



## Why Japan needs English

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## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Why Japan needs English

Liang Morita<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper argues that Japan needs English, and better English than just knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. English is the main language of globalisation, and there are clear advantages to being proficient in it. For a long time, English has been taught through the grammar-translation method at Japanese schools and universities, which is inadequate to say the least. This has resulted in the inability to work in the English language at the workplace. With a rapidly aging and declining population, the Japanese need to be able to work with foreign co-workers. Being proficient in English would also help the Japanese form alliances and partnerships with foreign establishments in business, research, higher education, and science and technology. This paper also argues that stronger English language skills would help improve attitudes towards foreigners, since recent research has shown that Japanese individuals with stronger English conversation ability have more positive attitudes towards immigration. It would also mitigate discrimination against foreigners if the Japanese could communicate, interact and empathise with them.

**Subjects:** Anthropology - Soc Sci; Sociology & Social Policy; Race & Ethnic Studies

**Keywords:** Japan; English; globalisation; immigration; discrimination

### 1. Introduction

English has been the main language of globalisation for a few decades (Jenkins & Leung, 2014). Before that, English was spoken in Anglophone countries, post-colonial countries, and between native and non-native speakers. These days, the most extensive use of English is as a lingua franca among people who speak different first languages, which means it could be an extremely useful tool of communication for Japan. In spite of this, many in Japan have not embraced English, due to various reasons such as being unconvinced that English is necessary or fears that English will threaten Japanese. Writers such as Kubota (2011, 2015) have been downplaying the necessity of English, citing the fact that the largest groups of foreigners in Japan speak Chinese, Korean and Portuguese as their native languages and therefore these languages are of greater practical value than English.

This paper is based on a meta-analysis of existing literature on a wide range of subjects, including English, immigration, globalisation, discrimination, highly-skilled migrants and English language education in Japan. It argues that Japan not only needs English, it needs better English than merely

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liang Morita trained in sociolinguistics in Britain. Upon graduation, she taught in Thailand for two years and studied the Thai Chinese community. She has been living in Japan for 14 years and teaches in Nagoya University. Her research interests include immigration, discrimination, multiculturalism, and English language education.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

With globalisation, more and more people are brought into contact with Japan. Whether English is widely used is a question that concerns many because it directly impacts the issue of how foreigner-friendly Japan is. Since Japanese is a language little spoken outside Japan, the Japanese need English to harness the benefits of globalisation.

competencies in grammar and vocabulary. Raising the general level of English would make Japan a more attractive place for migrants to come and work. As things stand, the language barrier at the workplace discourages highly-qualified professionals from coming to Japan. The struggles of the nurses and care workers in the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPA) programme show us just how much of an impediment the language barrier is. Stronger English language skills on the part of the Japanese would also facilitate alliances and partnerships with establishments outside Japan in research, business, higher education, and science and technology.

The second argument for English is that stronger English language skills would improve Japanese attitudes towards foreigners. As things stand, most Japanese distrust foreigners and do not welcome them. This is at least partly due to the lack of means of communication. Recent research has shown that Japanese individuals with better English conversation ability have more positive attitudes towards immigration (Green & Kadoya, 2015). Having the means to communicate would also mitigate some of the discrimination against foreigners.

Before going into the language barrier at the workplace (Section 2) and Japanese attitudes towards foreigners (Section 3) in greater detail, a discussion of the ineffectiveness of English language education in Japan is presented below. This is followed by an explanation of why English is not necessarily a threat to Japanese, contrary to what some believe.

### **1.1. English language education in Japan**

In 2015, Japan's average total score on the TOEFL is 71, the second lowest in Asia. The People's Democratic Republic of Lao ranked lowest at 66 while Singapore is highest at 97 (Education Testing Service, 2016). English is practically compulsory for six years in Japanese middle schools and high schools. It became obligatory in elementary schools for fifth and sixth graders in 2011. Young people who attend university receive a few more years of English language education. The fact that Japan ranks low despite all the years spent on English suggests that in the world's third largest economy, English language education may not be as effective as it could be.

