

## Research Note

## Preliminary Reflections on the Discourse and the Practice of 'Global Human Resources' in Japan

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**Abstract:** As economic competition expands its scale to a global level, Japan has made an effort in cultivating Global Human Resources (GHR) to enhance its competence in the global market. The discourse of GHR emphasizes communicative English ability, generic skills, and a certain Japanese identity, which is shared in the enterprise and education fields. In addition, the practice of GHR focuses on increasing the opportunity of cross-cultural communication. However, a case study of a Nigerian linguistic minority shows the discourse and practice of GHR does not always realize what it promises. The reason for this failure can be observed in the conflict between a modernist idea, where language and nation are regarded as fixed, and the postmodern reality, where language and nation are dynamic. This study thus calls for a reflection on both the discourse and practice of GHR.

**Keywords:** global human resources, the discourse of English, linguistic minority

### 1 The discourse and practice of GHR

With the desire of enhancing its competence in global competition, Japanese society has focused increasing attention on cultivating so-called 'Global Human Resources'(GHR). Governmental committees were established to facilitate and direct the process of this cultivation, following which policies were released and practices adopted by various institutions. Agents such as government, businesses, as well as educational institutions help to create this discourse of 'GHR'.

The official committee on 'GHR' in the Japanese government was first established in 2009 for the purpose of exploring the nature of this concept. At the year of 2012, the official council defined GHR as following: (1) linguistic, especially communication skills; (2) self-autonomy, positiveness, a spirit of taking challenges, a mind of cooperativeness and flexibility, a sense of responsibility; (3) an understanding towards different cultures and a sense of Japanese identity (Council on Promotion of

Human Resource for Globalization Development, 2012). This new definition towards GHR focus on two aspects including abilities of cross-cultural communication and skills within business, and linguistic ability is emphasized when it comes to cross-cultural communication. Besides, a sense of Japanese identity is also included in the concept of GHR.

Besides government policies, GHR is also widely discussed in the field of business where a certain understanding of GHR is produced as well. The term GHR started to appear in The Nikkei (Japanese economic newspaper) in 1999 and a rapid increase in the frequency was observed after 2011 (Yoshida, 2014). The Japanese Business Federation conducted a survey with 1314 enterprises in Japan on their image of ideal GHR. The survey shows neither consensus on the definition of GHR among Japanese enterprises nor the desire to define this concept. Yet, 'the curiosity and flexibility towards cultural difference' ranked first place among the characteristics considered ideal for GHR, followed by 'a spirit of challenging' and 'language skill, especially English skill for communication' (Keidanren, 2015).

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This survey indicates a general tendency among enterprises in valuing language, especially English skill, openness towards cultural diversity and generic skill as an employee in business. These ideas correspond with the governmental definition of GHR.

As would be expected, universities in Japan also started to set up departments to serve the purpose of GHR cultivation. Almost every year since 2000, ten to twenty new departments have been established for this particular purpose (Morozumi, 2011). The titles of these departments were reported to contain words such as ‘international’, ‘communication’, and ‘global’ with statements of their missions being focused on training students’ English communication skills (Yoshida, 2004).

To conclude, policies of government, enterprises, and educational institutions in Japan facilitate in the formation of the discourse of GHR which prioritizes linguistic communication skill, especially English skills, together with an understanding of cultural difference and generic business skills. This formation of discourse does not only occur at the level of policy but also occurs at the practical level.

To start, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) launched various programs and funds in universities to encourage GHR development (MEXT, 2012). Since 2014, MEXT established a project of ‘super global’ universities and high schools where financial support was provided for studying abroad. In addition to that, efforts were also made to increase the enrollment of international students. The Global 30 program was founded to enhance the number of English-instruction programs in these universities in order to lower the threshold for international students to come (Yonezawa, 2014). Besides the attempt to enhance the opportunity for cross-cultural communication, English education was also put under the spotlight. Compulsory education on English language was to start at elementary school since 2011 and Japanese-based instruction was required to transform into English-based instruction

(Yonezawa, 2014).

