

# **Employing Community Resources in the Development of English Communication Skills of Japanese Students: An Analysis of an Approach in Adapting to Global Society**

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## **Abstract**

Global education in Japan has been mainly prompted by requests from the business circle. Their main goal is to foster “global human resources.” The authors of the article critically examined this trend because it is too business-oriented, and as an alternative, they discussed the possibilities and challenges of their English learning programs that focus not on business context but on the community resources in everyday life in the community. “Resource” is a term that is mainly used in the business world where making a profit is prioritized. Broadening its meaning to include those which are not profitable or useful in business, the authors define community resources as follows: a person, a place, an asset, a service, a method, or anything that has the potential or the ability to enrich community life by broadening people’s perspectives and experiences. The programs, which were proposed, planned, and implemented by the authors, focus on the ability and sensibility to find and utilize community resources, aiming for sustainable coexistence instead of unsustainable competition. While the programs got positive feedback from the participants, it was only subjective. It is necessary to develop a more objective assessment method.

**Key words:** English learning program, global education, communication skill, community resources

## Introduction

The term “globalization” has various implications depending on the context. On the bright side, it implies opportunities that could break conventional rules on the local/nation-state level and new avenues for businesses that seek to expand beyond local markets. The dark side reveals the rampant greed of multinational corporations weakening local economies and community-based systems based on mutual aid. In the context of education, globalization is considered as a given reality that learning institutions, educators, and learners should adapt towards adopting and accepting. One of the major concerns arising out of the demand to globalize is the need to develop the English communication skills of the youth since English has become the universal language of business, economic, political, and social discourse worldwide.

We, Hans Nagl and Atsuki Kuga, the authors of this article have implemented various international programs employing natural, cultural, and human resources found in the community of Ogawa. Based on our experiences in carrying out these programs, we are going to identify the challenges and benefits that affect the English communication skills development of Japanese students, propose improved programs that further enhance communication skills, and argue that employing community resources is an important factor in implementing programs that enable learners not only to gain a global perspective but also to rediscover, recognize, and revalue the potential of local resources.

Ogawa, a town in Saitama prefecture, can be reached by train: about seventy minutes away up north from the central part of Tokyo. With a population of thirty thousand, the town is seeing a decline in its birthrate, a decrease in the number of residents, and an aging population. A research paper predicts that Ogawa will disappear from the map by 2040, with a probability of 75.6% (Japan Policy Council, 2014). Despite these problems, various activities aimed at revitalizing the community are actively being pursued, attracting the attention of non-residents. We consider the people who involve themselves in revitalization, the network of volunteers, and the revitalization initiatives as community resources.

By starting off with a brief critical examination of the Top Global University Project, a key government program that promotes global education in the Japanese university system (section1), the article moves on to a presentation of two sets of cases: Nagl's experiences teaching English to local kids and university students in Ogawa from 2017 to the present and Kuga's programs with his colleague Zane Ritchie and his friend Futoshi Sato (section2). The challenges and benefits of English education as drawn out from the implementation of said programs shall be discussed (section3). Ideas, plans, and recommendations for future programs that rely on local community resources in order to empower students with the means to adapt to globalization are suggested in the final section.

## Section1(Kuga): Global education and “Global human resources”

The Japanese government launched the Top Global University Project, a program that aims to “achieve true internationalization” by enhancing “international competitiveness” and “international compatibility” (MEXT, n. d. a), in 2014. Universities in Japan are expected to satisfy certain performance indicators ranging from overseas expansion (i.e., increasing the number of international students, foreign faculty, and Japanese professors with academic degrees from abroad) to the development of “global human resources”<sup>(1)</sup> (i.e., university graduates who are expected to succeed in competing with other talents from abroad in seeking job opportunities). By prioritizing the funding of 37 universities that have committed to the implementation of various initiatives in collaboration with foreign universities as well as pursuing their own activities and introducing changes to their staff and educational systems, the government seeks to promote globalization of Japanese university education.<sup>(2)</sup>

The Top Global University Program has met criticism from academia. First, the internationalization of Japanese university education as promoted by the Japanese corporate world focuses on worker competencies only (i.e., foreign language communication skills, initiative, cultural competence). Western societies include integrity and transparency as traits that a globally active leader should possess while in Japan, the emphasis is on business skills. The only requirements needed from a Japanese individual in order to be considered as a global human resource are the experience in studying abroad and the ability to speak in English.<sup>(3)</sup>

