

## Original Article



# English Acquisition as Human Capital for Sustainable Management: The Japanese Challenge

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**Abstract:** In the competitive global marketplace, corporations are adjusting to sustainable management in line with UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a diversity of innovative ways. One such innovation is the adoption of English as the universal business language. Effective English communication is an asset for workers which ensures international mobility, wider job search and faster rise in career ladders. For firms, the payoff is higher productivity and better job performance. In the post-Pandemic period, the Japanese corporations are adopting English as part of sustainable management. However, the conventional teaching of English as Foreign Language (EFL), emphasizing grammar and syntax, is far from facilitating sustainable management. This paper highlights the serious institutional and cultural challenges facing Japan in the transition to sustainable management.

## Introduction

SDGs are transforming human resource (HR) practices as well as the role of business academics (Christ and Burritt, 2019). An innovative management strategy in the competitive global workplace is the emergence of English as the universal business language. Language issues in multinational enterprises (MNE) have been well recognized but typically as an element in MNE management practice. This paper makes an original contribution by viewing “language capital” (Welsh and Welsh, 2015) in terms of English acquisition by foreign students, using Japanese students as a case study. If employees are the “micro-foundations of HR research” (Sanders et al., 2022), their pre-employment training must matter.

In Japan, the traditional Japan Inc model is becoming obsolete in the post-Pandemic world

and increasingly the Japanese corporations are adopting English as the universal business language, as part of sustainable management. This paper argues that effective English communication is a form of human capital, acquired through investment in such pre-employment programs as English as Foreign Language (EFL) with inter-cultural communication (ICC). The Japanese EFL/ICC teaching, however, faces serious institutional and cultural challenges.

This paper is divided into six sections as follows. Following this introduction, section II documents the demise of the “Japan Inc” corporate culture and the gradual transition to a new, transnational global workplace in which English is rapidly becoming the business language. Section III is the theoretical basis of the study, applying human capital theory to EFL/ICC teaching in higher

education system. Section IV is a critique of the standard Japanese system of fixed-term contracts for EFL teaching, and section V documents the cultural and institutional challenges resulting from short-term employment of non-Japanese teachers in the highly structured Japanese university system. Section VI highlights the main conclusions of the study.

## II. From “Japan Inc.” to Sustainable Management

Sustainable management is rapidly emerging as the new paradigm as corporations transform their HRM practices in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN 2023), attempting to become more environmentally friendly and socially more responsible. A new corporate innovation is that English is rapidly emerging as the international business language. Choudhary, et. al., (2020) have argued for higher human capital investment in employees, while Delgado-Ceballos, et.al., (2022) have emphasized firm-level environmental social responsibility as an integral part of “a sustainability balance sheet.” This paper argues that organizational transformation to sustainable management may face difficult institutional and cultural challenge in “high cultural content” societies like Japan.

The traditional Japanese business culture rests on formality, a clear symptom of a “high context society” (Japanology, 2022). In the export-oriented stage of early Japanese economic development, it served corporate Japan very well, creating a “corporate warrior” image of Japanese business entering global business and winning markets in the highly competitive global marketplace. During the rapid growth period of 1970-1993, the Japanese gross national income per capita rose from \$3470 to \$31400, a ninefold increase, by far the biggest increase among leading countries in the Asia-Pacific countries (Mehmet, 1997: 188). In more recent times, both the Japanese political and business leaders have adopted ambitious plans such as Society 5.0 (Rojas, et. al.,2021) and corporate social responsibility (Hiroshi,2023), yet major structural and institutional obstacles, imbedded in conventional Japanese culture remain.

Cultural factors are prominent economic development; economic decisions conforming to norms shaped by culture. Japan has been aptly

described as a “high culture context country” (Hall, 1985). In Japanese culture, people greet each other based on their social status in the hierarchy. First to be greeted is the most senior person present and the most junior person is greeted last. Foreigners are expected to follow this rigid custom, failure to do so causing offense. Bowing follows informal, but rigid rules of seniority. If someone’s status is senior than yours’, your bow should be lower and held for longer. Formality also extends to dress, by wearing simple black, grey, or navy suits, avoiding colors that differentiate one in a crowd. Foreigners in Japan are expected to respect the order of things, or the social hierarchy.