As well as government and educational institutions, enterprises also involved themselves in this practice of GHR. Around 60% of businesses in the survey claimed to provide language learning programs for their employees as well as study abroad programs (Keidanren, 2015).

Based on these efforts of government, business, and educational institutions, it can be concluded that the practice of cultivating GHR is oriented towards the development of language, especially English skills and the enhancement on the chances of cross-cultural situations. As mentioned above, these efforts towards the cultivation of GHR aim at utilizing potential talent in Japanese society and increasing Japan’s competition in a global environment. It is easy to assume that potential talents refer to only Japanese-natives in Japanese society. Yet, Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) released a program named Promotion of the Utilization of Foreign Professionals under the category of GHR on their homepage in 2014. It can be concluded that since there is a rapid change in the demographics of Japanese society where the population of foreign nationalities keeps increasing (Ministry of Justice, 2018), not only Japanese-natives who are easily assumed to be the potential candidates for GHR, but also the population of non-Japanese natives are considered as candidates of GHR. However, whether this discourse and practice guarantee both Japanese-natives and non-Japanese natives in Japanese society who dream of being regarded as a Global Human Resource the access to becoming GHR remains unclear.

## **2 The Difficulty of becoming a Global Human Resource in the case of a linguistic minority**

As mentioned above, the demographics of Japanese society are experiencing dramatic change where the population with foreign nationality continue increasing (Ministry of Justice, 2018). The

statistics collected by the Ministry of Justice show a general tendency towards a rising number of people with foreign nationality and at the end of 2017, this number reached more than two million, which constitutes 2% of the total population of Japan (Ministry of Justice, 2018).

Being inside Japanese society, the likelihood is high that this foreign population is exposed to the discourse of GHR and gets involved in the practice of GHR cultivation which especially focuses on the training of English skills. Nakamura's study (2006) demonstrates the case of Thai immigrants in Japan who prioritize the acquisition of English language rather than Thai. However, being a social minority, whether this practice of acquiring English language would assure them the access to becoming a GHR in Japan remains unknown.

The current study aims at exploring the case of linguistic minorities learning English in Japan for the purpose of reflecting on the discourse and practice of GHR. Although most of the official statistics regarding immigrants use the term 'population with foreign nationality', there is no actual consensus on the definition of 'immigrant' in Japanese society. Since this study focuses on the linguistic aspect of GHR, it categorizes the population in Japan from a linguistic perspective where the idea of linguistic minority is applied to refer to the group of non-Japanese natives.

A case study of a Nigerian linguistic minority was conducted with a narrative approach where semi-structured interviews, the length of which lasted from 30 minutes to one hour, were carried out four times. The interview data was transcribed and analyzed following Miyahara (2017)'s Six-step Analytical Model for narrative study.

The participant, Satoshi<sup>[1]</sup>, claimed his native languages to be French and Arabic. His father is Japanese, and his mother is Nigerian. Satoshi has a Japanese-sounding name and Japanese nationality but no knowledge of Japanese language before he came to Japan at the age of 22. He then spent one

and a half years in a language school learning Japanese. After graduating from that school, Satoshi entered a language institution in Japan and is currently majoring in English. He is interested in cinematography and dreaming of working in a film-making company where global talents work together.

Themes which emerged were categorized under three labels: 'English learning motivation' includes themes such as 'belief in English instrumentality', 'desire of escaping', and 'social integration'; 'Japanese learning motivation' includes themes such as 'identity' and 'social inclusion'; 'Dispowerment of English skills' includes 'disability of self-development' and 'facilitating social inclusion'. This paper focuses on the first and the third category for the reason that it illustrates the conflict between his aspiration of becoming a GHR and the difficulty in utilizing his English skill in Japanese society.

The first category of themes demonstrates Satoshi's motivation for learning English. It was observed that Satoshi highly valued the instrumentality of English language, the value of which lay for him in the ability to enable Satoshi to flee from his original country and to integrate into a global society he desired. The following excerpt shows Satoshi's aspiration for leaving Nigeria and becoming globally employable, which is in accord with the idea of GHR where English language guarantees a way to a global society.