Second, the discussions in Japan surrounding globalization reflect Japanese people’s inferiority complex toward western countries. Since the 1980s, the main concern has always been about catching up with the western world. However, even the most powerful nations in North America and Europe are not able to respond to global issues such as global warming, the shortage of natural resources, and terrorism. What is missing in the discussions is the implementation of education programs that allow students to think more critically about the things taken for granted in Japanese society and resist the negative side of globalization. Instead of catching up with the western world, Japanese higher education should foster the youth’s abilities in addressing global challenges by showing them how to take the initiative in establishing global networks (Yoshida, 2014).

Fostering “global human resources” is the goal of this program. Global human resources is a term referring to a new type of employees, those hired by Japanese companies when they develop overseas business (Fukagawa, 2013). This term is closely related to business. In fact, since the 2000s the business world in Japan has urged universities to train their students to become global human resources. Although issues related to globalization are not limited to the business field, the discussion has been led by the business world.

## Section 2 (Nagl and Kuga): Case study: Nagl and Kuga's experiences

"Resource" is a term that is mainly used in the business world where making a profit is prioritized. Broadening its meaning to include those who are not profitable or useful in business, we define community resources as follows: a person, a place, an asset, a service, a method, or anything that has the potential or the ability to enrich community life by broadening people's perspectives and experiences. Even if someone or something in a community does not generate any revenue, they can still be regarded as community resources. For example, there are elderly people who know which native grasses are edible in their area. By sharing their knowledge to those reliant on commercial food, they make sure that people would reevaluate the value of plants in their surroundings, and contribute to community life.

Employing community resources brings positive effects to the development of English communication skills of Japanese students, because the participants talk about something found in their community using English. If English programs give the participants chances to reevaluate community resources, they will be motivated to talk about it in English. Moreover, it is an effective way to protect cultural diversity which is vulnerable to globalization.

### 2-1. Nagl's experiences in instructing local children and adult students

Over last three years there were various opportunities teaching English from children to adults in the greater Ogawamachi, Saitama area. This included about 10 to 15 children of various age groups, and, well over 100 adult students at various locations throughout Saitama and Tokyo.

For younger children objective is to waken their interest in speaking English. They need to associate English with a happy teacher and fun activities.

Location of these classes were at a historic farmhouse, called Yashikibokko, in Ogawamachi. Summers are hot with very little air-conditioning available. Kerosene heaters help keep temperatures up during cold winter days. Students wore jackets during class. Recently classes moved to the authors home, a Showa era Kominka, located close to Nisseki Hospital in Ogawamachi.

A typical class consists of two or three students lasting about 50 minutes comprised of activities such as playing with various toys, creative art, singing songs, or exploring nature. Self-made word flash-cards include photos of local environment and items children are familiar with. This keeps their focus on the cards.

During classes students sometimes request



English practice at Yashikibokko Farmhouse

unplanned activities such as a favorite game. Because classroom is in a historic, old building playing hide and seek while exploring the place is an all-time favorite. This presents a great opportunity keeping children happy and motivated. Instructor watches and responds in English as much as possible before returning to a planned course outline. Flexibility of instructor concerning course outline is key.

An English textbook is rarely used because it is not popular with children. They lose attention very quickly.

It is also important to keep parents happy. They tend to like the learning environment of antique Japanese houses reminding them of their childhood days. They often watch classes from a close by table supporting children through their presence. This is beneficial, especially for younger children, because they feel more comfortable initially dealing with an unknown, foreign looking person, the teacher.

Overall, the setup is supposed to allow for activity based, natural, and, unstructured learning of English much the same way a child learns his/her mother tongue. Students, and, parents enjoy this playful English class very much.

For children ages 10 and above the program is little more formal, however, still playful and loaded with activities. Older children want to sing more modern songs they see on TV. If space allows dancing to songs is also an option. Through drawing favorite cartoon characters, creation of own stories, they can express themselves visually, aided by simple English. Use of music instruments is always a good way to keep their attention. In the author's classes we use accordion, banjo, keyboard and blues harmonica. Students may also bring their own instruments such as flute. Parents usually do not participate in these classes.

