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THE DEMAND FOR JAPANESE LANGUAGE SKILLS IN FINNISH HIGHER-LEVEL EDUCATION AND WORKING LIFE

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This article analyses what kind of challenges Japanese language teaching faces in professional higher education by discussing topics such as changes in European language policies, trends in foreign language studies, and educational requirements set by European working life and its development. The main focus is on polytechnic language education and the pedagogical challenges that the practical orientation of polytechnic degrees poses to foreign language education. Valid and competent language pedagogy should be geared toward the acquisition of specific communication skills required by numerous professional fields and incorporate methods directed at improving intercultural communication competence and autonomous language learning abilities. The market value of Japanese is not yet high in European working life, but further analysis and identification of specific Japanese communication needs and the development of Japanese language curricula towards such needs may prove to provide an invaluable competitive edge for European industry and businesses in the future.

Keywords: Japanese language, polytechnics, European language policies

1 INTRODUCTION

In the globalizing world, knowledge of more than one foreign language is becoming a necessity in practically any profession. Not only is business becoming more and more international, but also societies in most parts of Europe are turning increasingly multicultural. The enlargement of the European Union will have a strong impact on its language policies: previously there were 11 official languages in the Union, but, on the 1st of May 2004, the number of official languages rose to 21. Moreover, more than 50 “regional” or “minority” languages are used as means of everyday communication by nearly 500 million EU citizens in the different member states (Commission of the European Communities 2002: 14).¹

Traditionally, European language policies have emphasised the role of languages spoken within the borders of the Union, but, more recently, the needs of an increasingly globalized market economy have triggered language policy formulations including references to a number of major non-European languages, such as Chinese and Japanese. Surveys carried out on foreign language skills necessary in Finnish business and industry have not yet pinpointed any greater need for major non-European languages, but it is likely that the recent “China boom” may result in rapid changes at least in business sectors targeting or moving their operations to East and Southeast Asian market areas.

To gain a more accurate idea of the present situation of more “exotic” languages in professional education, I carried out a small-scale survey of Japanese and Chinese language education in Finnish polytechnics and examined their statistic importance compared to traditional foreign languages. In this paper I will, furthermore,

1 Even so, it should be remembered that, linguistically speaking, Europe is actually the poorest continent of the world, with only approximately 3% of the world’s spoken languages (Skutnabb-Kangas 2002: 7).

present some key facts and figures about linguistic diversity in Europe and examine Finnish and European foreign language education in general and the position and development of Japanese language education in Finnish polytechnic institutions in particular.²

2 LANGUAGE NEEDS IN FINNISH BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY

In today's world, language skills are an indispensable asset for any jobseeker, and employers value the knowledge of several languages. Although the Internet, diminishing resources of language education and shortened studying periods seem to be paving the way for the monopoly of the English language in Finland, knowledge of only one foreign language is hardly sufficient in the internationalizing world markets. In fact, a survey carried out in the late 1990s on language and communication skills in Finnish industry and business (Huhta 1999) reports that, in order to serve the future needs of working life, it would be necessary to start teaching more languages right from the school level. As Huhta (1999: 12) formulates it: "The greatest problems encountered are deficient oral skills and having skills in too few languages." Similarly, according to the objective of the Finnish Ministry of Education announced for the year 2001, 50% of the age class should study 2–3 foreign languages in comprehensive school, 90% of high school students should study 2–3 languages, and 40–100% of vocational students should study 2 languages (Huhta 1999: 26).

Citing the same survey, the reported need for languages in Finnish business and industry is as follows: 84% of the surveyed companies regard English as the most important language, and in

2 This article is a thoroughly revised version of a paper presented at the AFinLa Autumn Symposium in November 2003. I would like to thank Bart Gaens and three anonymous reviewers for comments on my paper. Remaining errors are my responsibility alone.