(Excerpt 1, Satoshi, Third interview)

R: You said when you were in Nigeria, you were playing games in English, you didn't want to play games with Nigerian people? Why not?

(...)

S: (...) Because Nigeria is not a very rich country, so everybody is trying to get away from it. And I feel like that's what I tried to do. So instead of playing with people from my country, I thought that it would be good for me to play with other people.

(Excerpt 2, Satoshi, Fourth interview)

R: Well the question might be difficult, but what is English for you? (...)

S: Well when I was younger, it was, as I have told you it's like a survival tool for me. But now it's different, because ..even if I don't like the word "globalization" I still am inspired to be an 'international person'. I feel like if I don't learn well, if I haven't learned English, I wouldn't be able like to achieve this goal. So when I was, when I was younger, it was more like, like an option? Playing games. But now it's more important, it's more professional.

It is worth noting here that although being in Japanese society, the place that Satoshi wanted to integrate into is not Japanese society itself, but a rather broader global society which includes Japanese society. Furthermore, Satoshi regarded the English language as being as a necessary tool for achieving this goal. Satoshi also declared the necessity of English with the idea of English being an international language. It can be observed that Satoshi's aspiration was partially in accord with the discourse of GHR in Japanese society.

The second category of themes illustrate the disempowerment of Satoshi's English skill, which shows both at the aspect of a disability of self-development and a disability of facilitating social inclusion. To start, the language school streams their students into different classes according to their TOEIC score. Satoshi scored over 800 in TOEIC and was placed in the top class for English majors. However, Satoshi claimed that his English skill did not improve after he came to this school since the Japanese-based instruction and translation method of teaching English forced him to devote himself to learning Japanese instead of English. Furthermore, the Japanese oriented school system also put Satoshi at the risk of failing to get promoted into the second year even though his English ability was high enough to meet the criteria. The following excerpt shows how the Japanese-based exam system and the requirement to perform as a Japanese-native

impeded Satoshi's promotion.

(Excerpt 3, Satoshi, Third interview)

S: Everything is in Japanese. So you listen to English, and note the one in Japanese. (...) That's why I sent them an E-mail and we discussed about it today. (...) They said 'we can't make an exception for you, because if we make an exception for you, we have to do it with for a lot of people. I told them TOEIC was in English. But they say you still need Japanese.(...) But you know they said if you fail this test like more than three times. You gonna have to do it from the beginning, like Ryunen. But I asked them and they said you don't have to worry about that but you still have to pass it.

The above excerpt illustrates the disempowerment of Satoshi's English skill and that English itself could not neither guarantee Satoshi learning opportunities nor acknowledge his English ability. And the cause of this disempowerment lay in the Japanese-oriented school system including the operating language of exams and lessons as well as requirements for Japanese-native-like performance.

In addition, the disempowerment of Satoshi's English ability was also observed when it failed to establish a certain social network for Satoshi. The observation of students in that language institution shows a high motivation for practicing English communication skills. Since Satoshi is not a Japanese native but had high-level English skills, the possibility is high that he could be a possible candidate for Japanese-native students to practice English with, through which a possible social network could be established. Yet, the interview data shows a mutual exclusion of Satoshi and his Japanese peers, which demonstrates the failure of English language alone in negotiating a new place for Satoshi.

(Excerpt 4 Satoshi, Fourth interview)

S: (...) But in the like Japanese essay class, there

is a lot of students, I was, we have the same class in the first year third term also, but I don't talk to them, not even once. I don't feel like..I don't feel like I want to know them, I don't feel like they want to know me. I was between...groups. (...) It's...it's ok. I like it this way.