A key factor in the lack of success in its English language education is the fact that English is mostly taught using the grammar-translation method, especially in Japanese middle schools and high schools (Rosenkjar, 2015; Stewart & Miyahara, 2011). In this method, the main activity in class is translation of English texts into Japanese. The teacher provides explanations on English grammar in Japanese, and students are required to laboriously translate English texts, word-by-word, into Japanese. These classes are extremely teacher-centred and focus on the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student (Rosenkjar, 2015). This method originated in the second half of the nineteenth century, when Japan wanted to acquire knowledge and practices from the West for its development. One way to achieve such acquisition was by reading English documents and translating them into Japanese. Although out-dated, grammar-translation is still widely used in schools and universities, to the neglect of the development of communicative competences, intercultural awareness and global perspectives (Whitsed & Wright, 2011).

There have been efforts to introduce communication-based approaches since the 1980s, but with limited success. One reason is that teachers themselves have been taught using grammar-translation only and they do not know how to teach using other methods (Rosenkjar, 2015; Steele & Zhang, 2016). There is a lack of confidence amongst these teachers when it comes to actually using English in front of their students. One solution would be for potential English teachers to spend a year of their training in an English-speaking country. Another reason is that the English part of university entrance examinations, the *raison d'être* for learning English in the case of many students, continues to test mainly knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. This means that no matter how much the educational authorities emphasise the importance of communication-based methods, teachers and students who have their eyes on university entrance examinations continue to rely on grammar-translation (Rosenkjar, 2015; Steele & Zhang, 2016). Other efforts to inject English language communication into classrooms include the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme established

in 1987, which has brought young native speakers of English to Japanese schools to work as assistant language teachers (ALT). Although potentially capable of firmly establishing communication-based teaching, these ALTs have been given only a marginal role to play in the classroom. Having said that, ALTs are not really qualified as EFL teachers, and this would mean that even if they were given a greater role, it may not be particularly helpful. In 1997, English conversation became an elective in elementary schools. In 2006, an English language listening component was added to the *Senta Shiken* (“Central University Entrance Examinations”). No significant improvements in students’ communicative abilities due to these last two efforts have been reported so far.

### **1.2. English is not necessarily a threat to Japanese**

Many Japanese have been discouraged from learning English because of fears that English will threaten Japanese. Writers such as Tsuda Yukio (2000), Suzuki Takao (1999) have been critical of English and have been successful to some degree in spreading their views. They claim that English is a threat to the Japanese language and culture, arguing that English is not a value-neutral tool of communication but an instrument of linguistic and cultural imperialism. It is a form of knowledge loaded with non-Japanese cultural baggage. Japanese who have achieved a high level of competence in English may not be “one of us” anymore and may have lost their Japanese identity.

The argument that English is not value-neutral and carries with it cultural baggage is neither new nor surprising. The same could be said of almost any language in the world. Instead of criticising and dismissing English for these reasons, it would be more practical to educate, whenever English is taught, to ensure there is awareness of the values English carries and its potential effects on identity. As for the argument that English is a threat to Japanese language, culture and identity, it would be useful to discuss this in relation to Singapore, the Asian country with the highest TOEFL scores, in which significant language shift towards English has taken place and falling standards in Chinese are causing serious concern. We will see that both language shift and worsening Chinese standards have taken place under a specific set of circumstances which are not found in Japan.

English has been used in Singapore since colonial times, and it continued to be used after independence in 1963 because of the economic edge it offered. It is an official language in the country as well as working language. It has been aggressively promoted as the language of economic survival and development, at the expense of other languages such as Chinese and Malay. As the post-colonial government prioritised English over the other languages, their prestige diminished, and the number of students seeking a Chinese-medium or Malay-medium education declined. For many years, formal education was available in other languages but since 1987, only English-medium education has been offered.