Demonstrating hierarchy in the office, meetings and during negotiations is critical and can make or break deals. Harmony in business culture is essential, creating teamwork, and subordination of self in the larger group or establishment. Disharmony, for example ‘face’ by inappropriate language or action, is a major cultural offense. It is made worse by the fact that the Japanese people do not always tell you what they think; they may even use language deliberately to mislead. Navigating through business culture requires tact, experience, and quick learning. For example, showing anger and uttering angry language is certain to create discord and loss of face. Silence and staying calm are a big part of interpersonal relations, as is body language.

Japanese business culture thrives on loyalty. Building trusting trust in business relationships is highly valued and will be rewarded by the superiors. Lifetime employment for ‘salary men’, often known as ‘corporate warriors’, demonstrated by long hours, is a prime example of corporate success. Salarymen are essentially white-collar workers, recruited into their role upon graduation from university which is an essential structural part of Japanese Inc culture. Salarymen remain with their employer for life, enjoying paid holidays linked to seniority and other corporate perks, until they reach pensionable age.

Once emblematic of Japan’s economic might, the Japan Inc model seems to have reached a peak (NIKKEI Asia, 2022). With the end of the export-oriented growth in mid-1990’s, cracks have emerged in the model: Most recently, the Corona-19 virus Pandemic has had a significant impact on

the traditional Japanese business culture. Increasingly, companies have had to scale back or go online. As a result, this culture is now being transformed, even eroding. Employers are shifting to greater flexibility allowing personnel to work from home, and the employees themselves, including those with the “corporate warrior” mindset, are rethinking their careers and lives; they are opting for change. (Foster, 2022).

One of the most significant changes emerging is increasing awareness of the ecological vulnerability of our planet. Fortunately, the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the annual Conference of Parties (COPs), specifically Agenda 2030 (UN 2023), are being embraced by the business world as corporations are adopting sustainable management. This requires corporate responsibility for a cleaner, greener world. The age of fossil-fuel is ending (Mehmet and Yorucu, 2020), and consumers are demanding ecologically friendly brands and products. Sustainable management means future business leaders have to accept responsibility for the global environment.

Major innovation is also occurring in communication and language. One innovation in Japanese business is the increasing use of English as the global business language. Many employers are introducing formal schemes to encourage cultural diversity, including recruitment overseas human resources. Recruitment of English-speaking engineers and programmers is widely promoted. One major employment agency, Izanau, is actively seeking to recruit English-speaking foreign engineers for Japanese corporations willing to expand their foreign workforce (Izanau, 2022). Even more radically, the Japanese IT giant Rakuten has now established English as the official language of the company (Kinni, 2022). There is also a variety of English teaching programs in universities and in the private sector.

### III. English Acquisition as Human Capital in a Transnational World

Following the lead of Chicago economists such as Schultz (1961), Becker (1964) and others, human capital theoreticians have argued that expenditure in education and training is investment, creating more productive skills leading to better paying careers, generating higher lifetime income. Human capital theory (HCT) quickly emerged as a

major field of study, embraced by the World Bank and international development organizations.

In this study, we apply HCT to English acquisition, which as noted above, has now emerged as the universal business language. Students who acquire effective English language, along with intercultural communication skills, greatly enhance their employability in the transnational global workplace. Compared to other graduates, they become more mobile internationally, expand their job search opportunities and once employed, win quicker promotions to higher paying positions with more job security. These benefits are monetary, and therefore measurable by means of HCT.

