons: the pullout lessons and the walk-in lessons. In the pullout lessons, the students who need to study Japanese are "pulled out" from the regular junior high school classes and are given Japanese lessons in different classrooms until being able to understand the regular lessons to some extent in Japanese. It is up to each student how long she/he learns in the classrooms of the pullout lessons. In the walk-in lessons, besides a teacher who teaches a subject, another teacher "walks in" a classroom and helps the foreign students who need Japanese language assistance to understand the contents of the regular class. In the junior high school where the author conducted this research, only the pullout lessons were given.



understand these subjects at the Japanese school. As for English, the students have less need to attend a supplementary English class because many of them, 8 out of 11 subjects, share almost the same alphabets in Spanish and Portuguese as used in English. In other subjects such as music, fine arts, etc., there is no supplementary Japanese class.

## 6.2. THE TEACHERS WHO CAN COMMUNICATE IN THE FOREIGN STUDENTS' NATIVE LANGUAGES

Those teachers who are in charge of the “pull out” classes mentioned in the previous paragraph include two who are able to communicate with the foreign students in their native languages, mainly Spanish and Portuguese. These teachers have a very important role in internationalized classrooms, offering classes to both Japanese students and foreign students without interpreters.

## 6.3. A FULL-TIME INTERPRETER

Besides the teachers, one full-time interpreter is assigned to the school. Her/his role is to become a bridge between the foreign students and the teachers whose knowledge of the students' native languages are limited. The students may need to speak in their mother tongues when they would like to express their feelings, especially in case of being in trouble. Not only in classrooms but also outside classrooms at school, the interpreter may be able to relieve the stress of these students.

## 7. PROBLEMS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

In order to solve the problems observed in DISCUSSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS, the junior high school employs the measures mentioned in the previous section to support the foreign students. In other words, the school is focusing on what the foreign students need to get accustomed to school life in Japan.

The situation in which the foreign students and the teachers are currently put should be improved from the viewpoint of educational administration.

First of all, more teachers and school staff who are able to understand the foreign students' mother tongues should be hired at the school. Supplementary language assistance is indispensable for the students who have difficulties in understanding the classes in Japanese. In multi-nationalization of the foreign students, the teachers and school staff are expected to understand the first languages of the students to some degree so that the teachers and school staff can communicate with the students more smoothly. Even if the number of the foreign students is small, the teachers and school staff may need to be familiar with plural foreign languages if the students' native languages are different. Obviously, the junior high school where the foreign students answered the questionnaire has a shortage of these types of teachers. It is entirely fair to say more multi-lingual teachers and school staffs should be employed as soon as possible.

It is not difficult to imagine that the foreign students studying at Japanese schools often feel nervous, especially until they get accustomed to the school. It is because the language is different as well as the atmosphere of the school life itself. The foreign students, however, should also make efforts to study Japanese so that they could understand the classes in Japanese. At the same time, they should study their native languages in order to maintain self-identity.

The ratio of the foreign students at the junior high school is only about 3 percent, which is a fairly small number. It must be very important, however, to understand the situation in which these minority foreign students are put. On the other hand, the Japanese students should learn about the situation of the foreign students and understand the fact that they are international classmates at the school. Moreover, it will lead to a real educational internationalization atmosphere that the teachers are trying to create in which both of the Japanese and foreign students can enjoy studies with each other. This is related to what Yamada (2005:37-41) would like Japanese people to think about: what is the definition of "cosmopolitan."

Furthermore, Ushida (2004:89) shows in detail what Japanese people should do in order to make a better international society in Japan as follows:

Although people in Japanese society have been good at taking in different cultures and adapting them to their own, they have tended to exclude foreigners. This is mainly because Japanese people view foreigners and foreign cultural elements as causes that may destroy the unification of Japanese society. .... Recently, Japanese people are expected to establish an international society where foreigners and foreign cultures are respected.

They are also expected to show generosity, not force foreigners to assimilate into mainstream Japanese culture, and not exclude them from Japanese society. Japanese society is greatly helped by the support of many countries around the world and there should not be any discrimination against foreign minorities. Japanese people should create an environment where both Japanese and foreigners can recognize each other as important neighbors and partners.

Moreover, Ishi (2006:5) states that the cultural and sports exchange should be more active between Japanese and Brazilians, one of the biggest ethnic groups living in Japan, to make a better coexistent environment.

## 8. CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, there are some issues facing foreign students at the junior high school where the author conducted this research. The teachers and teaching staff support the foreign students so that they could get accustomed to Japanese language and Japanese school life early<sup>7</sup>.

At this point, however, supporting foreign students are left only to the school and the teachers. It means that there is a big difference of educational services each foreign student can be offered depending on what school she/he attends. Therefore, the Board of Education in each prefecture and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of Japan are requested to show some comprehensive measures to support foreign students attending Japanese schools as soon as possible. As referred to Introduction section, it is no exaggeration to say that the “newcomers” work to support a part of Japanese economy growth and development in the age of Japan’s great demographic change. In this sense, as the coexistent partners of Japanese people, they should be provided with the secure educational environment for their children. This is the MEXT’s task with a first priority. It is fairly certain

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<sup>7</sup> Japanese classes for adults are also given in the town that hosts the junior high school where this research was conducted. Voluntary teachers teach the adult classes every Saturday night at a municipal facility. There are three levels available: basic, intermediate and advanced. In addition, Spanish, Portuguese and English lessons are also held for the Japanese residents. As of July 2006, the foreign residents occupy 4.35% to the total population (approximately 49,000) of this town. Both of these Japanese and foreign language lessons are expected to function as a cross-cultural communication bridge over Japanese and foreigners.

that Japanese students can also learn with better understanding the internationalization of Japan in such an educational environment.