Among adult level language classes author experienced two categories; Round table conversations, and, formal classroom education.

Most popular are activity based, round table conversations. Goal is to learn English in an informal, interactive, joyful way. Events take place at community centers, or, most preferred, locations such as above mentioned Yashikibokko because of its historic, interesting atmosphere. Outside activities are also popular. Students may bring their own snacks and drinks sometimes even share with others during conversations.

All English levels are welcome. A prior chosen topic builds the framework of the round table event. For example; Digital communication – benefits and challenges. Presentation part included demonstrations of actual, real items such as communication devices.



Round Table conversation at Yashikibokko  
Farmhouse

Instructor explained differences between analog and digital via demonstration of a functioning sixty year old pair of crank field telephones. This was followed by a presentation of various cell phones sold over time in Japan and US. Conversations easily unfolded around these items keeping participants engaged. Photography, camping, or, music might be future topics.

Classroom education such as at a local manufacturing facility includes one to four students per class. To keep everybody engaged, formal text book lectures include free conversations created by instructor. Learning only via a book, sometimes supported through an accompanying CD seems to be most unpopular. Progress of such a program is generally slow especially when aim is purely increase of TOEIC scores for purposes of job promotion.



**Figure 1** Photo workshop at Yoshida Kominka in Takezawa, Saitama

Finally I held workshops in English about mobile phone photography in a local antique farmhouse in Takezawa, Saitama, Yoshida Kominka. Workshops are produced in collaboration with Rikkyo University. This place has a straw type roof. Its heat source are two open fire places called irori, and, various kerosene heaters. Participants came from the local community, as well as, Rikkyo University students. Goal of these workshops is to, among others, familiarize local people with the use of cell phone cameras to communicate the beauty of this area via social networks. This in turn is supposed to attract more people to this area.

Workshop featured a theoretical part explaining camera functions and photo composition. An interactive practical part followed. There were three such workshops. Overall students were very engaged and enjoyed this workshop.

## 2-2. Kuga's experiences in implementing a rural community learning program

A group composed of university professors, Zane Ritchie and I, and a local farmer, Futoshi Sato, implemented the Ogawamachi program from 2015 to 2017.

The goals include: 1) using English as a communication tool; 2) gaining experiences to be shared with other people; and 3) thinking about one's own daily life from the perspective of sustainability. What makes this program different from other existing English education programs that rely on classroom instruction is



**Figure 2** Futoshi Sato explaining farming related activities in English



the integration of daily activities in English education: the students communicated in the English language while engaging in farm work, cooking, and eating meals together.

Community resources we used are 1) local farmer as facilitators: Futoshi Sato, who moved to Ogawamachi 15 years ago and practices organic farming. Since he has worked in the international exchange field and had the experience to teach English, he was a suitable person for this program. 2) local practices as a learning material: Ogawamachi is famous for its organic farming, and 3) local issue as a learning setting: Ogawamachi suffer from depopulation. There are a lot of abandoned farmlands. Futoshi borrowed one of them free of charge and has held events for urban people. Since Ogawamachi is famous for organic farmers, his events attract many people.

Zane concisely describes the contents of the program as follows: Our main facilitator was Mr. Sato. The participants worked outside his garden where they planted vegetables before harvesting their lunch, which might consist of a variety of seasonable vegetables, such as carrots, leeks, cabbages, potatoes, or root based vegetables such as Japanese radish. After harvesting activity, a cooking lesson starts with various natural ingredients and given instructions on how to cook multiple traditional dishes. As a native English teacher, Zane encouraged the participants to use English while doing these activities. The main English class, a series of lectures conducted by Mr. Sato usually followed lunch. In the lesson, the participants learn farming-related vocabulary and several grammar points, followed by discussion and examples. After a short break, the participants read together the material that the students had previously prepared for, on organic farming, for example. We then held group discussions in which participants were encouraged to offer their opinions in English. For the last part of the program, the participants were asked to create a group poster to present in front of the class. (Sato et al., 2016)



Enjoying harvested vegetables at a local community center

### **Section 3 (Nagl): challenges and benefits of employing community resources in English education as drawn out from the implementation of the programs**

Creating English language programs in a relatively small, rural town comes with its challenges. Children usually are at school until the afternoon. Homework and other activities follow. Many parents are faced with trade-off decisions between recreational and educational activities after school. It is believed by many that sport activities firm up communities and create long lasting friendships among children and parents. English is believed not to be so important since children

will not really have to actively use it at such an early stage. Some parents, unfortunately, do not realize that children at a young age soak up English very quickly. Later this early learning ability subsides making it harder to become fluent in English. Instructing English language at this stage looks much more like a structured leisure activity rather than a typical class room lecture.