The key features of the HCT model can be specified from standard labor market theory in which wages and salaries are payments by employers matching productivity of workers. In a competitive market, marginal product (MP) equals wage (W):

$$(1) MR = W$$

During the tenure of a worker’s career, eq. 1 is:

$$(2) MR_t = W_t$$

where subscript t is time,  $t = 1, \dots, n$

Now, taking a university graduate as an employee, the lifetime earnings during a career spanning time-frame t, can be cumulated to present value at discount rate, r, and expressed as

$$(3) \sum_{t=1}^n E_t / (1+r)^t = \Delta y^u$$

where  $E_t$  stands for annual earnings, net of initial investment cost in university education.  $\Delta y^u$  is the additional lifetime earnings of the university graduate, the yield of investment in human capital formation at the university.

In the standard application of HCT, it is universally assumed that  $\Delta y^u > 0$ . Moreover,

$$(4) \Delta y^u > y^{hs}$$

Where  $y^{hs}$  represents the earnings of a non-university employee, such as a high-school graduate.

In this study, it is hypothesized that, when a university student invests additional expenditure to acquire English language facility, taking a course in EFL, better still EFL infused with ICC, certified by high scores in international tests, the

employee will realize even higher lifetime earnings. Eq. (5) is a symbolic expression of our hypothesis.

$$(5) \Delta y^{\text{efl-icc}} > \Delta y^u$$

To capture the benefits reflected in eq., (5), EFL and courses must be effective, properly training students in English acquisition, certified by high scores in international tests, and supplemented by high degree of inter-cultural facility to perform well in a transnational global marketplace<sup>1</sup>. An empirical study of EFL/ICC teaching in a class of Japanese students, using a mixed methods methodology, found no correlation between English proficiency scores and inter-cultural sensitivity (Mehmet 2023). Evidently, the Japanese system of EFL/ICC teaching is lagging corporate HR management, at a time when increasingly organizations are embracing English for sustainable human resource practice in line with UN's SDGs.

#### IV. Challenges of Japanese EFL: Fixed Term Contracts

Teaching EFL is big business in the Japan marketplace. In addition to the official Japanese English Training (JET) scheme sponsored by the Japanese government based on fixed-term contracts, there are extensive private sector schemes for teaching EFL. Cultural clashes are inevitable as most foreign language teachers are from low context countries in the west, compared to the high context Japanese system. The transfer of language skills has a long tradition in Japan. Foreign faculty members teaching English have been employed since the Meiji period (Rivers, 2010). In most cases, such non-Japanese faculty members have been employed under fixed-term contracts. However, until recently there has been a distinct dearth of research examining the pedagogical implications of such contracts. This study seeks to make a small contribution to remedy this deficiency.

<sup>1</sup> The model represented by equations (1) to (5) is in private terms, whereby  $E_t$  in eq. (3) is net of cost of EFL. The student pays the cost. It is quite possible to modify the model for specific training, for example when a Japanese car manufacturer trains its employees for the Canadian market, teaching not only EFL but French as well. In that case, the firm bears the cost training,  $C_t$  and  $E_t = (y - c + b)_t$  where  $b$  represents any bonus for overseas employment.

Japanese higher education institutions have systematically employed foreign faculty members since the Meiji period (Rivers, 2010). In most cases, such non-Japanese faculty members have been employed by means of fixed-term contracts (Rivers, 2010). But there has been a distinct dearth of research examining the pedagogical implications of such contracts. A pioneering study concluded that fixed-term contracts, *sentaku ninkisei* in Japanese, have quantifiably contributed to a decline in the standard of language instruction (Burrows, 2007). Fixed-term contracts have caused temporary faculty members to pander to, or cater to, student expectations, adversely impacting their English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition. Burrows (2007) has argued that this EFL teaching promotes the passive, receptive language acquisition skills, with emphasis on grammar, syntax, and mechanical approach to reading and listening- at the expense of the more active, oral productive skills of writing and speaking. EFL classes are often structured to prepare students to pass English proficiency tests, to achieve high scores, typically based on multiple-choice questionnaires; the system encourages memorization and rote-learning.