All three main ethnic groups in Singapore, the Chinese, Malays and Indians, have experienced significant language shift to English. For the sake of simplicity, I will discuss only the Singaporean Chinese, the ethnic majority. The Singaporean Chinese have paid the price for their high standard of English in terms of sharply declining proficiencies in Chinese and language shift to English (Curdt-Christiansen, 2014; Lee, 2012). Many of them now speak English as their first language instead of their ancestral language, Chinese. What convinced parents to switch to English as the language used in the home was the harsh economic reality and grim employment prospects faced by Singaporeans who received a Chinese-medium education. It was increasingly difficult for graduates of Chinese-medium schools and university to find a satisfactory job. These graduates were seen as second-rate compared to those who had an English-medium education (Lee, 2012). As more parents switched to English at home, it gradually became the dominant home language as well as the language used with friends. At the same time, the use of Chinese declined and abilities in the language worsened (Li et al., 2016). The final nail in the coffin for Chinese came in 1980 with the closure of the only Chinese-medium university, Nanyang University.

To be fair, it has to be said that the Singaporean government has made efforts to encourage the use of Mandarin, the standard variety of Chinese, as well as raise standards in it. This is particularly

true since the opening up of China, which has led to business opportunities. Since then, Mandarin has been presented as an instrument for taking advantage of these opportunities. However, the damage to the Chinese language in terms of negative attitudes and low proficiencies had been done and it has proven to be difficult to repair. The shift to English is also resistant to reversal.

We can see in the case of Singapore that raising standards in English alone does not constitute a threat to Chinese. It was the withdrawal of Chinese-medium education, the lack of employment prospects of the Chinese-medium-educated, the perception of Chinese as second-rate and the switch to English as home language that led to the downfall of Chinese. The equivalent in Japan would be the withdrawal of Japanese-medium education, lack of employment prospects of the Japanese-medium-educated, perception of Japanese as second-rate and use of English in Japanese homes. None of the above seem likely to happen in the foreseeable future.

## 2. The language barrier at the workplace

Like many other global northern countries, Japan has a rapidly aging and declining population. According to the latest government estimates, the population will shrink to 88.08 million by 2065, down by about 30% from 127 million in 2015 (*The Japan Times*, 11 April 2017). The working population, consisting of those aged between 15 and 64, will decline by more than 40% to 45.29 million in 2065.

Some measures have been introduced to counteract the negative effects of the aging and declining population, but have been ineffective (*The Japan Times*, 19 November 2015). One such measure is encouraging women to go back to work after getting married or having children, but some have pointed out that unless attitudes (such as “the male should dominate” and “the rightful place of a woman is the home”) change, women are not returning to the workplace en masse anytime in the foreseeable future (Takeuchi & Tsutsui, 2016). Other measures include delaying the retirement age, automation in industry and the use of robots in caring for the elderly, which all have their limitations. The only option left is immigration. Some are of the opinion that Japan will only survive and prosper if it changes its deep-seated prejudice against immigration and embrace immigrants (*The Japan Times*, 19 November 2015).

The Japanese government is certainly aware that other global northern countries are facing similar challenges of having a declining workforce and have been actively attracting migrants, especially highly-skilled migrants. In response to this global competition to recruit highly-skilled migrants, Japan launched the Point-Based Preferential Immigration Treatment for Highly-Skilled Professionals system in May 2012. Japanese employment visas are issued according to the type of work performed, and there is no official definition of a highly-skilled migrant. Instead, 13 visa categories are usually used to define highly-skilled migrants, including engineer, investor/business manager, intra-company transferee and professor.

The incentives under this system are attractive, including work permits for spouses, fast family reunification, residency permits for the extended family and maid, and most prominently, expedited track to permanent residency. There is one area which is not addressed by the point-based system though: the language barrier.

D’Costa (2013) provided a number of reasons for why Indian IT professionals preferred working in English-speaking countries and other OECD countries to Japan. He listed language and cultural barriers, the lack of English language usage, the unfamiliar social and business environment, the lack of national receptivity towards foreigners and the lack of affordable international schools.

The language barrier also features prominently in Oishi’s (2012, 2013) efforts to account for the low numbers of highly-skilled migrants employed in science and engineering in Japan. Employers are concerned about foreigners’ Japanese language skills and their ability to communicate in it. The

vast majority of Japanese companies use mostly Japanese, and only a very small minority adopt English as the working language.

