

Intercultural Awareness via Improvements in Intercultural Communication

The Need for Change in Japan

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Abstract

The forces of globalization and intercultural awareness have profound impacts on Japan, a country which places high priority on its cultural identity. Over the past decades, however, the continuation of propagandising a mono ethnic nation-state has become more difficult, if not impossible, due to economic integration and demographic changes. This paper discusses the current state of intercultural awareness in Japan and highlights the importance of addressing the issue of intercultural communication. It will be argued that Japan should adopt more tolerant policies towards minority cultures rather than a policy of conventional assimilation.

Keywords: *Intercultural awareness, globalization, Japan, Communication, Demographic change*

Introduction

Two of the more popular catchphrases of the last two decades are globalization and intercultural awareness. The integration of the world's economies and technologies has fostered an increased need to not only understand one's own culture, but to view the world through six dimensions, or lenses simultaneously; the various perspectives of technology, environmentalism, politics, culture, national security and financial markets (Friedman 1999:7).

But what is globalization? A precise definition is hard to discern as the concept itself is continuously evolving and means different things to different people. One perspective is that it is related to the reordering of the global economy with the main focus to generate a reduction in international trade barriers such as tariffs, export fees and import quotas with the eventual goal of increasing overall wealth. Globalization can be seen as the driving force in the process of unifying economic growth making it the main engine of social changes for most of the world's societies. Eriksen (1999) points out, "the present human world is more tightly integrated than at any earlier point in history" and the pervasive effect of globalization is "influencing the lives of people everywhere."

Rosenau (1997:361) defined globalization as a process that is "changing humankind's preoccupation with territoriality and the traditional arrangements of the state system." Massey (1994) describes the idea of globalization as an uneven process, in which concentration, density of flow, neglect or even exclusion might be recorded.

All of these definitions reveal the very basic nature of globalization. Globalization has a tendency to accentuate fundamental cultural differences and has the potential to trigger intercultural conflict. This makes intercultural awareness an all important component of understanding globalization and a proper understanding of one's own cultural identity, on a personal as well as a societal level, essential in today's world.

And, what is intercultural awareness? A general definition is the willingness and ability to realize the need for social changes within an international context as well as to understand the increasing connectivity between different cultural groups. Ideally, this increasing connectivity will be seen as an uneven process of development upon which further efforts to improve the situation will need to be undertaken in order to ensure a more globalized social community. Intercultural awareness is necessary in order to achieve competence in intercultural relations. Chen (2007) argues it is “the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication” and refers to “the understanding of cultural conventions that affect how people think and behave.”

We adopt the definition proposed by Korzilius, Hooft and Planken (2007), because it is more practical and understandable when compared with other more complex and implicit definitions:

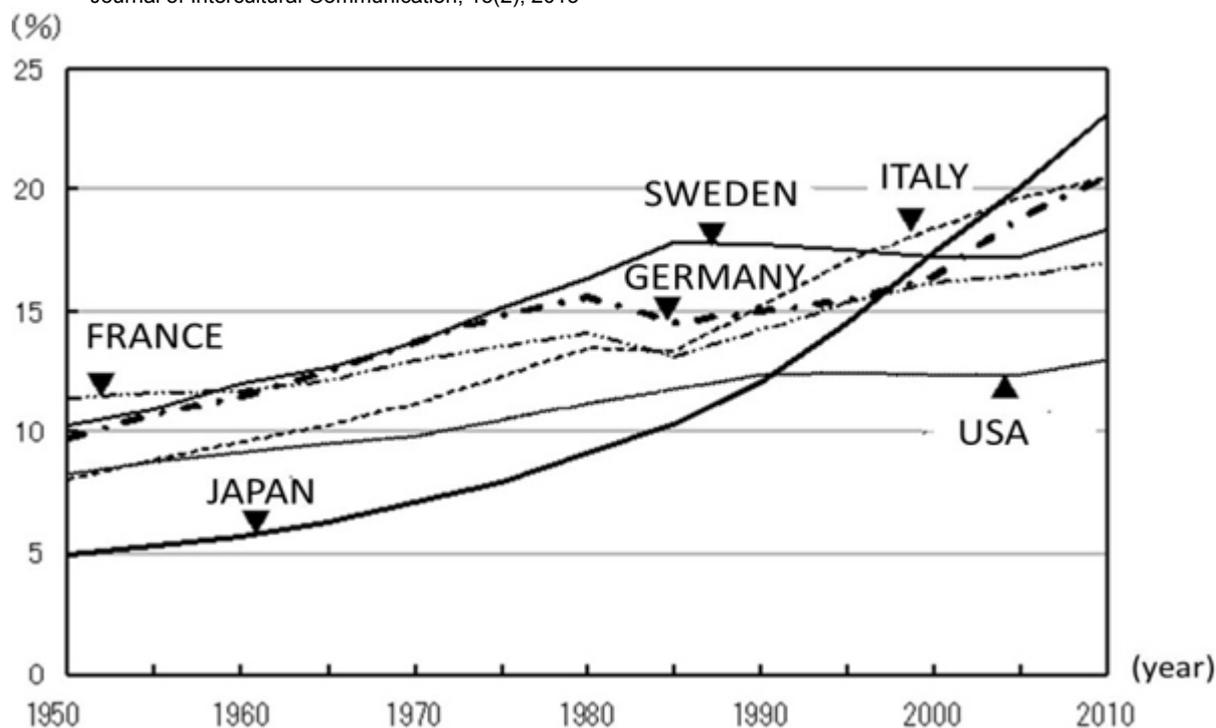
“Intercultural awareness is the ability to empathize and to decentre. More specifically, in a communication situation, it is the ability to take on the perspective of a conversational partner from another culture or with another nationality, and of their cultural background and thus, to be able to understand and take into consideration interlocutors’ different perspectives simultaneously.”