86% Swedish ranks among one of the three important languages. English and Swedish are followed by German (one of the three important languages: 68% of the surveyed companies), French (one of the three important languages: 13%), Russian (one of the three important languages: 17%), and Spanish (one of the three important languages: 4%). In the survey some need for Japanese was expressed by 3% of the studied companies, for Chinese by 6%. The great majority of the companies, namely 90%, reported that they manage without supplementary languages such as Italian, Estonian, Chinese or Japanese. However, in the interviews, employers pointed out that although the need for Italian, Estonian, Chinese, Japanese or other language speakers “may not seem significant in the statistics, it can be crucially essential for the success of the business” (Huhta 1999: 63). As regards Finnish-Japanese business relations, there has been an increase in trading particularly from 1994 onwards, partly due to special promotional campaigns (e.g., “Finland Advantage Campaign” and “Finland Plus”), and Huhta (1999: 67–71) further reports that, in the future, global companies will require more language variety. It is, therefore, likely that the need for Swedish, German, French, and also Russian, Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and other languages will keep on rising. Huhta (1999: 13) further estimates that, due to the competence gap in language and communication, “there is a large market in language/communication training for business and industry in Finland over the next five years.” On an annual basis, this market may amount to a total of more than EUR 150 000 per 100 employees. The need for Japanese alone, however, is likely to rise only by 1%.

3 FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN FINNISH POLYTECHNICS: FACTS AND FIGURES

Following a radical restructuring of Finland's higher education system, the 1990s witnessed the emergence of a wide network of polytechnics, which are equivalent, for example, to Belgian, Dutch and German higher professional education institutions (*hogeschool/haute école* in Belgium and the Netherlands, *Fachhochschule* in Germany). As of spring 2004, there are 31 polytechnics in Finland, most of which are multidisciplinary and provide a more practically oriented higher education option than universities in the fields of health care, social services, technology and communications, business administration, tourism, catering and institutional management, natural resources, culture, humanities, and education.³ At present there are around 100 000 students enrolled at polytechnics throughout the country. The student population is increasingly heterogeneous and has a high proportion of adult learners. Studies leading to a polytechnic degree usually take 3–4 years to complete and include basic and professional studies, optional studies, practical training (internship) and a thesis.

Since polytechnic degrees are designed to qualify graduates for various expert duties, they have a pronounced occupational emphasis and students cannot major in foreign languages in a university-like manner. Due to this practical orientation, polytechnic language education is mainly concerned with two languages: English, the most widely studied foreign language in Finland (and Europe), and Swedish, Finland's second official language. According to the *Amkota* statistics on polytechnic education (Huhta 2003), in 2001, the English language accounted for 42% of the language credit units studied by polytechnic students in Finland.

3 Polytechnic degrees are equivalent to the Bachelor of Arts (Hon)/Bachelor of Science (Hon) Degrees in the UK and the US, the French *Licence*, the German *Diplom Fachhochschule* and the Dutch *HBO Diploma*.

The percentage of Swedish was 27. The top languages English and Swedish were followed by German with 12% in the third position. Compared to the top three, the proportions of other foreign languages were extremely small: French 6%, neighbouring Russian 4%, Spanish 4% and Italian 1%. Other foreign languages, comprising Finnish as a foreign or second language, Chinese, Japanese and so forth, accounted for a total of 3%. In 2001, the number of polytechnic students who studied foreign languages and/or Swedish was 121 461. However, only a small minority opted for languages other than English and/or Swedish: 12 015 for German, 5 839 for French, 4 262 for Russian and 4 379 for Spanish. The number of Japanese language students was merely 177 (see Section 4 and Table 2 for more details).⁴

The practical orientation of polytechnic degrees poses an important pedagogical challenge to foreign language education, which should be geared toward the acquisition of specific communication skills required by numerous professional fields. Commonly taught languages such as English and Swedish – recently also German and Finnish as a foreign language – have received special attention at the national level, and a number of projects have been organised to train polytechnic language teachers of these languages. One project was set up to create a system which makes it possible to develop language testing so that grades in language studies are comparable between different polytechnics and fields of study (Airola 2001; Jaatinen, Lehtovaara & Kohonen 2001; Juurakko 2001). Another two-phase project aimed at developing the assessment of oral skills in foreign languages (Juurakko 2001). In addition, those responsible for the coordination and development of language studies at polytechnics meet biannually to discuss