In a different study of engineers, Murata (2015) found that language skills are important from corporate perspectives because foreign engineers without Japanese skills add to costs in terms of translation or interpretation fees. These engineers are unable to interact directly with clients, which lead to communication difficulties and cost clients more time and effort in dealing with the language barrier.

In general, Japanese companies are reluctant to hire foreigners who have limited Japanese proficiency (Murata, 2015). The irony is that in spite of this reluctance, there is an increased demand for these highly-skilled migrants, especially in software engineering and executive management (Mouer, 2015a). There is a pressing need to utilise foreign talents and expertise more effectively, in the way English-capable businesses in China, India, Singapore and other countries in Asia are. These businesses are tapping into the pool of professionals trained by top universities and business schools in Europe and North America, while Japan, lacking the ability to provide an English-speaking work environment, is being left out.

To stay competitive, Japan must better accommodate highly-skilled migrants at the workplace (Mouer, 2015a). For Japanese employees, the English language requirement for the vast majority of job applications is the Test for English for International Communication (TOEIC). The TOEIC was developed in the late 1970s for the Japanese market, and tests mainly grammar and vocabulary, not communication skills. It is therefore not surprising that the Japanese are ill-equipped to interact or work with foreign co-workers. Working alongside foreigners clearly requires more than English grammar and vocabulary. The IELTS would be a more suitable test that could be more widely adopted.

Another inaccurate idea many Japanese have is that a large part of English language skills for the workplace consists of issuing instructions in a one-directional manner. An example of this is the abundance of English language learning materials focusing on the mechanics of transferring equipment and control systems overseas (Mouer, 2015a). These materials teach their readers how to give instructions in English, but do not consider the other aspects involved in two-way communication.

While it is true that in the past, one-directional giving of instructions was an important part of English language skills for the workplace, its importance is declining (Mouer, 2015b). Rahim (2015), for example, showed that until recently in Japanese manufacturing in Malaysia, minimal English sufficed for Japanese engineers and other technical staff who gave directions or conveyed technical information to Malaysian staff members with the help of blueprints and other visual aids.

In general, Japanese engineers, scientists and elite businessmen have high levels of techno-professional competency, which is the knowledge of the logical connections in a specialised domain (Mouer, 2015b). Most of them find that blueprints, spreadsheets, visual aids, and a little English are sufficient for conducting technical business. However, over time, the relative importance of communicating the technical aspects is declining as manufacturing in many countries become more sophisticated and the Japanese invest in other areas. This is when the lack of English language skills becomes more pronounced than ever.

Mouer (2015a, 2015b) argues that fuller engagement with the rest of the world is a pressing challenge for Japan. This means that the Japanese need to use their English communication skills effectively to engage with others, not only for conducting business but also for purposes such as informal networking and socialising. Japanese companies have tended to rely heavily on other companies within Japan to develop their technology (Mouer, 2015a, 2015b). It is of course more convenient to work with Japanese firms only, since working with foreign firms means working in a different language and dealing with different work practices. Relying on Japanese companies only also means

that profits stay within the country. In comparison, Korean companies have been more willing to improve their technology through alliances with overseas businesses. Even with foreign CEOs and other foreign experts in the early 1990s, the reluctance to engage more fully in global networks has differentiated Japanese from Korean companies.

The experiences of the nurses and care workers who have entered Japan via EPA illustrate just how much of an impediment the language barrier is. Japan signed EPAs with the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam and India between 2006 and 2011 to facilitate temporary entry of nurses and care workers (Ford & Kawashima, 2016). The condition they must fulfill in order to work in Japan as fully-certified health professionals is that they must pass the Japanese national examination, in the Japanese language. These professionals may work for up to three years as assistants while preparing for the examination. Those who pass are given renewable resident status, while those who fail must return home, although they may re-enter Japan to re-sit the examination.

The EPA programme is unattractive to foreign health professionals for a number of reasons. Even though they are fully-certified in their home countries, they must work as assistant nurses or assistant caregivers in Japan until they pass the Japanese national examination. In other words, the skills and knowledge they have acquired in their respective countries are not fully acknowledged. They are assistants in Japan regardless of their work status at home, which is a downgrading of their status and leads to their gradual deskilling<sup>1</sup> (Vogt, 2013).

