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Global competence needs of foreign-language learners in Japan

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The success of Japan's "global jinzai" initiatives has been questionable. This research provides a Japan-specific framework for global education to facilitate more effective programs and pedagogy for global competence development in Japan.

This study aimed to address the lack of clarity around global competence education in Japan. Q methodology was integrated into a Modified Delphi study to collect, refine and analyse stakeholder and expert opinions, and determine (a) what global competence constitutes in Japan, (b) the primary challenges of global competence development for students in Japan and (c) the role of FL education in global competence development in Japan. Findings suggest that while some aspects of global competence delineated in Western frameworks are similarly important in Japan, additional factors concerning self-expression and critical thinking require explicit attention in Japan. Based on my findings I have developed the first Japan-specific framework outlining the primary facets and challenges of global competence development for students in Japan. I hope this will be of benefit in guiding future global competence education efforts in Japan.

intercultural competence education, FL education

global competence global human resources higher education FL education international education intercultural competence

１．研究開始当初の背景 (BACKGROUND)

In Japan, industry demand for globally competent graduates has prompted a series of initiatives designed to promote the cultivation of *gurobaru jinzai*: globally competent graduates. These are primarily directed at universities and tend to emphasise foreign language (FL) proficiency as a major goal, but other aspects of global competence remain ill-defined and thus difficult to target and teach. This has resulted in a tendency to focus on linguistic proficiency goals and neglect other aspects of global competence, and there is widespread concern that university graduates in Japan are not developing the necessary capabilities or attributes.

Scholarship examining the global competence construct has thus far emerged primarily from the Global North. The resulting frameworks tend to overlook the role of language and interpret global competence through a Western lens. Japan-specific definitions and frameworks are scarce and often lack a clear foundation in research, leaving educators and administrators in Japan with few reliable options to guide global competence education efforts.

２．研究の目的 (PURPOSE)

This study explored the nature and inherent challenges of global competence in the Japanese context, in an attempt to bring clarity and meaning to the ongoing demand for globally competent university graduates. It aimed to present FL educators with a set of research-based guiding principles applicable in the Japanese higher education context to facilitate the cultivation of global competence through FL education.

Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:
1. What knowledge, skills, attitudes and traits do experts/stakeholders in Japan believe are necessary in order to be "globally competent" in the context of higher education?
2. What specific challenges do experts/stakeholders perceive for global competence development in Japan?
3. What is the role of FL abilities for global competence?
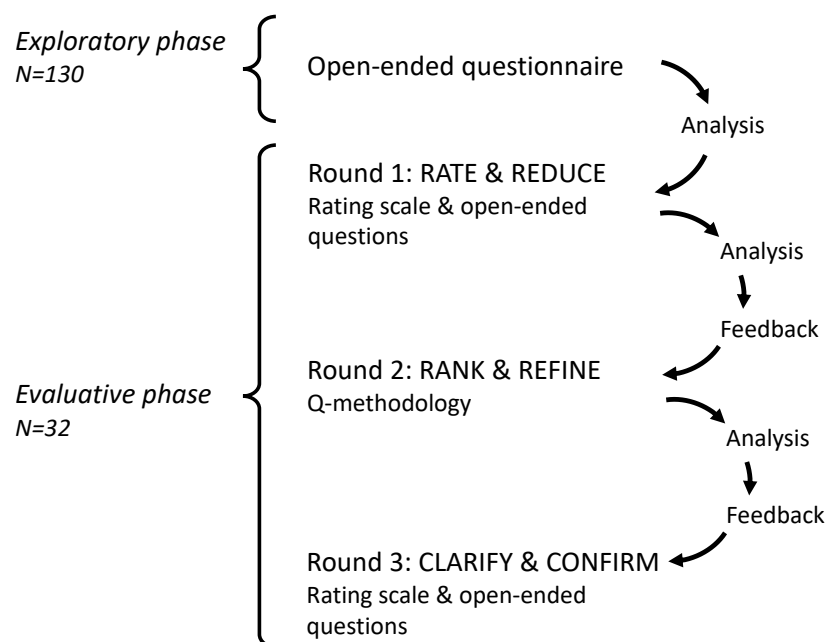
３．研究の方法 (METHODS)

This study adopted an exploratory mixed-methods approach integrating the Modified Delphi Technique together with Q-methodology to examine the viewpoints of experts and stakeholders and answer the research questions.

The Delphi Technique is a tool used to facilitate structured anonymous group discussion among panelists in different physical locations. Panelists respond to several rounds of questions interspersed with feedback showing the responses of the panel as a whole. The technique is useful in situations where the research questions do not lend themselves to analytical measurement but could benefit from group judgement, and enables the researcher to exploit the benefits of group discussion whilst mitigating the shortcomings associated with face-to-face interactions. The Modified Delphi Technique begins by collecting qualitative data related to the research questions from which possible items for rating and ranking in later phases of the Delphi study are sourced.

In this study, two focus groups were first undertaken to inform word and question selection for the questionnaire used in the initial exploratory stage of the Modified Delphi study. The exploratory questionnaire was completed by participants (N=130) who self-identified as belonging to one of the following groups: FL teachers at Japanese universities (n=33); students studying at Japanese universities and majoring in a FL (n=46); professionals with experience working inside and outside of Japan, or in Japan together with colleagues from different cultural backgrounds (n=39); and researchers with an interest or experience in global competence-related fields, especially pertaining to Japan (n=12). Qualitative data was analysed using thematic content analysis to determine items to include in the first-round Delphi questionnaire. A 32-member Delphi panel comprising the same four stakeholder groups was subsequently convened and responded to three rounds of questions to elicit their opinions regarding the research questions. Data analysis was carried out after each step of data collection. Q-methodology was integrated into the technique in Round 2 to facilitate both qualitative and quantitative analysis and identify shared viewpoints. Figure 1 overviews the instruments used in each of the three rounds.