4 Similarly, there seems to be a tendency for pupils in compulsory education to study fewer foreign languages than in the past. In 1998, 22% of 7th–9th graders studied German at high school, but three years later the figure dropped to 19.3%. The percentages for French and Russian also decreased from 8.4% to 7.5% and 1.4% to 0.9%, respectively (Mainio 2003).

training and other needs of polytechnic language education. Polytechnic language teachers also meet once a year or every two years to discuss various problems related to polytechnic language teaching in general and to specific languages in particular (e.g., English, Swedish, German, Russian and the Romance languages).

4 JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN FINNISH POLYTECHNICS

As discussed above, European languages have been the target of various nation-wide development and training projects in Finland, but such projects are not available for less taught languages such as Japanese or Chinese. The curricula of these languages lack clearly defined frameworks and courses are often left to part-time teachers with no or little knowledge about the general principles and goals of polytechnic education. *Amkota* statistics enumerate the polytechnics which have included Japanese in their range of optional languages from 1997 through 2002. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, both the number of offered credits and that of students enrolled in Japanese classes have dropped dramatically since 1997: from 29 credits and 221 students in 1997 to 11 credits and 43 students in 2002. Also, the number of polytechnics offering Japanese has been declining: from eight in 1997 to only three in 2002.

TABLE 1. Number of Japanese language credits offered in Finnish polytechnics 1997–2002.

Polytechnic	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Espoo-Vantaa technical	-	1	1	-	2	2
Espoo-Vantaa temporary ⁵	4 ⁶	-	-	-	-	-
Haaga Institute	-	-	1	-	-	-
Häme	2	3	3	-	2	-
Helsinki Business (Helia)	8	8	10	6	-	-
Helsinki (Stadia)	-	-	-	2	4	-
Kemi-Tornio	1	-	-	-	-	-
Lahti	1	-	-	-	-	-
Laurea	-	-	-	-	6	7
Oulu region	4	6	2	2	-	2
Seinäjoki	4	4	-	-	-	-
Tampere	-	-	4	4	-	-
Turku	5	2	-	-	-	-
Total	29	24	21	14	14	11

TABLE 2. Number of students in Japanese language education in Finnish polytechnics 1997–2002.

Polytechnic	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Espoo-Vantaa technical	-	36	20	-	5	3
Espoo-Vantaa temporary	30	-	-	-	-	-
Haaga Institute	-	-	12	-	-	-
Häme	17	22	17	-	15	-
Helsinki Business (Helia)	87	27	39	11	-	-
Helsinki (Stadia)	-	-	-	15	-	-
Kemi-Tornio	5	-	-	-	-	-
Lahti	12	-	-	-	-	-
Laurea	-	-	-	-	71	25
Oulu region	7	18	28	49	-	15
Seinäjoki	12	12	-	-	-	-
Tampere	-	-	32	28	26	-
Turku	51	6	-	-	-	-
Total	221	111	148	103	117	43

5 Initially, Espoo-Vantaa polytechnic had a temporary permit to provide polytechnic education (*Espoo-Vantaan väliaikainen ammattikorkeakoulu*) and later, following full accreditation, changed its name to Laurea polytechnic.

6 1 Finnish credit is equivalent to 1.5 ECTS credits.

