

International Academic Programs in English at the leading Russian and Japanese Universities: Cultural and Methodological Aspects

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Abstract

Modern development of higher education has had a similar effect on the leading universities in Russia and Japan, putting them under the challenge of internationalization. One of the most important aspects of internationalization is the growth in the number of international students and the necessity to design academic programs in English for those students. This work examines social and cultural aspects of the growing impact of English on higher education.

1. Introduction

The development of modern universities has been greatly influenced by the processes of globalization and internationalization of higher education.

The best universities of Japan and Russia are competing to preserve the status of the leading global universities. They have to respond to the new challenges of internationalization in the area of university education. However, making reforms (including the change of the language of instruction for several programs, inviting students, researchers and teaching staff from abroad) universities must be careful not to lose the identity of the academic culture. That is why reforms aimed at internationalization often face opposition from the Japanese and Russian academic community.

2. Literature Review

One of the most important aspects of internationalism is the growing role of English in the modern educational world. The impact of the growing use of English on the development of higher education in the countries with different national languages was described in numerous publications by American (Altbach, 1998, 2006), Canadian (Knight, 2006), Australian (Doherty, Singh, 2005), Japanese (Werawan 2007; Yonezawa, 2006) and Russian (Ter-Minasova, 2008; Saginova, 2009) scholars, as well as representatives of many other academic communities. It is necessary to define from the beginning, that academic programs in English are generally not aimed at the development of English language skills. As opposed to the English language courses, international academic programs use English as a tool for teaching various subjects (from social science to engineering) to international students. Linguistic mistakes made by participants are usually not corrected and evaluation is done without respect to the English language skills of

students. However, English language skills are an important criteria to be enrolled in those programs.

The use of English as the language of instruction in academic programs contributes to the growing market share of teaching materials, published in English and the spread of western pedagogy. However, the attempts to use Western tutorial at a class with Asian students sometimes result into “simulation and impurity of cultural processes”. This was proven by the experience of arranging a “western-style discussion” in an international student class at one Australian university. In order to force Asian students to behave, as their American peers do, “an authoritarian/coercive construction of power relations...at odds with the idealized democratic distribution of power in the imagined/fictionalized model of tutorial discussion” was created [3].

Doherty and Singh, who observed those classes argue, that “it was a simulation of an imaginary or idealized pedagogy rather than actually enacted pedagogic practices” [3, 66]. The most important idea expressed by Australian researchers is that the real modern Western education system is changing, facing more cultural diversity, instability, fluidity and complexification, partly as the result of increasing international population of Western universities. This causes interplay between “re-centring and de-centring discourses” [4, 282] and in this context the attempts to simulate pure Western pedagogy with Asian students at an Australian university may be regarded as an opposition towards the growing internationalization of the Western university. This work by Australian researchers illustrates an important trend: globalization and wide use of Western pedagogy with students from different cultural backgrounds changes and diversifies the understanding of what Western pedagogy is.

3. Research Rationale

The starting point of this research was an observation of how teaching and research culture may change when universities introduce launch international academic programs in the English language. Introduction of an English language course into curriculum usually does not only mean a change of means of communication, but also an implementation of a foreign culture and teaching philosophy into the domestic curricula. In many cases this “implemented” learning and teaching culture lies upon the original cultural patterns and

creates a “local variety of western pedagogy” with preservation of formal criteria, but important differences in the substance of teaching.

It is therefore necessary to analyze the positive and the negative experiences of teaching for international students and learning abroad to develop a set of guidelines and teaching methods that could be applied when teaching a group of international students. Those methods should promote communication between course participants and collaborative research, as opposed to the currently dominating method of giving lectures translated into the English language. Furthermore, attitudes and opinions of international programs alumni must be studied.

Another important research area is the efficiency of those programs both for universities and students and how this efficiency may be improved.

4. Analysis of findings

An important cultural consequence of the internationalization of a university and the switch to English is the appearance of “local variations on global scientific and teaching culture”. Even though there are many textbooks and manuals on how to make a good presentation, deliver a speech, participate in a discussion or write an essay in English, the cultural interpretation of these rules and recommendations is totally different, as well as their usage by representatives of different cultures. This may be observed even on the linguistic level, when “I”-statements are usually avoided by Russian faculty in scientific discourse as well as direct contradictions (especially in form of “no”-answers, words of disagreement etc.) avoided by Chinese and Japanese scientists.

Courses that combine formal lectures, discussions, group work during the class, group research and group presentation tend to be more effective in developing cooperation and more popular with foreign students. Often the original requirement for choosing a discussion partner during the lesson is that he or she is a representative of a different culture. Moreover, project groups are built in the way to promote intercultural communication and cooperation by the students (for example a group of 4 has to consist of one student from Europe, North America, Asia and Japan). Initially, many students face certain difficulties having to deal with different patterns of behavior, working culture and thinking. However, if the teacher monitors the process closely and advises students on how to come over cultural gaps, those cultural differences can help to enrich the research with different perspectives and to develop new approaches to research and study.

Nonetheless, almost all international academic programs in English may have certain natural limitations when taught abroad. The first limitation is generally understandable to anybody, who has ever been involved into teaching or attending a class,

where the instructor and most of the students are not native speakers of English. The efficiency (amount of material taught and acquired during a lesson) of those lessons is usually relatively low, as opposed to a class taught in Japanese or Russian.

The analysis of the academic programs in English offered at Hokkaido University reveals that most of them are introductory level courses (with an exception of the faculty of Engineering). Most of the courses in English at Moscow State University are either in the area of “Russian studies” (introduction into Russian society, economics and culture), or British-American, Australian studies. Most of the courses offered to international students in English at Moscow State University are introductory level courses. On the basis of this comparison it may be stated that it may be difficult to develop a highly specialized course in English with a deep view into scientific substance of the subject.

5. Conclusions

The internationalization of universities is a necessity in the era of global knowledge, information and mobility of human resources. The establishment of international programs helped to develop curricula, to promote publications in English, as well as to invite competent students with big potentials, who may later join the faculty. A change of language of instruction does not mean “internationalization”. Certain change of methods of teaching, encouraging more cooperation of students from different regions should be introduced. The university has to create an atmosphere, in which members of different cultures will be willing to cooperate, learn and research together. However, in both cases there is further necessity to increase the number of international academic programs (followed by the increase in number of international students and faculty) and improve the extent of internationalization of the curriculum, faculty and research.

6. References

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