When the immigration control law was revised in 1990, the Japanese government did not expect the case that quite a number of newcomers would settle down in Japan. Therefore, it is difficult to say that the government was considering the situation in which some of the children of the newcomers study at Japanese schools. Consequently, it has not provided these children with enough educational support nationwide in teaching Japanese and offering a program to get them accustomed to Japanese society. The government should take an immediate action in education so that foreign students could be accepted to Japanese schools and society more smoothly.

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## APPENDIX 1

### Questionnaire for foreign students currently studying at public junior high schools

My name is Hajime Umeda, a professor of English at Suzuka International University. Currently, I am conducting research on "society and languages." I would be very grateful if you could assist my research by answering the following questions. The results of this questionnaire will be used strictly as data for my academic research. You must be a foreign student studying at a public junior high school in order to be eligible to respond. When you answer, please do NOT consult with anybody else. I hope that the results of this research will contribute to providing better educational programs for foreign students in Japanese public schools.

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\*First, please give your personal profile below.

1. sex (Circle 'a' or 'b')  
a. male      b. female
2. age \_\_\_\_\_ school year \_\_\_\_\_
3. nationality \_\_\_\_\_
4. Were you born in Japan? (Circle 'a' or 'b')  
a. Yes      b. No
5. How long have you lived in Japan? \_\_\_\_\_ years and \_\_\_\_\_ months.

### QUESTIONNAIRE

Question 1: What language do you use most when you speak with your parents and/or relatives at home? (Circle the language.)

- a. English
- b. Spanish

- c. Portuguese  
 d. Japanese  
 e. other (Please write the name of the language. \_\_\_\_\_ )

Question 2: In your daily life, about how much do you use Japanese everyday? Please write the number in percent.

About \_\_\_\_\_ percent (%)

Question 3: In your social studies class, about how much do you understand the contents? Please write the number in percent.

About \_\_\_\_\_ percent (%)

Question 4: In your mathematics class, about how much do you understand the contents? Please write the number in percent.

About \_\_\_\_\_ percent (%)

Question 5: Is it interesting for you to study Japanese? (Circle 'a' or 'b')

- a. Yes                      b. No

Question 6: Are you studying Japanese in a supplementary class (a toridashi class)? (Circle 'a' or 'b')

- a. Yes                      b. No

Question 7: Is it interesting for you to study English? (Circle 'a' or 'b')

- a. Yes                      b. No

Question 8: Are you studying the language of your own country? (Circle 'a' or 'b')

- a. Yes                      b. No

END

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

## APPENDIX 2. RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Subj. #	Language Answer to the Questionnaire	Sex	Grade	Age	Nationality	Pl. of birth	Period of living in Japan
1	Japanese	Female	2	14	China	Outside Japan	6 yrs.
2	Japanese	Male	2	14	Brazil	In Japan	14 yrs. & 3 mos.
3	Portuguese	Male	1	13	Brazil	In Japan	7 yrs. & 11 mos.
4	English	Female	3	15	Philippines	Outside Japan	1 yr.

5	Spanish	Female	1	13	Bolivia	Outside Japan	4 yrs.
6	Portuguese	Female	3	15	Brazil	Outside Japan	7 mos.
7	Portuguese	Male	3	15	Brazil	Outside Japan	1 yr. & 11 mos.
8	Japanese	Female	2	14	Peru	Outside Japan	8 yrs.
9	Japanese	Female	2	14	Brazil	In Japan	12 yrs. & 3 mos.
10	Japanese	Female	3	15	Brazil	Outside Japan	9 yrs.
11	Japanese	Male	3	15	Peru	Outside Japan	8 yrs. & 1 mo.
Results	Japanese=6	Male=4	1st=2	13=2	Brazil=6	In Japan=3	Ave.=6 yrs. & 8 mos.
	English=1	Female=7	2nd=4	14=4	Peru=2	Outside Japan=8	
	Spanish=1		3rd=5	15=5	Bolivia=1		
	Portuguese=3				China=1		
					Philippines=1		

Subj. #	Q1. Lang. at Home	Q2. Percentage of Jpn. Use	Q3. Percentage of Understanding Soc. Studies	Q4. Percentage of Understanding Math.
1	Chinese	80	90	30
2	Portuguese	70	60	90
3	Portuguese	70	5	15
4	Tagalog	50	No Answer	60
5	Spanish	60	50	60
6	Portuguese	20	0	30
7	Portuguese	20	No Answer	No Answer
8	Spanish	80	100	80
9	Portuguese, Japanese	85	50	30
10	Portuguese	80	40	50
11	Spanish, Japanese	98	50	50

Results	Japanese=2	Gross/Ave.(%)	Gross/Ave.(%)	Gross/Ave.(%)
	Tagalog=1	713	445	495
	Spanish=3	64.82	49.4	49.5
	Portuguese=6			
	Chinese=1			

Subj. #	Q5. Interests in Jpn.	Q6. Taking Sup. Jpn. Classes	Q7. Interests in Eng.	Q8. Studying Native Lang.
1	Yes	No	No	Yes
2	Yes	No	Yes	No
3	Yes/No	Yes	Yes	No
4	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
5	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
6	Yes	Yes	Yes	No Answer
7	Yes	Yes	No	No
8	Yes	No	Yes	No
9	Yes	No	Yes	No
10	Yes	No	Yes	No
11	Yes	No	No	No
Results	Yes=10	Yes=5	Yes=8	Yes=1
	Yes/No=1	No=6	No=3	No=9
				No Answer=1