On the other hand many adults realize the increasing need for English as an important communication tool at work, and, on a personal level. If workplaces do not sponsor internal English classes then individuals need to find instructors at their own time. Since traditionally people work long hours it is sometimes impossible to squeeze English lectures into a busy day. Early morning classes, as well as, late night lectures, and, weekend programs form an alternative solution. These lectures mostly do not provide students with motivating, hands-on, active English classes because of time constraints. Overall, once adults are employed it becomes very hard to engage in motivating educational programs during work off-hours.

There are many benefits of actively learning English. For an individual person communication abilities on a professional and personal level increase dramatically. Many people around the World speak English turning this language into a common denominator for international communication. On a professional level misunderstandings through poor language understandings are diminished, for example, leading to successful business negotiations. People with these skills tend to have better career options, sometimes even increasing their wages.

Communities with English skills tend to be more visited by tourists since it is easier for them to get around, ask questions, or, get first hand advice from locals. From an international business perspective it seems to be less challenging to operate at locations with larger pools of English speaking human resources helping global management communicate. Based on my own experience it also simplifies moving into communities with English skills. Finding a local physician, communicating health issues, helping with Japanese homework, filling out forms written in kanji, and, many other items require English explanation skills making life less frustrating for both immigrants, and, locals.

#### **Section 4 (Nagl): ideas, plans and recommendations for future programs**

Three years ago my family and I moved to Ogawamachi. Many thoughts crossed my mind even before moving here. It became clear to me that one way to lead a happy life is to become as self-sufficient as possible, have many hands-on skills, and, most of all be flexible. Relying on employment at the every-day mercy of corporate maneuvering became a lesser option for me going forward. Ogawamachi seems to have all elements making such ideas become reality, mainly because of curious people of all ages, environment away from busy cities, healthy nature, mountains, agriculture, ancient history, and, Japanese traditional crafts.



In spring 2019 our family had the opportunity to purchase a Showa era antique farmhouse located between Nisseki Red Cross hospital, and, Kawara Hot Springs on a hill overlooking the city. While relatively small compared to other kominka style farmhouses ours featured nicely decorated rooms, an extra edition which will function as a class room-café, and, most important, a large garden. The challenge was that the place was empty for five years. Significant repairs needed to be undertaken to make this house livable again.



Hans' Showa era farmhouse

While planning my future I wanted it to go along well with people who live here and have a thirst for out-of-box education. Goal would be to offer communications in various languages about a large array of topics in form of hands-on workshops and classes. The place also has to be a friendly and interesting. A small café to relax over a cup of coffee, or, tea should also be part. Overall I would like people to visit this place communicating about various topics, returning home with an interesting and engaging learning experience. Audience would be members of all age groups.

The question becomes how this could be achieved in an old Showa-style house in Ogawamachi.

One side of the house features a concrete extension of younger age. It's square layout is perfect for a class room. Actually it would be better to call it a communication room since it will have one large table where people can sit and talk to each other rather than individual tables. Usually, in a typical café, customers engage with their phones, or, computers while drawn into their own thoughts rarely communicating with others.

Shelves will hold many books in English or German, some of them antique, which visitors may chose to read. There are topics about history, Japan, USA, Europe, photography, music, crafts, cooking etc. Some of these books will also be presented by various people leading to discussion groups. For example, there could be conversations about topics such as nature, farming, or, cooking.

Language classes in form of round table conversations, as well as, formal 1x1 lectures will happen on a continuous basis. For children groups of three or four will form basis of English instruction in an active an happy way as described above.

Round table conversations are designed more for adults. Topics could range from tourism to photography, hiking etc. There are many options about topics which depend mostly on wants and needs of students. During round tables a cup of coffee or tea with pastries could help sweeten the study experience.

For example, a 35 mm camera workshop would incorporate information from various books collected over years combined with explanations of actual cameras. Afterwards the garden could be used as practice ground. At the end, if students would like to still communicate more about their experiences then they could just remain at the café.

