Revisiting Japanese Language Education in the UK  
A survey on learners’ and teachers’ perceptions regarding intercultural understanding

Hanako Fujino, Oxford Brookes University  
Junko Hagiwara, University of Oxford  
Kaori Nishizawa, University of Oxford  
Kazuki Morimoto, University of Leeds  
Yuka Oeda, University of Leeds

With the advance of globalisation we are living in an increasingly diverse society where people with different cultures and values coexist. Foreign language education has also taken a ‘cultural turn’ (Byram et al. 2013) by which, in addition to learning to use the target language accurately and appropriately, gaining intercultural communicative competence (ICC), i.e., understanding and accepting other cultures, has become a central theme. In the age of international mobility and instability, it became required in higher education in the UK to train students to be tolerant and be interested in other cultures (Bothwell 2016). In reality, however, language and communication continue to be the main focus in many language classrooms and ICC has not been integrated as one of the learning objectives (Byram et al. 2013). Studies have also shown that intercultural competence (IC) does not always develop naturally through the experience of studying abroad, and suggest the need for intercultural training prior to studying abroad (Behrnd & Porzelt 2012).

This study is a fundamental research on the awareness of IC and ICC in Japanese Language education in the UK. An online questionnaire was administered to each group. The questions focused on their motives for teaching or learning Japanese, how they perceived IC and ICC and what they thought their contribution to society was. Some questions asked the participants to explain in detail and a total of 34 teachers and 38 university students, who are majoring in Japanese and have studied abroad in Japan, participated.

The results from analysing the student questionnaire using Byram’s ICC Model (1997) showed that in general many of the students lacked “critical cultural awareness”. Although many of them thought that they were tolerant to other cultures, there was a big difference in their self-awareness to IC. The results also showed that many of the students did not recognize British Universities as a ‘multicultural society’. The results from analysing the teacher questionnaire showed that many recognized British Universities as a ‘multicultural society’ and fully understood that the classrooms of Japanese language education could improve IC and ICC effectively. However, to the question, ‘Are you teaching students to have an awareness of our multilingual or multicultural society?’ only a few teachers provided concrete examples of IC and ICC related teaching, and few curricula included the training of IC and ICC. That is, there was a separation of teachers’ belief and actual teaching.

Based on the results above, we would like to consider what we can do in order to improve IC and ICC for Japanese language education in the UK.