One can view intercultural competence as “the demonstrated ability to enact a cultural identity in a mutually appropriate and effective manner” (Samovar and Porter 1994). As can be seen, the concept of globalization lays the foundation for defining the term intercultural awareness. In this study, the above notions are adopted as the basis for the interpretation of the terms.

One country which finds itself increasingly confronted with the forces of globalization and intercultural awareness due to both internal and external factors is Japan, a country which places high priority on its cultural identity. Traditionally, the Japanese have regarded their islands as a homogeneous country and a vision of Japan imposed by nationalists within the power elite is that Japan “has been mono-ethnic from the beginning to the present” (Lie 2001). This claim is stressed even though there are ethnic minorities, *Ainu* and *Ryukyuan*, living within the national borders albeit these groups have lost many of their customs, traditions and even language. Residents in Japan of either Korean or Chinese descent, most forcibly brought to Japan during the Second World War are also still considered foreigners despite living in Japan for close to three generations. The only real option they had was to assimilate without much attention given to their ethnic features (Maher 1997).

Over the past two decades, however, the continuation of propagandising a mono ethnic nation-state has become more difficult, if not impossible, due to economic integration and demographic changes. Japan’s population demographics, namely one of the lowest birth rates in the world combined with an increasingly aging population impact the labour force and concurrently revenue generation necessary to sustain social systems (Zhang and Mok 2). The percentage of the population aged 65 or older, for example, is now among the highest in the world (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Ratio of Population Aged 65 or Older*



(Data Source: Statistics Bureau, 2012)

The severity of this situation has forced the Japanese government to alter some of the restrictions regarding immigration policies in order to boost the number of foreign workers. Such changes in the social structure have forced Japanese society to face the challenge of how to enhance intercultural awareness and sensitivity as conflicts between immigrants and members of the local community are often based on ignorance and misunderstanding of the migrants' native cultures.

This paper discusses the current state of intercultural awareness in Japan and highlights the importance of addressing the issue of intercultural communication. It will be argued that Japan should adopt more tolerant policies towards minority cultures rather than a policy of conventional assimilation.

Historical Background

Japan was one of the earliest nations in Asia to industrialize and the Meiji Restoration that began in 1868 signaled the beginning of modern reform and development. Westerners were invited to come to Japan to teach science, technology and social systems and this opening up can be considered as the very first attempt of the Japanese government to get involved in internationalization.

The government's assimilation policies towards ethnic minorities can be framed within a legislative regime that is traced back to the Meiji Period. This era restored imperial rule in Japan and the establishment of a true nation-state was viewed as the most important objective. Fostering patriotism was a natural ingredient in this process and in order to do so a true national identity was needed. This process was begun by initially breaking down the social barriers of society which categorized people as either samurai, farmers, craftspeople or business people. This was further advanced by officially removing designations regarding ethnic minority groups such as *Ainu* and *Ryukyuan* as well as discriminating against social minorities such as the *Burakumin*. Everyone was now regarded as *Nihonjin* or Japanese.

