

Teaching History and Religion of Modern Japan to Mixed-Classes of Japanese and Foreign Students at Hokkaido University

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Abstract: Drawing on practical experience of teaching modern Japanese history and religions in modern Japan in English at Japanese university, this essay addresses several problems with courses consisting of both Japanese and foreign students, but argues these courses provide fruitful opportunities for teaching. It also conditionally defends the lecture format of courses, provided these are to a degree interactive, and shares some practical devices for the classroom.

Keywords: contents courses, active learning, lecture, modern Japanese history, religions of Japan

In this paper I want to address some problems and opportunities involved in teaching contents courses in English, in Japan. My observations are not based on reading in pedagogy but on practical experience of teaching in Hokkaido University's Modern Japanese Studies Program, and compared to my teaching in the United States and the United Kingdom. Before delving into the specifics of teaching, I will briefly outline the Modern Japanese Studies Program and the teaching environment at Hokkaido University.

Hokkaido University's Modern Japanese Studies Program (MJSP) launched in 2015. It is full four-year bachelor's program in Japanese studies focusing on the modern (post- Meiji restoration) and contemporary periods of Japan. With Japanese universities aiming to boost their internationalization, MJSP is one among several new programs aimed at international students that have been gaining prominence in Japan in recent years. Every year about twenty students enroll in the program, coming from all over the globe. What is distinctive of the MJSP program is that it is the only four year bachelor's program in Japanese studies that is fully bilingual: students are expected to be completely fluent in both academic English and Japanese by the time of graduation. Students receive a half-year intensive Japanese language training before entering the bachelor's program, after which they continue to take courses in the Japanese language as well as a wide range of courses in English in academic subjects related to the study of modern Japan, such as Japanese history, politics, economy, anthropology, and culture. Students choose between two modules, either "history and culture," or "society and political economy." In their last two years, students take courses in other faculties in the university, in Japanese. One of the aims of MJSP is to educate students in Japanese studies from the viewpoints of multiple disciplines, and by understanding Japan less in terms of its national uniqueness but as part of an interconnected world.¹

Some of the academic strengths of this program compared to Japanese studies programs outside of Japan are the following: first, the realistic prospect of gaining fluency in Japanese; second, the possibility to tap into the vast range of regular courses taught in Japanese and related to Japan in the other faculties of the

¹ For more information on MJSP see <https://www.oia.hokudai.ac.jp/mjisp>.

university. (In contrast, Japanese or East-Asia studies programs in Europe are often the only courses in the university that deal with Japan and/or East-Asia.) Third, the relatively tight focus on modern Japan. The latter is of course a choice, but it is one that facilitates communication among faculty and students and increases cross-fertilization in contents of the various courses. The focus on modern Japan, however, does not mean a complete neglect of the premodern period. In my courses for example I expose students to pre-modern materials from Tokugawa society as well as readings from classics such as *Kojiki* and Confucius' *Analects*.

Hokkaido University also has developed a separate bachelor's program for the sciences, named Integrated Science Program (ISP), which I will not discuss here, and operates a half-year and year long exchange program, called Hokkaido University Short-Term Exchange Program (HUSTEP). Students in the latter program make up the bulk of the non-Japanese students at Hokkaido University. Most content courses taught in English at Hokkaido University are open to students from across the university. Hence most content courses in English at Hokkaido University, even if designed for MJSP, tend to be a mix of MJSP students, exchange students, and Japanese students from other faculties. Mixing foreign and Japanese students and students of different levels poses some problems but also unique opportunities.

I am a historian by training, specializing in the history of religion, science, and more broadly intellectual history in modern Japan. At Hokkaido University, I teach the following content courses in English, which I designed mainly with MJSP students in mind. "Modern Japanese History: Japan in the World, (1868-1951)," which is a basic overview course of Japanese history but firmly places Japan in a frame of world history. "The Age of Total War, World History: 1904-1945" is designed to give MJSP students a wider perspective on global history beyond Japan and East-Asia. The goals of this course are: to gain a birds-eye perspective of the first half of the twentieth century, understand the connections between the different conflicts raging in the world in this period, and how this era shaped our world today. While it involves plenty of European history, it also aims at moving away somewhat from Euro-centric as well as Japan-centric narratives by providing perspectives from areas that receive much less attention, such as India, Thailand, or Finland.

My "Seminar in Religion and Modernity" aims at the following outcomes: to achieve basic "religious literacy" (understanding of key concepts and approaches) in the study of religions in general and East-Asian religions in particular, understanding religious plurality (the co-existence of Buddhism, Shintō, etc. and the participation in multiple religions by Japanese people) in Japan, and overcoming the common dichotomy of "religion" versus "modernization" by exploring how Japan's modernization since the nineteenth century went hand in hand with a vast reshaping of the religious landscape, and by zooming in on ways how religion contributed to the modernization process. The latter can most prominently be seen in the development of religious ideologies in support of the state ("State Shintō" and Buddhist support for imperialism). Students in this course work on their own (or group) project related to religion and Japan, and present their findings in class. (Some examples of student projects of past years were: *yōkai*, Shikoku pilgrimage, Ainu religion, bear worship rituals in Hokkaido and Finland, Miyazawa Kenji, Mt. Fuji worship, comparisons of spirit festivals in China and Japan, and various topics related to religion in manga and anime.) The two history courses involve more lecture format, while the religion seminar centers around active learning and student projects. All courses mix lecture with discussion, and in all courses the reading focus is mainly on primary texts, ideally available in both Japanese and English.