Figure 1: *Methodological Flow*

Exploratory phase
N=130

Open-ended questionnaire

Analysis

Round 1: RATE & REDUCE
Rating scale & open-ended questions

Analysis

Feedback

Evaluative phase
N=32

Round 2: RANK & REFINE
Q-methodology

Analysis

Feedback

Round 3: CLARIFY & CONFIRM
Rating scale & open-ended questions

４．研究成果 (RESULTS)

The findings of the study highlighted the inability of extant literature to adequately describe the global competence construct and desirable goals of global competence-oriented education in Japan. The specific findings pertinent to each of the research questions are outlined below, followed by the Framework for Global Competence in Japan that was developed based on the findings.

1. What knowledge, skills, attitudes and traits do experts/stakeholders in Japan believe are necessary in order to be "globally competent" in the context of higher education?

The primary objective of global competence education in Japan identified in this study is to equip students to communicate effectively and appropriately with a wide variety of people and in diverse situations. The experts / stakeholders in this study determined that global competence in Japan requires *attitudes/traits* of openness, emotional stability and willingness to engage; *skills* pertaining to independent critical thinking, self-expression, FL ability, communication and relational abilities; and *knowledge* of oneself and of cultural diversity.

2. What specific challenges do experts/stakeholders perceive for global competence development in Japan?

Ethnocentricity and difficulties with self-expression emerged as the primary challenges for students that need to be addressed in the development of globally competent graduates in Japan. Participants emphasised that educators need to cultivate independent critical thinking skills to enable students to critically reflect and recognise their own ethnocentricity. Explicit educator attention to the cultivation of self-expression skills (not necessarily in English) was also deemed necessary. Participants suggested that students need spaces where they can step outside of local sociocultural norms and practice expressing themselves and communicating without (or with less of) the tension that classroom CLT activities often cause.

### 3. What is the role of FL abilities for global competence?

In Japan, the need for FL ability (especially EFL ability) cannot be ignored. It is fundamental because without English ability, students simply cannot access the global community to the extent that English-speakers can. At the same time, linguistic ability is not a guarantee of communicative success or global competence and FL education for global competence should be focused on equipping students for communication with a wide variety of interlocuters in diverse contexts and situations. In global communication, language needs to be employed in combination with the other skills, attitudes / traits and knowledge identified here and FL education (in Japan and globally) must thus shift away from its persistent narrow linguistic focus to recognise and explicitly target the

transformative education that is required for perspective shifts and development of global competence.

Framework for Global Competence in Japan

Participant responses in this study painted a picture of global competence in Japan that defies neat alignment with any existing frameworks or single body of literature. While no framework can ever hope to exhaustively describe all the permeations and nuances of global competence, for effective global competence education to proceed, some agreement and clarity as to the aims of such education is needed. The researcher thus drew on the findings of this study to propose a framework for tertiary global competence-oriented FL education in Japan.

Figure 1: *Framework for global competence in Japan*
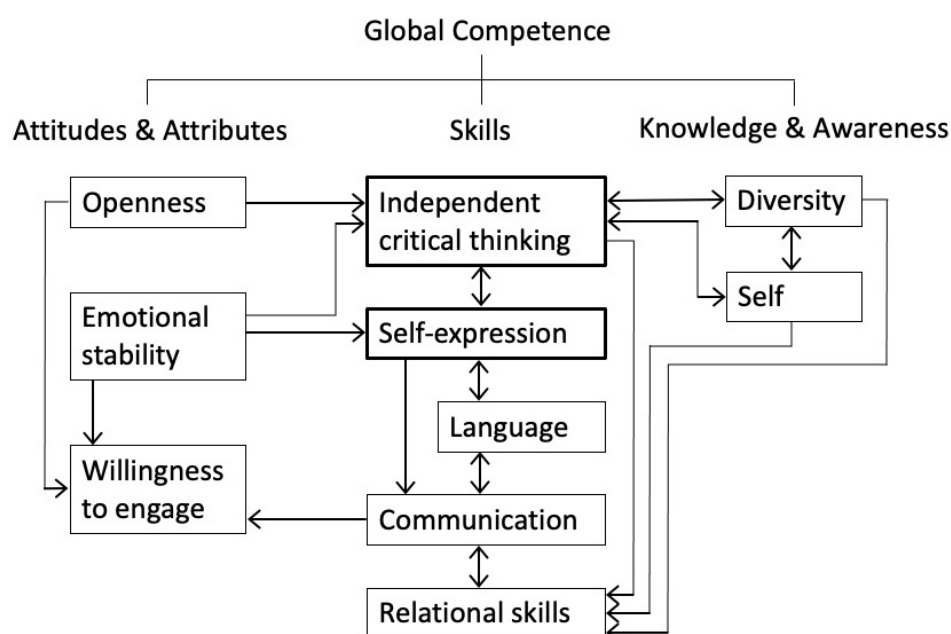
Summary

This study demonstrated that the extant literature is unable to accurately depict the global competence construct as it applies in Japan, and provided a framework to inform global competence-oriented university FL education in Japan. Findings indicate that in Japan, educators particularly need to focus on finding ways to cultivate students' self-expression and independent critical thinking skills. To facilitate the transformational learning needed for development of global competence, Japan will need to implement radical classroom-level changes in its approach to FL education.

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