What stands out most in the experiences of these professionals in the EPA programme is the hardship of passing the Japanese national examination (Shinohara, 2016). The figures for Indonesian nurses and care workers, the largest group so far, show that 98 nurses out of a total of 547 who arrived in Japan from 2008 to 2015 passed the examination by 2015. 214 care workers out of a total of 966 during the same period passed the examination. In 2015, the passing rate was 5% for nurses and 55% for care workers (Shinohara, 2016). For health professionals who received their training in English, such as those from the Philippines, going to an English-speaking country is by far an easier and quicker option.

There have been efforts to make the national examination more foreigner-friendly, and as a result, the passing rate is improving (Akashi, 2014). For Indonesian nurses, 2% passed in 2010, 14.3% in 2011 and 29.6% in 2012 (Ford & Kawashima, 2016). *Kanji* (“Chinese characters”) in the examination is now supplemented with *furigana*, a less complex Japanese script, and the names of diseases are provided in both English and Japanese. The Japanese expressions used are simpler, and a longer test time is offered to foreigners. From 2015, a one-year visa extension for re-sitting the examination became available (Ford & Kawashima, 2016).

Although there have been many positive reports from the Japanese of these foreign health professionals being good sources of stimuli and a positive influence on Japanese colleagues and patients (Shinohara, 2016), life for these professionals in Japan is far from easy. An Indonesian nurse who worked in the Kansai area shared her struggles with Vogt (2013). She had failed the national examination when she took it the first time, and only passed it the second time because a Japanese doctor helped her study her medical vocabulary and 10 pages of medical writing, for two hours, every evening, for a year. Even after passing the examination, she had not found her job fulfilling, because she was bullied by Japanese nurses, who saw her as more of a burden than an equal co-worker. In general, whenever a foreigner is on duty, there has to be a Japanese staff member on call, which is a significant extra burden from the point of view of the Japanese.

If the general level of English was better and English was more widely used at the workplace, foreign co-workers would be less likely to be seen as a burden. Using English more widely at the workplace alone will not threaten the position of Japanese. As we have seen in the case of Singapore earlier, it was a combination of factors that brought about the decline of the Chinese language. There are clear advantages to raising the standard of English and using it more at work. Japan would

be a more attractive place for migrants and would be able to compete for highly-qualified professionals with other global northern countries on an equal footing. Stronger English language skills would also facilitate alliances and partnerships with foreign establishments, not only in business and technology, but also in other areas of research and higher education. Japanese expatriates in many countries would also find it easier to work with the local staff.

### 3. Japanese attitudes towards foreigners

Based on the results of the World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 6, Vogt (2017) found that 36.3% of the Japanese respondents indicated that they would rather not have immigrants or foreign workers live in their neighbourhood. This is the third highest proportion, after South Korea and Estonia, among the OECD countries that participated in the survey. When asked how much they trusted people of another nationality, only 13.6% of Japanese respondents responded in the affirmative, which is the lowest proportion among the OECD countries (Vogt, 2017).

The main reason why the Japanese distrust foreigners is the exaggerated media coverage of crimes committed by foreigners, as well as right-wing politicians' and groups' bashing of foreigners using such exaggerations. Media reports of foreigner crime is part of what Chiavacci (2014) calls the "foreigners-as-an-internal-security-threat" discourse, which originated in the 1980s and has been well-established since the 1990s. According to this discourse, foreigners are an internal security threat and having more foreigners in Japan will lead to higher crime rates, ethnic conflicts and riots. Vogt (2014) explains that foreigners are seen as a threat to national security and public safety, and as people who need to be controlled. Crime is perceived as something originally foreign and public safety as originally Japanese. When foreigners arrive in Japan, they bring with them crimes which attack Japanese public safety. This discourse has been extremely influential. It has a very strong impact on the Japanese and has resulted in a feeling of insecurity and a climate of fear in relation to foreign neighbours and co-workers (Vogt, 2014). Kibe (2014) also observes that the discourse has succeeded in the sense that it has shaped Japanese perception of foreigners as criminals.

