

Summary of Panel Discussion:
“What are the Roles of ‘English Language’ for Universities in Non-English Speaking Regions?”

Date and time:

March 6, 2018 from 3.00-5.15pm

Venue:

Koshiba Hall, Hongo Campus, The University of Tokyo

Moderator:

Takashi Mino (Professor, Graduate School of Frontier Sciences, UTokyo)

Panelists:

Suiyan Fu (Professor/Director, Office of Educational Administration, Peking University)

Meeri Hellstén (Associate Professor, Department of Education, Stockholm University)

Takane Ito (Professor, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, UTokyo)

Hiroaki Suga (Professor, Graduate School of Science, UTokyo)

Yuto Kitamura (Associate Professor, Graduate School of Education, UTokyo)

1. Opening and short presentation by the moderator

Universities that desire to be international are “forced” to use English, which is a common media but can act as a disadvantage when cultural or other factors are considered. Therefore, this panel discussion is organized to discuss the roles of English for universities in non-English speaking regions when English is used as a common media for education. By show-casing the Graduate Program in Sustainability Science Global Leadership Initiative (GPSS-GLI), Professor Mino proves the international nature of the program, which consists of students from different academic backgrounds and countries. According to Prof. Mino, English acts as a useful tool, (1) to gather diverse and motivated students and (2) to disseminate local wisdom through English. On the other hand, the usage of English can create biases in terms of logic and expression.



2. Short presentation by each panelist

Suiyan Fu: Given that English is the chosen as the global language by the world, PKU must engage in English education if the university desires to strengthen its position in the world. In order to cultivate students' English language ability, the University provides more courses and exchange programs in English. PKU launched many policies to stimulate English teaching, such as offering support for faculty members to teach in English and providing special course series for students by leveraging internal and external funding, resulting in an increase of courses taught in English. In face of strengthening PKU's English program, there are challenges such as integrating students from different cultures, an imbalance between student demand and course supply, and tension between short-term demand and long-term benefit. In order to further strengthen PKU's English policy, Professor Fu suggests to 1) implement a top-down English curriculum and 2) incentivize and stimulate high quality teachers that naturally attract more students.



Meeri Hellstén: Stockholm University's vision is to attract Swedish and foreign researchers and students, which naturally requires the usage of English although Swedish is the University's administrative language. Therefore, the University must implement a parallel language use of both Swedish and English. In terms of education, Stockholm University effectively encourages students to utilize both English and Swedish academically throughout their studies by increasing the usage of English based on the academic grades as well as providing language support services. The University's initiative also face challenges, as there are advantages and disadvantages for using English. Disadvantages include the discrepancies in level of fluency among both students and staff and literature utilization. Advantages include a variety in participation, integration, and internationalization. When looked at discipline specific issues, English can differ based on natural sciences and humanities; colloquial and academic English can still create challenges.



Takane Ito: In the globalized world, universities are responsible for providing global education which aims at cultivating the ability to understand “others” with different cultural backgrounds. Given the homogeneity of UTokyo’s undergraduate education, where the vast majority of students and academic staff are male Japanese, UTokyo has



developed short-term exchange programs, providing students with a “fake” global campus with cultural diversity unattainable in the real campus of UTokyo. For the majority of UTokyo students, who seem to lack confidence in English, Prof. Ito believes that using English in non-English speaking environments is very effective: they need not feel intimidated to speak English, and cannot ascribe their “failure” to the language barrier when they feel, for instance, that their exchange counterparts are doing better at presentations, since the counterpart students are also using English as a foreign language. Technologies like automatic translation, when used appropriately, may help diminish the language barriers, and these programs will be all the more effective to make students aware of what constitutes difficulties in cross-cultural communication and how significant it is to try to understand different assumptions governing different behaviors.

Hiroaki Suga: The Department of Chemistry decided to offer classes all in English from the third year of the undergraduate level because of the importance of English in the chemistry field and therefore initiated a program called Global Science Course (GSC). GSC was established in 2014, which is an undergraduate transfer program taught entirely



in English. GSC limits the number of students, which allows a high level of interaction between students and professors. Laboratory work, special seminars, and Japanese language classes are also offered in the program. Although there are not many examples yet, a variety of students from all over the world have participated in the program, and half of them remain as graduate students at UTokyo. UTokyo students also benefit from the program by interacting with GSC students in classes and labs and joining research internships abroad. Particularly for chemistry, as most textbooks and research papers are written in English, Prof. Suga believes studying in English from the beginning is beneficial for students.