To gain a more accurate idea of the present situation of East Asian languages in polytechnic education, I carried out a small-scale survey of Japanese and Chinese language education in Finnish polytechnics in May 2002. Only six polytechnics replied that they regularly offer or have offered Japanese language courses, although the number of polytechnics enumerated in the *Amkota* statistics and displayed in Tables 1 and 2 is higher. Regular Chinese language courses, by contrast, are or have been offered in a total of fifteen polytechnics. In the 2001 *Amkota* statistics, Chinese is mentioned in the course offerings of six polytechnics comprising 20 credits and 88 students. The statistics further demonstrate that, in recent years, Chinese has been much more popular in Finnish polytechnics than Japanese: 30 credits and 140 students in 2001, 45 credits and 216 students in 2000, 95 credits and 333 students in 1999, 151 credits and 312 students in 1998 and 70 credits and 413 students in 1997. In addition, in my survey three polytechnics reported that they offer Chinese as a part of special training programmes (e.g., EU-China Junior Managers Training Programme) or to exchange students at their partner institutions in China. All the polytechnics which answered that they regularly provide Japanese language courses also have Chinese in their curricula. Two polytechnics further announced that they occasionally offer other Asian languages as well. These include Bahasa Indonesia, Malay and Thai.

The number of credit units covered by Japanese language courses generally varies from 2 to 4 Finnish credits, equivalent to 3–6 ECTS credits. According to my survey, five polytechnics offer or have offered courses at the basic level and three also at a more advanced level. One respondent did not specify the level. One polytechnic offers an additional course of Japanese language and culture. Three polytechnics reported that Japanese language courses are taught by native part-time teachers, and in one of the polytechnics by a part-time teacher of Finnish nationality. One respondent did not provide information about the teacher. Only in one of the surveyed polytechnics is the teacher, a Finnish national,

a full-time lecturer. No information was provided on the teaching material.

In 2001, I was involved in the planning of the annual meeting of polytechnic language teachers and suggested the organisation of a special workshop concentrating on less frequently taught languages such as Estonian, Chinese and Japanese. Other planned workshops included English, Swedish, German, Russian and the Romance languages (French, Spanish and Italian). My suggestion was accepted with enthusiasm and an invitation was circulated in all Finnish polytechnics, but no one registered for the planned workshop. This was an amazing outcome given the fact that Chinese and Japanese, together with languages such as Estonian and even Malay and Thai, are taught in numerous polytechnics throughout the country. The unfortunate reality seems to be that these languages are, almost without exception, taught by part-time teachers, who cannot participate or are not interested in participating in such national-level seminars and workshops. In the worst case, information about such events never reaches them. In the best case, they would be interested in participating, but, as part-time teachers, are offered no financial support to do so. It is obvious that this leads to a situation in which Japanese and Chinese language studies are provided sporadically without polytechnic-like curriculum planning and with little or no continuity and integration with content studies in the students' main fields. From the students' point of view, such language courses face the risk of remaining a form of "exotic recreation".

5 COMPUTER-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING IN FINNISH POLYTECHNICS

In recent years, the Finnish Ministry of Education has been eager to support computer-assisted language learning projects. To name a few, the language centres of Finnish universities have joined forces

by creating the Finnish Virtual Language Centre, polytechnics are active in a number of online projects involving languages such as Swedish, English and French (the *KIVA* projects), and numerous individual institutions and educators provide occasional virtual language courses.⁷

Also, small virtual education projects targeting less commonly taught languages, such as Japanese and Chinese, have received aid from the Ministry of Education. One such project is the so-called *ItJaKiLa* project including online modules of Italian, Japanese, Chinese and Latvian languages, produced jointly by four higher education institutions: Helsinki Business Polytechnic Helia (project coordinator), Laurea Polytechnic, Helsinki Polytechnic Stadia, and the Helsinki University Language Centre. The project aims at producing online modules of advanced Italian and basic Japanese, Chinese and Latvian, each worth 2 Finnish credits (3 ECTS credits). Japanese and Chinese will both include two modules (3 + 3 ECTS credits) at the beginner's level. The Chinese modules are already available for the students of the participating institutions, and the Japanese module will be piloted in spring 2004.⁸ In 2004–2005, the *ItJaKiLa* project will be complemented by the *ItKiRaVi* project, providing online modules of advanced Italian, Chinese, French and Estonian.