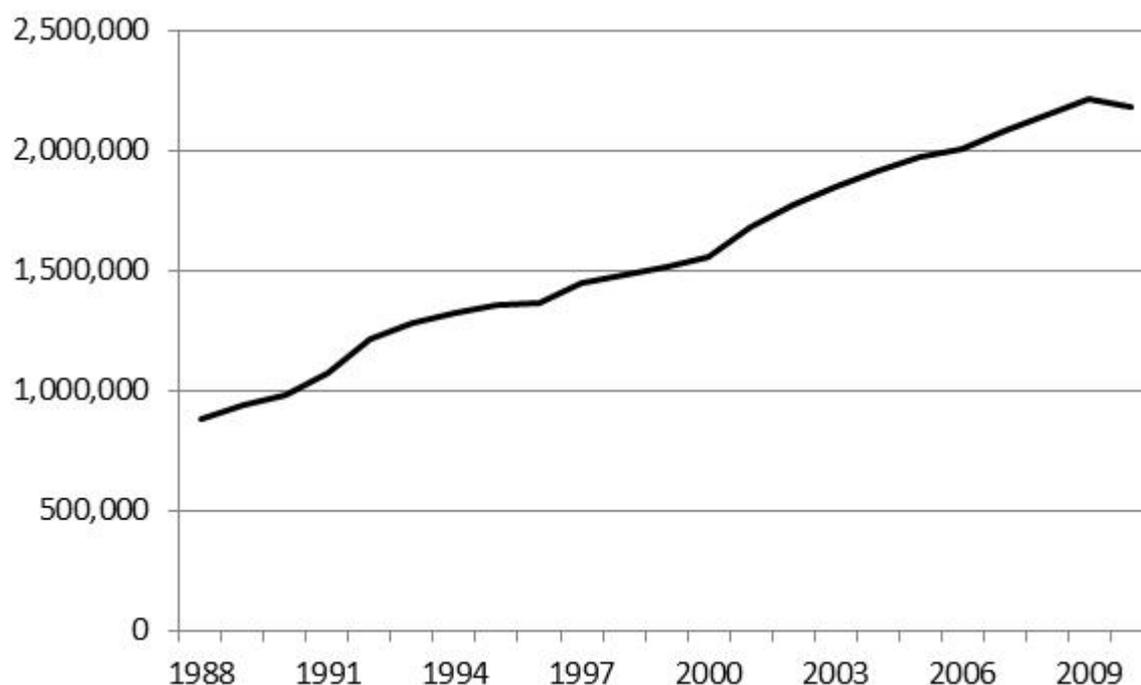
The heart of the assimilation policy was to create the ideal Japanese identity. The creation of a true Japanese identity was one of the requirements for the foundation of the modern Japanese state (Lie 2001). A strong emphasis on national integration based on state-making and nationalism led to a tacit understanding and necessity of uniformity in daily life. No anomalies were to be accepted within the social and cultural context (Lie 2001).

Claims of Japan as a homogeneous nation are, however, subjective and these connotations have been used at the Japanese government's convenience (Scott 2007). This ideology is one explanation for Japan's poor record welcoming immigrants and, until recently, there has been essentially no immigration policy in Japan due to "anti-immigrant sentiment" (Richey 2008). These efforts at maintaining a unique Japanese identity helped to shape the current political context for minority and intercultural issues.

Current Trends in Japanese Immigration

Japan is often criticized for its lack of openness despite its significant level of exports and imports as well as both private and public investments in a large number of countries. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2008) ranked Japan among the least globalized countries because "the share of foreign affiliates in total service turnover in Japan, as well as the proportion of services in the total turnover of foreign affiliates in Japan, are the lowest in the OECD area." The basic conclusion is that Japan is perhaps the least globalized of its 30 member countries (Mrglobalization 2011).