Elaborating on this negative EFL experience, Burrows (2007) has persuasively argued that fixed-term contracts have led to a qualitative reduction in the level of educational delivery in Japanese higher education institutions. This view runs counter to the current Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) directive for universities to improve both their accountability as well as the quality of education (MEXT, 2004). Typically, full-time Japanese faculty members are in tenured positions, while most full-time non-Japanese are on fixed contracts, on non-tenure track positions. The apparent discrimination violates Article III of the Japanese Labor Standards Law which prohibits any kind of discrimination based on nationality (Johnston, 2004).

Theoretically, at least, contract employees are protected under Japanese labor law even if the employer chooses not to renew the contract once it has expired. Employees who want to continue are legally entitled to expect their contract to be renewed, as the law does not allow for dismissal due to contract expiry once renewal has occurred. "After such a contract has been repeatedly

*renewed, it will resemble a contract without a fixed period.*" (Sugeno, 1992, 389) Sadly, however, this nebulous legislation does not specify how many times a contract must be renewed before an employee can legally expect his/her contract to be automatically renewed.

Regardless of this lack of legal clarity, Burrows has noted that "... (*faculty members on contracts*) *will be more inclined to ingratiate themselves with the university to reduce the prospect of contract non-renewal. It is this ingratiation which is most likely to influence how they behave in the classroom*" (Burrows, 2007, 32) To a very real extent, this fear of non-renewal dictates how teachers are perceived by their students, and how these perceptions will directly influence course evaluations. Given Japan's largely homogenous demographic composition, student-held criteria may be markedly different from those of their non-Japanese teachers. As a result, "foreign" teachers who excel in their classrooms, are not necessarily conforming to their Japanese students' culturally informed image of what constitutes a "good" teacher. This can lead to student confusion with non-Japanese, post-secondary educators when required to perform independent, creative, "active participation" type learning.

Furthermore, the two qualities that Japanese learners expected in foreign teachers were how easy they were to get acquainted with, and how entertaining they were (Shimizu, 1995). As well, Hadley and Yoshioka Hadley have listed other attributes that Japanese university learners believe non-Japanese English teachers should have such as kindness, friendliness, cheerfulness, enthusiasm, and humor (Hadley & Yoshioka Hadley, 1996). This contrasts markedly with results from the assessment of ethnically Japanese university EFL educators, for whom the most important quality mentioned was knowledge of the subject area; followed by pronunciation. Other attributes that students believed such Japanese educators should possess included "being demanding" and "professionalism," items which were not listed for non-Japanese educators (Hadley & Yoshioka Hadley, 1996).

Rapid globalization is also impacting EFL teaching. The virtual world of new information technology is creating "figured worlds" (Holland, et al., Skinner, Lachicotte and Cain, 1998) defined

as "socially and culturally constructed 'as-if' realms (6) ... "invisible to people until they encounter differences" (7) in their own individual spaces. These spaces can be workplaces or classrooms, especially impacting young people who are more adept at "digitally mediated spaces" (Li and Hawkins, 2020, 5). In the Japanese cultural spaces, globalization is deeply affecting the foundations of the "Japan Inc.," business model, forcing change and adaptation, enhancing English teaching and communication. Bennett (1999) has proposed a useful multiple-stage intercultural awareness test, ranging from 0, rejection of other cultures, to the highest level of full acceptance or assimilation. EFL acquisition in Japanese university would be greatly enriched by infusion of ICC competence testing.

The next section builds a conceptual model from literature to identify and resolve the "*us versus them*" duality, which can result in intercultural friction, or even conflict. This model views Japan as a homogenous, island nation with a strong national identity, and a tendency to view anyone outside of the kinship group as different (Najita & Harootunian, 1988). This model, now under threat of the competitive forces of globalization, needs adoption of greater inter-cultural awareness, far more ICC content in EFL classrooms in line with Bennett's ICC index (1999).