The idea behind the *ItJaKiLa* and *ItKiRaVi* projects is to provide instruction in languages for which it would otherwise be difficult or impossible to secure funding in individual institutions due to diminishing resources and numbers of interested students (cf. Table 2 above). In my opinion, it is, however, questionable

7 The author of this paper, for example, has designed a simple Japanese writing system online course using a Finnish-made learning environment (*Optima*) and existing Internet *kana* and *kanji* courses and exercises, which have been linked to the learning platform.

8 The author is in charge of the Japanese language modules together with Pia Matilainen, the Japanese language teacher of the Helsinki University Language Centre.

whether virtual courses alone can benefit students planning to learn a completely new language from the beginning. Online tasks and learning assignments may no doubt be suitable for advanced language students interested in additional training in reading and writing skills, but it remains to be seen what can be accomplished by extremely limited beginner's level online modules in languages such as grammatically complex Japanese and phonetically challenging Chinese, both with complicated writing systems differing greatly from the Roman alphabet.

6 LANGUAGE NEEDS IN EUROPEAN WORKING LIFE: MULTILINGUAL EUROPE AND PLURILINGUAL EUROPEANS?

Why should we then make efforts to teach such “exotic” and challenging languages as Chinese and Japanese to Finnish and other European students? Does Europe need employees with Chinese and Japanese language proficiency? Should such languages be included in the already packed curricula of higher level professional education at all? If we take a look at what European language policy makers have said about foreign language needs, it becomes clear that, until the 1990s, the European Community was mostly concerned with the learning and teaching of (major) **European** languages within its borders. The *White Paper on education and training, teaching and learning: Towards the learning society*, published in 1995, states that one of the four general objectives in the building of a European learning society – and a necessity from the perspective of a border-free single market – is “proficiency in three community languages” (the mother tongue + two community languages model), which “helps to build up the feeling of being European with all its cultural wealth and diversity and of understanding between the citizens of Europe” (European Commission 1995: 47). According to a recent *Eurobarometer*

special survey on Europeans and languages, Europeans seem, indeed, to be in favour of plurilingualism:⁹ more than 70% of EU citizens consider foreign language skills useful and think that everyone in the Union “should be able to speak one European language in addition to their mother tongue” (European Commission Directorate-General for Education and Culture 2000: 7–9). Non-European languages, however, do not receive much support. There is only one non-European language on the list of the seven most “useful” foreign languages, namely Chinese.¹⁰

No non-Community languages were mentioned in the 1995 *White Paper*, but in the European Commission consultation on language learning and linguistic diversity carried out in 2002, the “mother tongue + two **community** languages” formula was rephrased as “mother tongue + two **other** languages” (Commission of the European Communities 2002: 7–8; emphasis mine). Reference was also made to “major ‘world’ languages”, that is, (Mandarin) Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Arabic, of which the first three all belong to the top ten languages of the world in terms of the number of speakers. The traditional arguments for language learning which are enumerated in European language policy formulations usually include language learners’ personal development needs, intercultural awareness, enhancement of creativity and innovation, and European cultural values. However, what appears to be looming behind the latest rhetoric are the specific needs of European industry and commerce and the possible “market value” (Grin 2002: 21) of non-European languages: “European companies continue to lose business because they cannot speak their customers’

9 Although the *White Paper* from 1995 talked about **multilingualism**, in more recent language policy recommendations formulated by the Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe, a difference is made between **multilingualism** (“the presence of more than one language in a given geographical area”) and **plurilingualism** (“the repertoire of languages which an individual may use”) (Shiels 2001).