Figure 2: Number of Registered Foreign Population in Japan

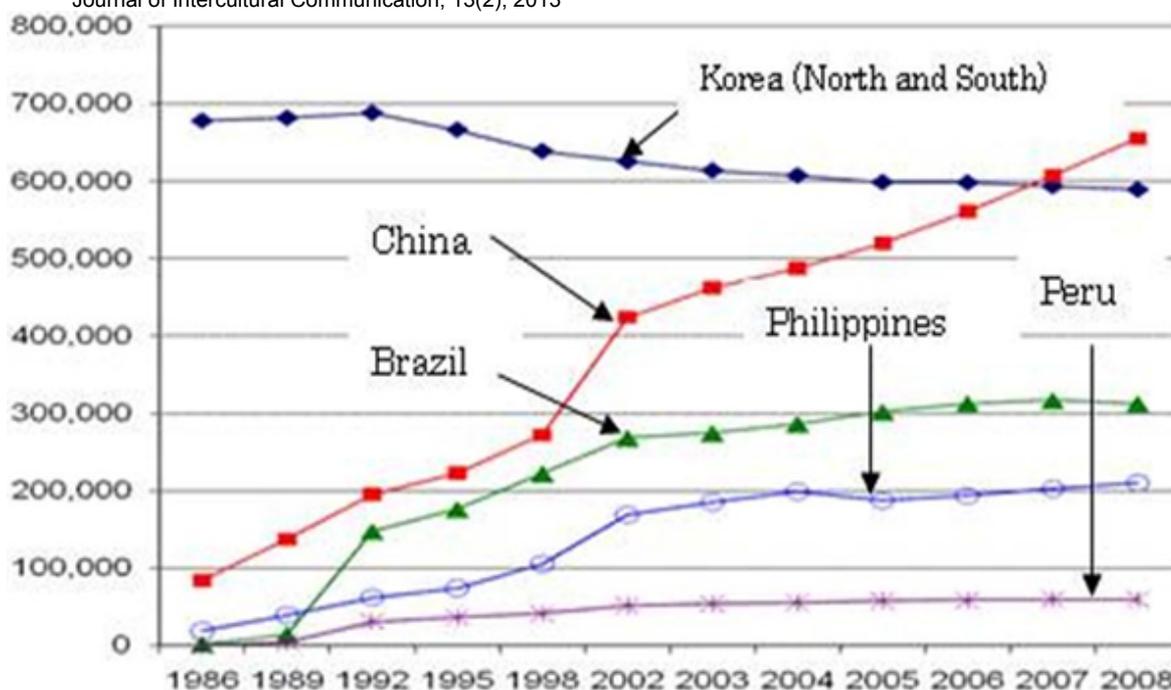


Data Source: Honkawa Data Tribune (2012)

Change is on the horizon and globalization and demographic changes in Japan provides an explanation for a major increase in the number of arriving migrants over the past decade. By the end of 2010, there were over 2.1 million registered foreigners living in Japan (Figure 2). Although this is a slight decrease from 2009, the trend has been generally upward over time with the number of foreign residents in Japan nearly tripling over the past 25 years. This is mainly due to the measure taken by Japanese government to alleviate its domestic economic recession and the problem caused by shortage of workers.

The five ethnic groups with the largest population are individuals from Mainland China/Taiwan, Korea (North and South), Brazil, the Philippines and Peru (Figure 3). Residents of Chinese descent have recently overtaken the population of Korean residents to become the largest ethnic minority in Japan.

Figure 3: Changes in the Number of Populations among the Top Five Ethnic Groups



Data Source: The Ministry of Justice, Japan (2012)

The above statistics must be interpreted with some caution, particularly with respect to Korean and Chinese residents, as some of the numbers are not necessarily the result of immigration. Many of these residents were actually born in Japan and a large portion of them are monolingual, speaking Japanese only. Japan does not allow **dual citizenship**, except to those having acquired dual citizenship prior to January 1, 1985, when the Nationality Law was enacted. While approximately 10,000 extended generation Koreans become naturalised each year this usually occurs in the third and fourth generation cases. These people become Japanese and are dropped from the roles of foreign residents.

In the 1990s and early 2000s the Japanese government made attempts to recruit guest workers from many Asian and Latin American countries. Agreements were drawn up to bring in around 50,000 temporary workers from several South Asian countries, primarily the Philippines and Indonesia. Additionally, arrangements with Brazil, Chile, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay to bring in over 20,000 workers were established with the majority coming from Brazil and Peru. Many of these workers are ethnic Japanese, but have foreign citizenship.