Yuto Kitamura: It is good for students to study in English from the beginning in some fields such as chemistry. However, in some other fields, particularly in the social sciences,

you cannot apply the same story. Also, in a liberal arts education, it is sometimes important for students to explore different streams of thoughts in their mother tongue. Teaching in English is also a burden for some faculty members even though they have studied or worked abroad, because teaching requires a high level of precision. As there are many countries and regions including ASEAN where English is an official language, English is the primary international tool to share our knowledge. It is important to be able to use English. At the same time, however, we should not put down the importance of our own language because it is used as well when we create new local knowledge. What is important is to find a good balance between the mother tongue and English, and universities in non-English speaking regions have to strategically define this balance and give proper guidance to the students.



3. Comment by Daniel Lang (Professor, Faculty of Sustainability, Leuphana University of Lüneburg)

Prof. Lang gave a very comprehensive summary of the presentations by the panelists. Then, he concluded with the following. English is important but diversity of language must be embraced because diversity is lost both in academia and lifestyle if we lose the diversity of language. Although English can provide ample opportunities, high linguistic capability is necessary for good communication in English. Although there are challenges in using English such as language biases and risk of excluding certain students and faculty members, one of the reasons why we aim to use English is to have diversity in cultural and academic experience. Finally, incentive for faculty is important to promote teaching in English.

4. Comments by Panelists

Prof. Kitamura: Historically, Japan has been translating knowledge into Japanese, which helped the country understand the evolution of knowledge as well as create knowledge by ourselves. If we depend too much on digitalization of language translation, we may lose this advantage that we have developed.

Prof. Suga: The discussion is about mother-tongue and non-mother-tongue teaching. Language is important, but it is not essential when teaching chemistry which normally utilize structure and techniques that are commonly used. GSC graduates whose mother

tongue is English remain at UTokyo, which proves the teaching quality of the GSC.

Prof. Ito: Young students tend to think that English is necessary to communicate with native speakers of English. In interaction programs in non-English speaking environments, they become aware of the significance of English as a medium of communication with non-English speaking people. Question to Prof. Fu: you mentioned about the discrepancy between the supply of English programs and the student demand; what encourages Chinese students to take courses conducted in English?

Prof. Fu: One reason is the rise of Chinese economy and the internationalized job market. Another is as most of the Chinese students currently begin studying English in primary school, their English competency is quite high enough to take courses in English. Some people in PKU doubt the necessity to have international students who are relatively not as good as Chinese students while there are so many excellent students in China, We have to convince them that it is the University's responsibility to assure diversity which benefit Chinese students to understand others in the future.

Prof. Hellstén: Stockholm University has an expectation that students have a certain proficiency level before they enter University. However, there are still challenges: how can we address students with different genres and registers of spoken English; how can we teach students academic English that can be sufficient enough for publication? Also, since the University increasingly recruits staff members from all over the world, it involves some preparatory efforts to help them transition into both the Swedish and English environment. Understanding their different levels of English is necessary.

5. Open Discussion

Question One: 20% of UTokyo students are really good at English, while 80% of the student body is ignored. For example, there is only one scientific writing course for the whole student body. Most graduate students forget what they learned during the first year of undergraduate when they need to write their papers in English. Why doesn't this University provide additional courses for undergraduate students, including scientific writing, presentation, and conversation courses?

Prof. Suga: The Department of Chemistry provides additional English conversation courses for Japanese students on a weekly basis. Unfortunately, scientific writing courses do not exist yet, but the Department hired one native speaking faculty this year and he is very likely to initiate those courses, which may be offered to students from other departments.

Prof. Kitamura: International opportunities are currently limited to the top 20-25%

students who are already capable of communicating in English. UTokyo will introduce a new certificate program to encourage students, especially those who are struggling to use English, to participate in international programs from the next academic year. In order to initiate this program, a university-wide effort is being made to develop more international programs and hopefully opportunities to brush up their scientific writing will increase as well.