Foreigners in Japan do commit crimes, but at a relatively low rate compared to what the media, as well as right-wing politicians and groups, have had the general public believe. 1% of all crimes are committed by foreigners, although the public thinks it is 26% (Richey, 2010). Chiavacci (2014) describes media coverage of crimes committed by foreigners as a distortion of reality and the figures provided on foreigner crime rates as flawed. Richey's (2010) study shows that a majority of the Japanese are hostile towards immigration, particularly focused around exaggerations of immigrant crime.

There is evidence that English language abilities are associated with positive attitudes towards immigration. Using the results from the Japanese General Social Survey (JGSS) 2010, which is based on a nationally representative sample, Green and Kadoya (2015) found that although attitudes towards immigration are generally negative, individuals who claim to have better English conversation ability have a more positive disposition to increasing the foreign population in their communities. The authors observed that the correlation is only with English conversation ability, not reading ability, which was also examined. This shows that the ability to interact with foreigners influences attitudes towards immigration and foreigners.

Communication is closely associated with empathy. Japanese individuals who have the English conversational ability to interact and communicate with foreigners are also able to empathise with them and welcome them. As things stand, there is neither much empathy nor welcome for foreigners, which is evident below.

Speaking in relation to the provision of multilingual services for foreigners in Tokyo, a Japanese respondent in Nagy's (2012) remarked:

It is natural that foreigners who come to Japan should do things the Japanese way. It's strange that we provide special services for them. We should not give them any special treatment. (Nagy, 2012, p. 133)

There is hardly any sensitivity to the needs of foreigners in the comment above. The next example of the lack of empathy and welcome is from Nagy's interview with the managing director of the Shinjuku (a municipality in Tokyo) Foundation for Culture and International Exchange. He explained that one of the reasons for the provision of Japanese language classes, cultural classes, as well as multilingual advisory services and publications is so that foreigners do not cause any intercultural friction or become a burden to the local government and Japanese residents.

As I have remarked in the previous section in relation to foreign co-workers being seen as a burden, foreigners would be less likely to be a burden if the general level of English was better. If both foreigners and Japanese had the means to communicate, there would be less intercultural friction too. This is not to say that there would not be intercultural friction caused by the Japanese being forced to communicate in a foreign language in their own country. The stress and intercultural friction caused by having to speak English is worthy of a separate study of its own.

An unprecedented government survey on discrimination was carried out recently. 4,252 foreign residents of various nationalities across Japan were surveyed (*The Japan Times*, 31 March 2017). Discrimination at estate agents' offices, workplace, and racist taunts were most commonly reported. About 40% of the respondents have been told a property they were interested in renting was unavailable to foreigners, which is the most common form of discrimination at estate agents'. About 30% have had derogatory remarks made about them because of their background. One in four respondents who have applied for jobs said they were denied employment because they were foreign, and one in five believed they were paid less than their Japanese counterparts for similar work (*The Guardian*, 31 March 2017).

Although Japan ratified the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination in 1995, the government has not passed any legislation to outlaw discrimination. Since ratification, Japan has come under constant criticism by the UN for not introducing legislation against discrimination, despite its obligation to do so in the treaty (Burgess, 2016). The reason for not doing so may be due to the lack of popular interest in the issue, as well as the fact that there is little political benefit to doing so. The UN committee has also expressed concern about the harassment and violence against minorities, including foreign students, and notices on businesses (which include estate agents, shops, restaurants, hotels, and hot springs) that read "Japanese only", which are refusals of service to foreigners (Park, 2017).

Some forms of discrimination against foreigners would be mitigated if foreigners and the Japanese had the means to communicate. I will illustrate this with discrimination in housing.

When estate agents are asked why they refuse to serve foreigners or when property-owners are asked why they refuse to rent to foreigners, the answer is frequently "Foreigners do not understand the Japanese language or do not know Japanese culture" (Morita, 2015, 2016). Another common response is *Ruru mamoranaï* ("(Foreigners) do not obey rule(s)"). The rules in question range from minimising noise to the correct days for putting out various types of rubbish. If foreign clients and Japanese estate agents have no means to communicate, it is no wonder that foreigners do not follow the rules they do not know.