From the above excerpt, together with the lack of evidence of practicing English with his peers, it can be concluded that English failed to guarantee Satoshi a social network in Japanese society, or the global society he desired. The reason of this failure can easily be attributed to Satoshi's lack of intention to build up his communication skill or Japanese skills. Yet, the reason behind this lack of intention is rather crucial. One possible cause on a macro-level that impedes this intention can be that the native speaker norms in English excludes Satoshi as a possible candidate for practicing English. Not only with his peers, exclusion is also observed in the relationship with his language teachers. During the meeting, Satoshi mentioned one embarrassing experience when a Japanese-native teacher made fun of his name, saying that since neither his Japanese skill nor his appearance is Japanese-like, he should change his name into a less Japanese-sounding one. It can be concluded that his peers' idea of a native English speaker, together with the teacher's idea of a native-Japanese speaker disempower English to establish a social network for Satoshi in Japanese society. It is easy to consider Satoshi's case as exceptional and argue the result being as a mismatch between Satoshi and a Japanese-domain school. Yet, this problematizes the deficiency in the practice of cultivating GHR in Japanese society since non-Japanese natives are also considered as the potential candidates of GHR (METI, 2014). It is true that not every linguistic minority desire to become a GHR, yet, the problem demonstrated in this paper is that those linguistic minorities who desire to become GHR have difficulty doing so. It may be easy to argue that a linguistic

minority should try to behave as Japanese natives since they are in Japan, yet, following the same logic, they should be guaranteed the access to what they want to do.

To conclude, the interview data hitherto illustrates a conflict between Satoshi's aspiration of integration into global society with English language and the disempowerment of Satoshi's English skill in Japanese society where the training of English is underlined in the discourse and practice of GHR.

### **3 The conflict between the modernist idea and the postmodern reality**

The discourse of GHR emerged from the necessity of competitive talent in a global environment. Economic globalization joins multiple global markets into one, which results in domestic competition expanding its scale to a global-level. The necessity of economic competition explains the requirement for generic skills in business in the discourse of GHR. Besides, the discourse of GHR also centers on the idea of 'English as an international language', which explains the requirement of the emphasis on language, especially English skills in the discourse of GHR. These perspectives show that the discourse of GHR is a product of globalization.

Yet, the case in this study illustrates that the practice and the discourse of GHR, which emerged in the background of globalization, failed to guarantee the empowerment of English skill for a linguistic minority in spite of that linguistic minority itself being a representation of mobile population driven by globalization. This failure can be seen as a conflict between a modernist idea and the postmodern reality. The modernist idea refers to the regarding of nation and language as fixed (Blommaert, 2010). While the postmodern reality refers to the phenomena where nationality, population, language, and identity become multilayered and fluid (Blommaert, 2010). The conflict between these two conceptions have three aspects. First of all, the Japanese-based instruction, exam system, and the



belief in its legitimacy, demonstrate the monolingual imagination of Japanese society. Advertisements and signboards with various languages can be observed in Japan (Blommaert, 2010) as well as communication with mixed languages (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2010). These phenomena show a postmodern reality where several languages exist and function in Japanese society rather than a mere single national language of Japanese. Second, the disempowerment of the linguistic minority's English ability in establishing social networks among Japanese communities illustrates a modernist conception of nationality and language. The exclusion of Satoshi as a possible English-speaking candidate despite his high English skill shows a possible idea of a native norm among his Japanese peers. In addition, the episode of the Japanese teacher asking Satoshi to change his name illustrates the same modernist idea that nationality should be fixed and corresponded to appearance and language. Yet, a highly mobile population driven by globalization enhances the complexity of identity in a certain social space. This reality requires a multi-layered understanding towards identity rather than the simplified understanding towards the relation among nationality, appearance, and language. Third, the requirement of a certain Japanese identity in the discourse of GHR demonstrates a monoethnic understanding of and amongst Japanese society. However, Japanese society is neither historically nor contemporarily ethnically homogeneous. The idea of the monoethnic Japanese has been proved to be a social construction; as soon as Ainu, Korean, Chinese, and other ethnic groups and immigrants are considered (Lie, 2000).

To conclude, this study illustrates a conflict between a modernist idea and a postmodern reality which possibly impedes the discourse and the practice of GHR from realizing what it promises for those who desire to become a GHR. Thus, a reflection on the discourse and practice of GHR is necessary in the sense that the emphasis on mere English skill

may neglect a group of people just as the requirement of a certain Japanese identity may do so as well.

#### Note

[1] Pseudonym

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