Prof. Mino: Some Graduate Schools offer those courses which are not enough for the whole student body. Because the University recognize this problem, Prof. Mino hopes the number of scientific writing courses will increase.

Question Two: Each faculty(/graduate school) at UTokyo is independent, which also means English language programs are also left in a decentralized manner. I was wondering whether you would recommend this decentralized trial and error approach or a centralized policy. In addition, while most faculty members are fluent in English, it is difficult to find and hire administrative staff who are fluent in English due to competition from the private sector. Could you give any suggestions how to attract those administrative staff?

Prof. Hellstén: Stockholm University takes a centralized approach towards the English language. If we are to take internationalization seriously as a university, we need to think about utilizing our resources including our staff and students. We are also providing different types of training opportunity for staff. Exchange opportunities with partnership universities for administrative staff can also be beneficial.

Prof. Fu: Sometimes it is just a matter of how much you want to offer to attract staff.

Prof. Shigeru Miyagawa (Senior Associate Dean for Open Learning, MIT/Project Professor and Director of Online Education, UTokyo): At MIT, 15% of faculty and 30% of students are from non-English speaking regions and the President is from Venezuela. Although MIT is in an English speaking country, the University doesn't take English for granted and has a number of intensive speaking and writing courses throughout the year. Diversity is important in English speaking countries as well.

Prof. Hellstén: Probably because of the cultural tradition, the oral component is very much embedded into the curriculum in Sweden.

Prof. Suga: I remember how hard the writing and presentation classes were at MIT, but at the same time they were very helpful. The problem with UTokyo, or perhaps all universities in Japan, is the divide between the MA and Ph.D. programs which made us put effort to do research rather than to have classes for speaking and writing in English.

Prof. Mino: In fact, even in Japanese, writing component is much less than in the US.

Mr. Stefan Noreen (Senior Adviser, Office of the President, UTokyo): While decentralization can remain a problem, it also is beneficial as some departments are really advanced in internationalization. The University should learn from successful departments. In response to academic writing, the University held an English abstract writing workshop for graduate students with the help of Australian professor. This is just the beginning but it should gradually expand.

Question Three: The writing center in Komaba Campus is dedicated towards the first year students and therefore cannot provide assistance to third or fourth year students, or to Master's or Ph.D. students, who came to seek help for academic writing. I was wondering what student support looks at PKU and Stockholm University.

Prof. Fu: PKU also struggles similarly as UTokyo. PKU students are not receiving support from writing classes but from their research groups, which consist of researchers, graduate students or similar peers. Provision of classes is difficult when targeting a large population of students.

Prof. Hellstén: Services of support exists.

Question Four: Language itself embodies culture, as English tends to be more cordial whereas Japanese can be more hierarchical. I was wondering whether any of you try to use English as a catalyst to connect with students.

6. Final Comments by the panelist

Prof. Kitamura: International students try to call me by my first name, but the attitude of Japanese students creates an environment to call me “professor.” Difference between faculties is also apparent as well, especially in the Department of Education. Only a limited number of faculty deal with international affairs, which creates a division within the Department. Such division among faculty members must also be resolved in order to actualize globalization.

Prof. Suga: In the lab, people do not call me professor: they call me Suga-san. We also divide the year with Japanese and English months, therefore making students speak in English. This is the way internationalization happens.

Prof. Ito: The role of English may differ according to disciplines, as we discussed, but interacting with diverse students through English in the first few years of university

education offers our students invaluable experience of global learning, irrespective of their (future) fields of specialization.

Prof. Hellstén: The key is to continue working in collaboration and mobility. By doing that, we lay the responsibility of the use of English upon each individual. Language in diversity brings value.

Prof. Fu: English is inevitably the global language. At PKU, we need to work to design different programs that can meet the needs of students of different levels. We need diversity in the University and must embrace differences in teaching as well.

7. Concluding Remarks by the moderator

We all agree that English is important while the reasons may differ. Since there were a lot of good examples on how to accelerate the use of English in our programs, we probably have to focus on taking actions on such as promoting English, such as writing and presentation skills, and faculty and staff development. Thank you very much for your participation and comments.