Courses mixing Japanese and foreign students pose some problems that the reader can probably anticipate. First among these is the often limited English-speaking abilities of the Japanese students. This proves mostly a problem during class discussions, where Japanese students often have problems keeping up with the pace (an additional problem being the wide variety of accents of the foreign students who come from all over the globe). Regrettably, sometimes students drop out of the course for this reason. However, some of this can to some degree be mediated by the instructor by creating an environment where all students feel at ease to speak (without being monitored as every time a student speaks up counts as “participation”), by providing extra opportunities for the Japanese students to speak, and by slowing down the pace by, for example, summarizing the state of the discussion to the Japanese students. In order to neutralize the advantage in English skills among foreign students some measures can be taken, such as allowing a certain amount of reading in Japanese, or allowing written assignments in Japanese but complemented with an English summary. While the limited English-speaking abilities are of course a larger problem of the Japanese education system as a whole, I believe providing and expanding courses in English for Japanese students offer important opportunities for Japanese students to improve their English, their communication skills, and, of course, knowledge in various fields. For example, the number of Japanese students in my Japanese history course has been growing, often with students motivated to take the course as an opportunity to improve their English with a subject they have some familiarity with. While perhaps not every instructor would be open to this, a purist separation of language versus content courses would be unhelpful. Content courses in English, like the one above, expose students to questions and perspectives that foreign students have vis-à-vis Japanese history, religion, or culture, but also help students to express their understanding of Japanese history and culture in English, a valuable tool of communication to have when being employed in an international environment.

The following stems more from a personal perspective and are not unique to an international teaching environment in Japan, but are important to mention. The wide variety in majors, general academic skills and levels, and large differences in background knowledge on Japan prove sometimes larger problems than the Japanese/non-Japanese divide. In some courses one can find first year students in a science major next to a fourth year student from a European Japanese studies program preparing for his or her final thesis. Other issues are probably more universally shared, such as a lack of ability to judge the credibility of - and use - sources, especially Internet sources. One study from Stanford University found that “young people’s ability to reason about the information on the Internet can be summed up in one word: *bleak*.”² In my courses this problem was shared equally among Japanese and non-Japanese students, but has not been universal. Integrating the cultivation of awareness of sources and tools to judge the reliability of information should be strongly emphasized in college education. Another problem is the changing relation with information acquiring in the classroom. Many students, for example, do not take notes in the above mentioned courses, which sometimes results in less precise retention of materials discussed in class. This is a reflection of

² See Stanford Education Group, “Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning: Executive Summary”
<https://sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20Summary%2011.21.16.pdf>
(accessed March 31, 2017).

the digital age, where students are under the impression that all information is always and immediately accessible and the lecture model has come under criticism. This is a larger, complex, and evolving social phenomenon, which requires careful deliberation, although, as I touch upon below, I believe the lecture model has not outlived its usefulness.

Despite some of the above problems I believe classes composed of a mix between foreign and Japanese students provide some fruitful opportunities for the teaching of Japanese studies in English in Japan, as well as contribute to the general education of Japanese students. Perhaps it is obvious, but making good use of this mix can be an asset enhancing the course. To illustrate this with an example from my course Religion and Modernity, I start the course with the (admittedly rather vague and generalizing question) whether students believe Japan is a very religious country, or not? Without fail, most foreign students answer Japan is very religious while most Japanese students believe it is absolutely not. This provides an excellent opportunity for discussion and for both Japanese and foreign students to listen to each other's perspectives. Throughout the semester I build in plenty of time for a free-flowing conversation in which Japanese and foreign students can sound off and inquire on each other's conceptions related to religion, religion and politics, religion and education and other related topics. More importantly, this initial discussion provides a leading motive for the course, which is to problematize and historicize the notion of "religion" and its Japanese counterpart *shūkyō* itself. (The term *shūkyō* as meaning "religion" only came into use in the Meiji period and was a part of a larger and complex rearranging of the place of religions in Japan.³) This in turn triggered some students' interest to choose topics for their projects which explore the applicability of the notion of religion, for example, the question whether shrine visits are "religious" or not, or phenomena on the porous borders of religion, as illustrated by the Shikoku pilgrimage today: is it religion or tourism, or both?