There are also a number of illegal immigrants living Japan although the number has been declining. In 1990, the number was estimated to be about 100,000, but had grown to 300,000 over the next decade as a result of overstaying visas. Japan's Ministry of Justice (Williams, 2010) issued a reported stating that illegal immigrant numbers had dropped below 100,000 as of the beginning of 2010, a 21 year low. The number is down 18.8% compared with 2009, and more than 50% lower than the number in 2006 when there were an estimated at approximately 193,000.

Intercultural Awareness via Intercultural Communication

When foreigners enter a new country or ethnic region, there may be difficulties in maintaining identity in order to avoid conflict. An open society refers to "a society based on the recognition that nobody has a monopoly on the truth, that different people have different views and interests, and that there is a need for institutions to protect the rights of all people to allow them to live together in peace" (GeorgeSoros.com 2012). Using this definition, Japan would have to be classified as closed due to its nature as a community with strong awareness of self-identity and unconscious resistance towards the influence from other cultures.

It is generally understood that Japanese society is organised around principals of coexistence in accordance with the collective environment. Therefore individual desires are expected to be subordinate to the common good. Until recently, the approach to different ethnic groups in Japan has been, essentially, to assimilate them as quickly and thoroughly as possible in order not to cause any cultural clashes. This means that intercultural awareness via intercultural communication has been simplified on the basis of self-culture consciousness with no regard to the cultures of immigrants or ethnic groups (Zhang 2006).

In Japan, intercultural communication has not been well integrated into the educational system and society in general. However, if Japan is to commit itself to a large influx of foreign students and workers, these issues will need to be addressed in the very near future. It is time for the Japanese government to make a decision as to whether Japan wants to “cling to its relatively monolingual linguistic identity” or produce citizens who “can interact freely in the global context” (Gottlieb, 2005).

If the social environment encourages the coexistence of more than one culture, individuals, particularly the younger generation, tend to show enthusiasm and generally have positive attitudes towards these combinations. In this way, integration of cultures can create a more balanced harmony and establish a logical behavioural paradigm. On the contrary, if there is difficulty integrating two cultures or even hostility between ethnic groups, persons are usually put in a position where they need to choose one culture over the other. This often leads to hesitancy in choosing one's own cultural identity. The optimum outcome of integrating two cultures is that the individuals are allowed to make their own decisions without “having to deny the existence of one of the cultures ... unless a person shows a positive emotion towards learning, understanding, recognising, and respecting the cultural similarities and differences, intercultural awareness is unreachable” (Chen, 2007).

The negation of a person's original language is just one example of a lack of intercultural awareness which can have detrimental effects. “Few things do more to destabilise a people's sense of cultural identity than to forbid the use of their native language and impose the language of another” (Gottlieb, 2005). This, however, was the effect of policies implemented in Japan towards the *Ainu* people and Koreans and Chinese residing in Japan as the use of Japanese was made mandatory and the individual's native language repressed. While these types of policies have been moderated over time, the justification for these harsh attitudes, nevertheless, are still visible in today's Japan.

The manner in which the Japanese census records are reported is a good example of the emphasis on a mono-cultural mentality. In most countries, census statistics reflect the ethnicity of the people being recorded. This is not the case in Japan. Japanese statistics do not have a question regarding ethnicity even though one and one half percent of the total population are not ethnic Japanese (Nationmaster.com, 2011). The Japanese census only asks a person's nationality and the nationality of all legally residing foreigners are recorded. All naturalised citizens are systematically categorised as Japanese. The Japanese census advances the assumption then that all Japanese speak Japanese and are culturally homogenous. The convenient implication is that there are no ethnic minorities, which is not the case.

Further insights into the monolingual nature of Japan can be gained by looking at the concept of language policy within Japan. The heart of language education for the entire nation is a language policy established within the Ministry of Education which has a set of strict regulations and guidelines (Gottlieb, 2005). The language policy was closely related to the historical and cultural development of the nation. It was viewed as having been a major component in “the make-up of its population.” The Japanese language has been regarded as the tool which establishes and helps to maintain and promote a national identity. It has been viewed as “the subject of cultural policy promotion” since the mid-1970s (Gottlieb, 2005). The foreign ministry established the Japan Foundation within its own jurisdiction in 1972 for the purpose of promoting Japanese culture overseas. The Japan Foundation devotes major portions of its efforts to the teaching of the Japanese language because it was perceived that a major part of international cultural exchange would be the teaching of the Japanese language.