The place will also have WIFI allowing for small movies to be shown leading to conversations afterwards. Opinion exchange and critical thinking will be a very important part of such sessions. Since English skills of all levels are welcome anybody is encouraged to start a conversation with locals and foreign visitors. This would also be important for younger visitors of college, and, high-school age to practice assertiveness. Too many times students are told to conform with standard accepted opinions and not say what is on their mind, just listen.

Garden offers a unique chance for small agricultural activities. Students can join and learn how to grow various plants such as herbs, and, vegetables. While the size of garden would be too small for large fields, smaller patches will be possible. After all it is the experience which counts having grown own vegetables.

There could also be lectures about herbs and their proper use. Small cooking exercises would round things up offering an experience from growing plants to actual preparation of food.

Music will be an important aspect underlining not only language related activities also presenting its own form of communication. Various musicians will be invited to play their instruments either with others or solo communicating their feelings without words. This should inspire others to engage with music.

A special aim of this place will be inclusion of retired people who are skilled in a craft not commonly used so much anymore. For example carpenters could show on a small scale how to work with wood. Electricians could explain how to repair an old vacuum tube radio, traditional Japanese crafts people could explain their skills. This would not only appeal to Japanese people, however also to foreigners visiting Japan looking for a unique experience while communicating with locals.

Finally, in the long run, activities would be digitally transmitted via internet to other places in the World. People could participate from anywhere, ask questions, or comment. Digital recording of lectures and events will serve as a record for many generations to come.

In conclusion this place will be a hands-on communications hub for anybody who wishes to get in touch with local and international audiences learning, or, communicating their skills, telling



Figure 3 Gardening workshop with Rikkyo University

their stories, or, making friends. I hope it will be a happy and joyful classroom café.

## Conclusion

As Nagl mentioned, Ogawa is a relatively small, rural town. Yet, there are over 300 foreign residents, which is equivalent to more than 1% of the population. It is not rare to pass by someone who speaks a foreign language in the town. The increase in the number of foreigners, even in the small town, indicates that globalization has been accelerating in Japanese society as a whole. It is high time to develop educational programs which enable the students to accept this social change.

We critically examined the Japanese government's policies for fostering "global human resources," because they are too business-oriented. In the policies, the improvement in labor productivity has been required, appreciated, and prioritized. It sometimes requires even to sacrifice quality of life. The educational programs we displayed in this article are a proposal for an alternative to the government's policies. The programs, which were proposed, planned, and implemented by the authors, Nagl and Kuga focus on the abilities and senses to find and utilize community resources, aiming for sustainable coexistence instead of unsustainable competition.

Japanese society suffers from depopulation, aging, while the economy is shrinking. Especially, the revitalization of rural areas is a major concern. Taking sustainability issues into serious consideration, it may be impossible to expect that economy will grow further by mass production and consumption, while aiming for the endless improvement in productivity. As an approach to develop educational programs for adapting globalization, it is hoped that resources in the community are found and reevaluated and the acquired knowledge is shared on the global network by using IT technology.

This research has the limitation that it does not provide an assessment method for the results of the programs. While it is impossible to apply a quantitative measurement such as TOEIC scoring, it is necessary to analyze the feedback from the participants of the programs, which will be an issue of our next research.

## Notes

- (1) "Global human resources" is a literal translation of "gurobaru jin zai" (グローバル人材), a concept that consists of three factors: "linguistic and communication skills; self-direction and positiveness, a spirit for (sic) challenge, cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility and mission; and understanding of other cultures and a sense of identity as a Japanese (person)" (The Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, 2011). The closest translations to this term are either "global leader" or "global talent" (Moriya,

2016).

- (2) "Under the Top Global University Project, 13 universities were selected as Type A (Top Type) universities that are conducting world-leading education and research and 24 universities were selected as Type B (Global Traction Type) universities that are leading the globalization of Japanese society. These 37 universities have been working hard on internationalization and university reform." Annually, Type A universities receive 420 million yen subsidy at most; Type B universities, 170 million yen maximum.
- (3) Yoshida (2014) takes note of the common notion in Japanese society: anyone who goes abroad to study in any foreign university and come back with the ability to communicate in verbal English are able to get good jobs.

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