The means to communicate is also important for estate agents to guide foreign clients through the maze of *shikikin* ("deposit"), *reikin* ("key money"), taxes, transaction fees and maintenance fees. Clients also need to understand the role of the guarantor and who they may approach. When finally the contract is drawn up, the client should understand its contents when the estate agent goes through it. There will always be cultural differences between foreign clients and Japanese estate

agents and property-owners, but having a common language and being able to communicate their expectations will mitigate their differences to some degree.

We have seen in this section that Japanese attitudes towards foreigners are far from positive. The Japanese neither trust nor welcome foreigners, and discrimination against foreigners is common. Research has shown that Japanese individuals with better English conversation ability are more positive about immigration (Green & Kadoya, 2015), which shows that English language skills influence attitudes towards immigration and foreigners. The ability to communicate will also mitigate discrimination to some degree.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Mouer (2015a, 2015b) strongly believes that Japan must engage with the rest of the world in the twenty-first century, and through the use of English. The fields to engage in go beyond business, research, higher education, and science and technology. The Japanese should be able to understand foreign perspectives on the controversial issues surrounding wartime aggression and territorial disputes (Senkaku and Takeshima islands), rather than blindly accepting the information handed down to them in Japan. They should also have the English language ability to engage in discussion of these issues.

Japan needs English, and better English, for reasons that go beyond what is discussed in this paper. One of the aspects that have not been discussed here due to space constraints is the disservice Japan is doing to foreign residents through its lack of English language skills. It was recently revealed that the death rate of foreign residents in Japan is higher than that of the Japanese (*The Japan Times*, 19 April 2017). The doctor interviewed in the *Japan Times* article did not think the difference in death rate had anything to do with poor health on the part of foreigners. The reason for the higher death rate is the lack of language support for foreign residents in the healthcare system. In a survey of foreign residents conducted in February 2017, many respondents cited the lack of language support as one of the shortcomings of Japan's healthcare system (*The Japan Times*, 19 April 2017). While Japan has no laws requiring hospitals to use medical interpreters for non-Japanese-speaking patients, some community-based non-profit groups have worked hard to train volunteer interpreters and persuaded hospitals to accept their assistance. This has been helpful to some degree but is far from sufficient. The challenges posed by the language barrier in medical services are discussed in Morita (2016).

The advantages to having better English language skills have been clearly presented in this paper. The grammar-translation method of teaching English in schools and universities needs to be phased out and communication-based methods have to be firmly established. For that to happen, university entrance examinations have to move away from questions on grammar and vocabulary, since many Japanese students see the examinations as their goal and purpose for learning English. An oral test in English would be ideal, although logistically challenging. The advantages of having stronger English language skills need to be clarified and emphasised. Many Japanese are going to be working with foreign co-workers and English is going to be used at the workplace. It is also to Japan's advantage to form alliances and partnerships with foreign establishments. Attitudes towards foreigners are also important since many more foreigners will come to Japan.<sup>2</sup> Being able to communicate and interact with them would help develop empathy for them and mitigate discrimination against foreigners.<sup>3</sup>

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#### Notes

1. A reviewer pointed out that because communication is an essential part of nursing, the ability to speak the language would be essential to be considered for full duties in most countries. While I agree that communi-

- cation is important, it is also true that countries such as Singapore have successfully employed the services of English-speaking nurses from the Philippines for many years. Local Singaporean nurses step in when elderly patients speak only Chinese or Malay.
2. There have been efforts to make Japan more foreigner-friendly in the run-up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Bilingual road signs have been put up and public symbols have been brought in line with international standards. Organisers and volunteers are also being taught conversational English.
  3. There are many who believe that mass-immigration will bring as many troubles as it solves. The most common counter-argument to mass-immigration is Japanese homogeneity. The Japanese are homogeneous (this has been refuted) and foreigners will not fit in. According to the argument, the presence of foreigners will significantly alter Japan, along with its shared values and harmonious consensus.

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