The relationship between language and culture as postulated by Hamers and Blanc (2005) is “a balanced biculturalism often goes hand in hand with a balanced bilingualism.” Bilingual learners often achieve better results than their monolingual counterparts in verbal abilities (Swain and Lapkin, 1982). In Japan, while acknowledging that there may be benefits found in acquiring another language, bilingualism is not

embraced by the educational establishment. This should be seen as a national policy failure in the field of curriculum development.

Evidence of the problems in curriculum development is the failure of English language education in Japan (ETS, 2010). In order to graduate from a high school students need a total of six years of English instruction. If these students then go on to a university, a minimum of another two years of English instruction is required in most cases. Yet, by the time they're ready for work, hundreds of thousands of graduates have spent nearly 10 years struggling with the language, but few can do more than speak a handful of wobbly phrases: Japan ranks lower than North Korea, Mongolia, and Myanmar in the much-watched Test of English as a Foreign Language, or TOEFL (McNeil, 2011)

Rectifying this situation does not appear to be on the horizon and rather than becoming more internationalized, Japan is becoming more insular. (Dujarric (2012) argues that Japan's linguistic policy continues to lag behind the world trend and consequently, fewer Japanese are capable of international communications.

There is also an absence of any serious attempt at fostering bilingualism in immigrant children which offers further evidence of the inward looking nature of language education in Japan. Children from the many ethnic minorities residing in Japan are offered no opportunity to maintain and develop their original languages. Japanese children, who received education abroad and returned with their parents from overseas postings, are simply placed back into the appropriate age level within the educational system and offered no assistance in maintaining their abilities in other languages.

Keys to Improving Intercultural Awareness

Chen (2007) warns that “unless a person shows a positive emotion towards learning, understanding, recognizing, and respecting the cultural similarities and differences, intercultural awareness is unreachable.” He further points out that “to be successful in intercultural interactions, we must first show the ability of intercultural awareness by learning the similarities and differences of each other's culture.”

It is of crucial significance to increase “informed intellectual appreciation of and engagement with cultural and individual differences, which presupposes recognition and acceptance, in principle, of the existence and inevitability of cultural diversity” (Meier, 2007). To integrate two cultures harmoniously into one's individual identity requires a society which does not favour one culture or ethnicity over the other. In order to avoid this type of discriminatory practice, it is necessary for societies to integrate multiculturalism as a core value (Hamers and Blanc, 2000).

According to Hamers and Blanc (2000), four characteristics are proposed to describe a balanced bicultural identity: (1) Feel positive with both of one's cultural/ethnic communities; (2) Achieve a certain linguist competence in both languages; (3) Perceive both of one's cultural/ethnic groups as dynamic; (4) Have self-confidence in one's ability to overcome the contradictions brought about by membership in two cultural groups.

These characteristics are applicable in all cases of biculturalism. It may be instructive to look at the work of Ishii (2005) when trying to relate some of these concepts to Japan. She made detailed investigations into the lives of immigrants and the condition of bicultural identity in Japan over the past twenty years. She concluded that “Japanese society still faces the challenge of how to develop an awareness of diversity.”

Intercultural awareness training is considered crucial for finding a solution to bicultural identity problems as well as improving intercultural competence for all involved. Chaney and Martin's (2004) cultural awareness model emphasizes cultural insights and it is effective because the experimental process makes comparisons about social values between different cultures. It provides room for the development of each culture with no regard for and without placing priorities on the national culture.

In fact, the essence of any effort to promote intercultural awareness lies in the attitude towards immigrants' native languages, because "a language standard is also often associated with a particular national identity" (Garrido, 2005). This statement suggests that other languages are often not acceptable by default to host countries, needless to say other cultures. This often leads to discrimination and conflict with regard to the objective of establishing mutual understanding among diverse cultures. There is a positive relationship between foreign language acquisition and the promotion of intercultural awareness, though it has not been stressed sufficiently (Byram, 1997; Council of Europe, 2002; Van Ek and Trim, 1991). By enhancing bilingual education, a more favorable environment for intercultural communication may begin to develop in Japan. Exposure to cultures with other languages can further the intercultural awareness of the Japanese people.