#### V. *Clash of cultures in the Japanese university*

In the pre-service EFL teaching in the Japanese university with which this paper is concerned, the staff members on limited term contracts generally come from low context cultures, unlike their permanent Japanese colleagues, who come from a high context culture. This creates cultural conflicts, contributing to an "*us versus them*" binary, or 'either/or' conflict (Midgley, et. al., 2011). Culture conflict pervades the entire university, from academic leadership at the top to students at the bottom. Very concisely, leadership theory emphasizes three main qualities: mutualism; a sense of shared purpose; and an allowance for individual expression (Crowther et al., 2002). Elaborating on these qualities throws much light on the culture conflicts in Japanese university environment.

Firstly, mutualism has to do with the sharing of trust and respect between administrative leaders and teaching leaders. In the traditional,

hierarchical Japanese university, there is not a great deal of this aspect of parallel leadership in evidence. A sense of shared purpose has to do with a common commitment to values such as the integrity of teaching, or the need for social justice. This perception of shared purpose thrives in workplaces characterized by transparent decision-making processes, collaborative problem-solving, and positive communications. In contrast, a *nemawashi* culture prevails whereby the decision-making is behind the scenes, in private, consensus building in advance of formal and public, with little transparent decision making.

Secondly, as regards shared purpose, an argument could be made that foreign teachers in the classroom are for the most part dedicated professionals who strive to offer students the best possible instruction. Seen from this angle, then, there is a definite sense of shared purpose: namely, teachers attempting to offer learners the best possible education. In this environment, there is a sense of positive emotional culture between the teacher and learner, enhancing employees' loyalty and organizational identification, a fact noted in relevant literature (Yue, et. al., 2020).

The third facet of parallel leadership, individual expression, and action, provides for administrator leaders and teacher leaders both to engage in unilateral expression and behaviors (Crowther, 2004). Crowther and his team acknowledge that this flies in the face of teamwork, collegiality, and consensus decision-making. They move on to assert that each of the American and Australian cohorts of parallel leaders that their research team studied manifested strong convictions and assertive capabilities, as well as a capacity to accommodate the values of co-leaders and work collaboratively with them. As with the mutualism aspect of parallel leadership, then, this "individual expression and behavior" aspect of parallel leadership is not necessarily a smooth fit for the Japanese university at the heart of this binary.

It is also significant to distinguish cultural differences. E.T. Hall (1985) classifies high context and low context cultures, noting that in high context cultures inhabit a "sea of culture" that is collectively shared (Hall, 1985: 164). All or most of the component parts of meaning join to make the environment meaningful. High context cultures include the Pueblo people of the USA,

many indigenous African cultures, the Russians, and the Japanese (Hall, 1985). In this binary, then, the contracted, native speaking English teachers are almost all low context Westerners, whereas their Japanese colleagues, not to mention the working *milieu*, are categorically high context. Accordingly, the implementation of this paradigm will have to accommodate the fact that in Japan meaning is not as much assembled from words, or discourse analysis, as it is from the working environment. This, in and of itself, could present a substantial test, given that theories are usually defined as a collection of meaningful, abstract parts, such as suppositions, hypotheses, and presumptions. Most emphatically, theories are not often regarded as a collectively experienced environment. Specifically, then, this Western theory will need to be implemented in a way that downplays its precise language, and which maximizes an awareness of the workplace setting, as well as the worldviews, opinions, and perceptions of the authority figures in it. This goes a long way toward embodying the entire crux of the proposed solution to this binary. The degree to which this can be accomplished will determine the chances for success.

E.T. Hall (1985) has also compiled a list of recommendations specifically designed for those involved in cross-cultural education. These five recommendations include the following: a.) that effective intercultural pedagogy emphasizes the commonalties shared by all human cultures- the term that Hall uses for such commonalties is "interfaces"; b.) that indigenous education systems be encouraged and increased, and that these build on past successes; c.) that outstanding educators be rewarded; d.) that cross-cultural education, particularly the teaching of EFL must be highly aware of different learning styles; e.) and fifthly, that effective intercultural pedagogy promotes a wider recognition of the importance of "the microculture of education."