In my Religion and Modernity course, every year several Japanese students join, motivated by a personal connection to or interest in religion. For these Japanese students, the international setting of the class seems to be somewhat liberating, providing a space to explore their personal connection in an objective and larger framework. Several Japanese students have presented in class on either their family's religious affiliation, or a topic that deeply concerns them. For example, one student presented on the religion of the Ainu out of a concern for the Ainu as a minority. This provided a local (Hokkaido) perspective on religions in Japan that would otherwise easily be missed, and functioned as a starting point to explore issues of nationalism and religion. Another student presented on the Atsuta Shrine in Nagoya, her hometown, wondering why it is not as well known as the Ise shrine, despite it being established to house the *Kusanagi no Tsurugi*, one of the three imperial regalia. This again was a local perspective but helped to talk about the modern changes of Shintō and step away from the idea of "Shintō" as one seamless whole. (This is a complex history, but for the present purpose, Ise pilgrimage became popular in the Edo period, but has not always been at the pinnacle of Shintō, and its elevated status after the Meiji restoration did not happen without a conflict with priests from other shrines.) Other students presented their family history and

³ For the history of categories and especially "religion" in modern Japan, see among others Isomae Jun'ichi, *Kindai nihon no shūkyō gensetsu to sono keifu* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 2003), and Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

participation with certain religious movements. For the foreign students hearing first-hand testimonies was an unmissable experience greatly enriching the course. They also triggered engaging discussions. Involving students' personal experiences in class should of course be approached with care, and students should not feel under pressure to share such a personal dimension of their lives.

To conclude, I want to share some thoughts on the lecture format, and practical devices that have worked well in the above mentioned courses. While the trend towards Active Learning and “flipping the classroom” is gaining pace, and which I believe is a welcome development, I also believe the lecture is in need of some reappraisal. A well-conducted lecture, as some have pointed out, is not a “passive” activity on the part of students, but a very active collective listening activity and coordination of minds that is difficult to replicate in, for example, online courses. In the digital age, the lecture also has a new role to play as a means to organize information and provide larger perspectives. Rather than just delivering facts, lectures coupled with conversation with the students can also function as demonstrations of how a researcher approaches problems.⁴ Lectures that are interactive and involve discussion can be very valuable platforms to enable communication between Japanese, foreign students, and with the instructor.

A useful device is to make good use of images during the lecture and ask students to analyse these in class, and place what they see in a larger historical context provided by the lecture. In my modern Japanese history course, as a background for Commodore Perry's coming to Japan, I show a nineteenth century painting by John Gast's *American Progress* and I let students first express the elements they see: the angelic figure in the center, her holding a book (probably the Bible) as well as a telegraph cable, the light on the right of the painting from where the Americans are coming, the dark on the left where the Indians are. The next step is to put these together, American progress as Westward expansion, aided by the two most important technological inventions of the time: the telegraph and the steam-engine powered train, legitimized by Christianity. In short: American exceptionalism and its inevitable move further West, making the United States also a Pacific nation that would soon show its presence in East-Asia.⁵

In history courses, maps can be used as means that go well beyond illustration or to locate place names, and are very valuable for global history. For example, in “The Age of Total War,” the world history course mentioned above, pondering on maps with Russia and later the Soviet Union at the center of a world map visually brings home the geostrategic position of Russia as a landmass connecting East-Asia and Europe. This naturally problematizes the separation of East and West, and helps understand how leaders in Moscow had to consider both East-Asia and Europe simultaneously. For example in 1939, when the Soviet Union balanced a small war with the Japanese Army at the Mongolian-Manchurian border at Nomonhan with striking a deal with Nazi Germany, resulting in the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact,

⁴ See for example Miya Takumitsu, “In Defense of the Lecture,” *Jacobin*, February 2017. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/02/lectures-learning-school-academia-universities-pedagogy/>, and Alex Small, “In Defense of the Lecture,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 27, 2014.

⁵ To express the idea of the United States as a Pacific nation, Bruce Cumings chose this painting as cover for his *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

concluded the same year.⁶ A bit more difficult is, instead of having students summarize or answer questions about the readings of primary texts, to identify the key terms (for example, “civilization” in a nineteenth century text), define these, and organize them in a chart on the blackboard, thereby reconstructing the underlying assumptions of a particular view of the world in a specific time and place in history. Giving students “vote” in the contents of the class is also a useful way to make the lecture interactive and prime the attention. This can be done by assigning students to formulate questions with regards to the reading assignments before the lecture, and subsequently posting questions by students on PowerPoint, then discussing these in class.

Finally, one factor that I believe is very important is the spatial organization of the classroom. Using Active Learning classrooms, where students sit at several round tables and thus face each other, has worked extremely well to naturally produce an atmosphere conducive to conversation, among the students in particular. The traditional lecture classroom with students’ benches lined up facing the instructor is not conducive to interaction and conversation, and should, where possible, better be replaced with round tables allowing a natural interaction between students, in turn generating a collaborative atmosphere which, I believe, is essential for learning.

⁶ For the connection between these two events, see Stuart D. Goldman, *Nomonhan, 1939: The Red Army's Victory That Shaped World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Press Institute, 2013).