By enhancing multilingual education and giving more recognition to the native languages of immigrants, a more favorable environment for intercultural communication needs to be established and developed. Exposure to cultures with other languages can further the intercultural awareness of the Japanese people. If the Japanese government is actually serious about deepening the intercultural awareness of the Japanese people a framework for bilingual education on a national level will prove to be above all the foundation upon which they can establish such programs.

Efforts at the governmental level will also be needed in the training of program organizers and planners. Japanese society has a tradition of over-emphasizing its own culture while neglecting to pay enough attention to others (Aoki, 2001, 2003). Japan is not well prepared to accept new cultures and languages "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 (Zhang 2006). It seems to be a one-way street with Japanese language and culture the only things needed to be learned while aspects of other cultures are paid little attention.

Most events or programs held by officials in the name of intercultural awareness and communication focus on these themes instead of helping Japanese people to get a better understanding of foreign cultures. It should be the responsibility of those government administrators who make decisions based on national guidelines to give priority to the understanding of other cultures and not to focus only on the dissemination of their own culture. Therefore, the training of qualified program organizers and planners is urgently needed so that training programs for intercultural communication are carried out from new perspectives.

Evaluation of training programs is another barrier which has prevented cultural awareness training from developing smoothly. Fair assessment serves not only as a summary of contemporary programs, but also throws lights on future work. Gudykunst (1979) pointed out that an important point to stress in multicultural training is to be aware that there may be many situations where friendship between participants in intercultural events may take place without any perceivable change in attitude toward the idea of intercultural communication. Most intercultural training programs in Japan follow this pattern. The most common type of event is international cooking. Many intercultural communication workshops are held only to provide chances for Japanese citizens to learn how to cook foreign food. Information about the other culture is scarce. At the conclusion of the event, the participants go home with good impressions about the food but with very little substantive knowledge about other cultures. It is imperative that cultural objectives be taken into account when developing assessment schemes for training programs (Alvarez and Garrido, 2001).

Tai (2012) notes that in their efforts to promote understanding of cultural differences, teachers often introduce food, fashion, and festivals from the homelands of newcomer children as teaching tools. This "three-F" approach is effective in raising self esteem among newcomer children and cultural awareness among Japanese children, when planned carefully. Yet, education centering on newcomers has been criticized for its tendency to concentrate on the three Fs, and to enumerate different cultures as if they were fossilized displays in a static museum (Matsunami, 2004).

On a positive note, programs have been implemented in recent years to offer counselling support to foreigners in order to help them overcome psychological problems caused by cultural conflicts. The impetus for this change was the realization that international students are impacted by culture shock when

confronted by a community with a different cultural background and difficulties occur in the adjustment process. A number of psychological problems relating to diverse perspectives in thinking and behaviour patterns are common and more attention is now paid to the various aspects of Japanese and foreign culture with an emphasis on fostering cultural adaptation

One example of such a program is the Advising and Counselling Services supported by the Education Centre for International Students at Nagoya University. This centre, established in 2011 replaced the Foreign Students' Chatting Room on the campus which mainly dealt with the administrative matters relevant to foreign students. The program recognizes that the "life of international students living in Japan is often more challenging and stressful than expected," thus the advising and counselling service aims at offering help to international students to cope with the stress they might encounter in an unfamiliar social environment (Education Center for International Students (ECIS) at Nagoya University 2011). The above efforts are a good first step in changing the traditional way of handling intercultural matters which has historically focused on changing the cultural patterns of foreigners to those of Japan under the assimilation policy while neglecting the diversity feature of different cultures. Nevertheless, further efforts need to be forthcoming.

Conclusion

Solutions to issues related to identity and intercultural communication can be found in improvements to the educational system. With an increase in immigration to Japan, it will be extremely helpful if the educational system can adopt features of multilingualism in order to assist the children of immigrants adjust to a natural biculturalism. Additionally, efforts at various governmental levels will be needed to help foster a true sense of multiculturalism in the population. This coupled with active foreign language study may help to bridge cultural gaps between Japanese people and immigrants. As we see now increasing levels of immigration into Japan and expect higher levels in the future, one would hope that support from the Japanese government for multi-lingual and multi-cultural education might function as a lubricant in maintaining good relations between the new immigrants and the Japanese population. If Japan intends to be a better member of the global community, it must show responsibility and obligation as a host country for these workers. "Japan must learn how to treat outsiders not only with the respect and recognition they deserve (as contributors to Japanese society), but also must cease depicting foreigners as a social bane"(Debito, 2006).

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