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The Structure of Science Subject-Specific Professors' Perspectives on International Student Education: Conflicting Demands on Science Professors in Managing an International Student Program

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Outline

This study qualitatively investigates the perspectives of subject-specific faculty—particularly in the sciences—on international student education, in order to explore effective collaboration between Japanese language education and disciplinary education. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with science faculty engaged in designing and operating an international student program at a large university, and the data were analyzed using the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA). This revealed the dilemmas and conflicts faculty face in teaching international students. Based on the findings, the study discusses collaboration between Japanese language instructors and subject-specific faculty, focusing on the prioritization of learning items relevant to disciplinary education and the creation of effective environments for Japanese language learning.

Background and Aim

With the internationalization of universities, the connection between Japanese language education and disciplinary education, as well as collaboration between Japanese language instructors and subject-specific faculty, has become increasingly important. To build effective cooperation, clarifying faculty perspectives is essential. However, previous studies on faculty views of international students have been sporadic, and their perspectives have not been sufficiently explored.

In the sciences, academic activity is largely conducted in English, consistently raising the question of whether Japanese proficiency is truly necessary. At the same time, Japanese is required in various contexts, such as undergraduate study, participation in research communities, and employment in Japan. Thus, faculty perspectives are expected to be dynamic. The aim of this study is to model the educational views of science faculty, which rest on multiple intersecting factors, and to derive implications for practice.

Research Overview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine science faculty members at a large research university who were involved in the design and operation of an undergraduate international student program. The interviews were analyzed using M-GTA. The participants, professors in fields such as physics, chemistry, engineering, agriculture, and medicine, had extensive experience supervising international students.

The aforementioned program consists of a half-year preparatory course and a 4-year undergraduate course. The preparatory course provides Japanese language education as well as disciplinary basics in English. To attract top-level students from abroad, the program requires high academic ability and English proficiency at admission, but not Japanese. In the undergraduate course, general education in the first and second years is offered in either English or Japanese, while disciplinary courses from the third year onward are conducted in Japanese.

Result

The analysis generated 43 concepts, organized into 14 subcategories and 5 overarching categories. Faculty perspectives can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Faculty recognize a discrepancy between their aspiration to admit excellent students and the obstacles posed by real-world constraints, described as “admission strategies versus reality.” They also acknowledge that these distortions are shaped by “intersecting language environments,” in which the linguistic demands placed on students differ by context and overlap in complex ways. To address challenges arising from these mismatches, faculty draw on their experience to propose strategies for “learning support” and the development of “competencies to be acquired.” By supporting students in overcoming difficulties, faculty expect them to contribute positively to the university’s internationalization while eventually becoming pro-Japan mediators or settling in Japanese society, which is framed as the “realization of educational ideals.”

The details of categories can be summarized as follows:

- (2) **Admission Strategies vs. Reality:** Faculty perceive contradictions in strategies for admitting excellent students. Examples include the high cost of offering all courses in English, the pressure on students to quickly become proficient in Japanese, the knowledge gap with Japanese students due to relaxed admission standards, and the relative lack of attractiveness of Japanese universities, which requires substantial efforts in terms of human resources and financial expenditure to overcome.
- (3) **Intersecting Language Environments:** Faculty recognize that the university environment mixes contexts where Japanese is indispensable (e.g., undergraduate courses, lingua franca on campus) with contexts where English suffices (e.g., research activities). Thus, Japanese learning is not considered wholly unnecessary.

(4) Learning Support, Competencies to be Acquired, and Realization of Educational Ideals:

Effective support is considered to involve both the enhancement of English-medium instruction and the creation of opportunities for mutual exchange between Japanese and international students. The competencies to be acquired include research abilities and receptive Japanese language skills essential for undergraduate study. Faculty also expect international students to contribute to the international campus environment and eventually give back to society or the university.

Discussion

Science faculty find themselves caught in several dilemmas:

- (5) They recognize the duality that while English is central in the sciences, Japanese remains indispensable in undergraduate education and in interactions with Japanese students.
- (6) They feel conflicted about requiring Japanese study solely for undergraduate education, as it may not be worthwhile for research.
- (7) They value diversity but are aware that knowledge gaps with Japanese students can hinder education, and they find it challenging to bridge these gaps.
- (8) They wish to attract excellent students, yet acknowledge that studying science in Japan has limited appeal.

These dilemmas stem from the tension between internationalization strategies and the still-dominant “immersion in Japanese-medium education” model. Based on these findings, the study highlights two key issues for collaboration between Japanese language instructors and subject-specific faculty:

- (9) Internationalization should not mean reducing Japanese language education. However, priorities within Japanese education should be reconsidered—for example, by emphasizing receptive skills.
- (10) Since subject-specific faculty regard specialized vocabulary and early exposure to academic environments as effective support, Japanese language instructors should actively collaborate on these points. Moreover, as international students are expected to contribute to internationalization, the positioning of multicultural collaborative courses at the institutional level should be discussed jointly.

Conclusion

Although English-medium education is likely to expand, Japanese language education remains indispensable. Its significance should be clarified from multiple perspectives, including career development, the costs of English-medium instruction, and the added value of Japanese as a lingua franca. Japanese language instructors and subject-specific faculty must work together to

reconsider the place of Japanese education within international programs. This study clarifies the perspectives of science faculty toward international students and provides insights for such discussions.

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