The first of these five recommendations is highly applicable to the non-Japanese staff members who are relegated to short term contracts and must interact on a daily basis with their tenured colleagues, avoiding divisive issues to ensure a harmonious, amicable, professional *milieu*. As for Hall's second suggestion, the idea of encouraging and upholding indigenous education systems has a definite bearing on this binary, in that if a hybrid

blueprint was to be applied to this (indigenously Japanese) binary on an “as is” basis, it would most likely have minimal chances for success, given that the organization in question is a top-down, quasi-militaristic, rigidly vertical hierarchy. It is doubtful whether such a rewards system could be accepted in the the traditional Japanese organization. This is because Japanese workplaces tend to be group-oriented, and being distinguished from the group, for reasons either good or bad, is not normally desirable. Regrettably, the time-honored Japanese proverb “*The nail which stands up gets hammered down*” still resonates loudly within the institution that is the focus of this case study. In Japan cultural rigidity is so deep, even as Japanese corporations adopt international management norms within the emerging paradigm of sustainable management discussed above. Within this framework, the use of English as a business language as well as new information technology are keys to become competitive. In much of Japanese institutions, such as the university, age-old conventions are still dominant.

The final recommendation from E.T. Hall that will be discussed here is the one that values different learning styles, with emphasis on more cultural content in teaching materials and classroom pedagogy. Since all humans, regardless of their cultural background, have individual traits the adoption of a hybridized blueprint will need to account for different styles of learning. Although some of the principal theorists in this field, Kolb & Fry (1975) and Gardner (1983), are firmly ensconced in the Western mindset, their research clearly crosses cultural and ethnic boundaries. More specifically, the Kolb Learning Style Inventory, or LSI, developed by David A. Kolb, is premised on the idea that learning preferences can be described using just two archetypes: active experimentation-reflective observation, and abstract conceptualization-concrete experience. Perhaps not surprisingly, Kolb’s research has determined that some learners have more than one strong learning preference.

To conclude, inter-cultural curriculum is essential in updating Japanese pre-service training of business leaders. An early finding that EFL teaching in Japan needs to be reframed with sociocultural content to raise student awareness of global culture is still valid (Mantero and

Iwai,2005). Finally, educators with a Western teacher’s college background may realize that Gardner’s theory (1983) of multiple intelligences also supports and vindicates educators who cater to differential learning styles and cultural awareness.

## VI. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the acquisition of English and inter-cultural communication has become an integral part of sustainable HR practice. EFL/ICC is a form of human capital formation in employees. Corporate Japan is rapidly endorsing sustainable management in line with the UN’s SDG, but the higher education system is lagging well behind the corporate management. There is a need to upgrade the teaching of EFL/ICC to match the new paradigm of sustainable management.

Specifically, a systemic quality decline in EFL delivery exists. As shown above, being relegated to fixed term contracts has caused discriminatory hiring practices. However, greater application of Bennett’s test of cross-cultural effectiveness would go a long way to reducing any sort of “*us versus them*” dichotomy. The way to overcome this kind of risk is to significantly expand the ICC content of teaching in the classroom, with a diversity of examples from the business world. Most significantly, EFL delivery needs updating to catch up with sustainable management.

Finally, non-Japanese educators who believe they are excelling in their classrooms are not necessarily perceived as being outstanding by their Japanese students who are, understandably aiming at careers in the highly rigid Japanese business culture. EFL must equip Japanese students to succeed in the business world, and increasingly in the competitive global business environment where English has become the pre-eminent language. Although this issue initially appears to have little relevance to the challenge of changing Japanese students’ perceptions of their non-Japanese teachers, its ICC component, linked to Japanese business culture, should aim at developing global citizens with the knowledge that empathy and communication are crucial when dealing with intercultural transactions. Hopefully, the high esteem earned from empathy and ICC might help such language learners, and their teachers become more

cognizant of the “*us versus them*” binaries in perception.

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