10 Only 1% of the respondents regarded Chinese as a “useful” foreign language.

languages; they need to improve their skills in languages, including those of non-European trading partners” (Commission of the European Communities 2002: 6). Since the range of foreign languages mastered by EU citizens is rather limited (41% speak English as a foreign language, 19% speak French, 10% speak German, 7% speak Spanish, 3% speak Italian, and no other language reaches even 1%), industry and commerce are beginning to voice concerns. As the Commission of the European Communities (2002: 6) puts it, “this narrow range of foreign languages could make it difficult for European businesses to achieve their full potential in a multilingual market place.” It is obvious that Europeans are worried; without knowledge of non-community languages, the lucrative markets of China and Russia – and perhaps to a lesser extent also those of Japan, Southeast Asia and the Arab world – may be slipping away. In the globalizing world, mastery of non-European languages is becoming an indispensable economic asset (Skutnabb-Kangas 2002: 17). Speaking Chinese or Japanese makes it easier to sell goods to the Chinese- or Japanese-speaking public “and thereby gives rise to higher profits” (Grin 2002: 21).

In many European countries, traditional philological university methods of language studies, based on historical and comparative aspects and linked to literature studies, are attracting fewer students than in the past, which is why language pedagogues have started to pay more attention to the actual **practical** language needs of higher education graduates. In recent years, there has been an increase in surveys on the language and communication skills required by working life in different European countries (e.g., *Prolang 1997–1999*). Also Japanese language needs have received some attention. Kragt and Sakurai (2002), for example, surveyed Japanese firms located in Belgium and the Netherlands and found out that, in addition to Japanese language skills (e.g., simple telephone interactions, self-presentations, rudimentary reading and writing, field-specific terminology, attending to Japanese guests, understanding orders, apologizing, etc.), non-Japanese staff would greatly

benefit from social skills and practical cultural knowledge (e.g., Japanese business culture and manners, and intercultural awareness). Since the working language in Japanese firms based in Europe is usually English, (native-like) fluency in Japanese is not a prerequisite for employment. Similar conclusions were drawn by Kondô (2002), who carried out a survey of 12 Japanese firms based in the Czech Republic: seven firms responded that they wished to hire local staff with Japanese language skills, but five replied that knowledge of Japanese would not be a requirement for employment.

7 LANGUAGE SKILLS REQUIRED FROM POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS IN THE GLOBALIZING WORLD

In the light of surveys carried out on communication and foreign language skills required by European working life, it seems evident that the workplace communication situations which employees with polytechnic degrees are most likely to encounter are linked to specific communication skills (Huhta 1999; Kragt & Sakurai 2002). Huhta (1999: 100) demonstrates that, in Finland, the most likely situation in which a foreign language (or Swedish) is needed at the workplace is a **social** situation, such as small talk, self-introduction, etc. Among the top five of the most likely communication situations, four require advanced command of **oral** skills. In addition to the stated social situations, workplace communication situations include routine telephone conversations, travel contexts and client contacts. Only one of the communication situations in the top five involves the command of writing skills (i.e., writing e-mail messages, faxes, notes, etc.). Polytechnic language education, and perhaps language education in general, should therefore “focus on the identified key elements of workplace communication” (Huhta 1999: 12) and oral skills. Similar conclusions were drawn by Kragt and Sakurai’s

(2002) survey examining Japanese companies located in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Additionally, as required by the act governing polytechnic education, special attention should be paid to professional terminology. Understandably, requirements cannot be completely identical for optional languages that students begin only at the polytechnic level and study perhaps for no longer than 1–3 years. Despite the decreasing numbers of students, Japanese and Chinese basic level courses still attract participants – at least in the very beginning. More advanced courses, however, seem to be out of the scope of polytechnic education. Since the number of years which students are allowed to study at polytechnics in Finland is strictly controlled (which differs greatly from university education), and students are required to include one or two internships in their studies, they seldom have time or interest to concentrate on demanding optional studies. Hence, a polytechnic student who enrolls in a Japanese language course is likely to do so for reasons other than the market value of the language. For the student, Japanese most likely has “non-market value” (Grin 2002: 21): s/he may, for example, be interested in learning just enough conversational Japanese to be able to communicate with his/her Japanese karate teacher. The Japanese language thus responds to an individual “preference structure”, including contact with Japanese culture and community. If the student actually sees some market value in his/her Japanese studies, it may well be limited to serving Japanese tourists at the reception desk of a hotel or explaining what kinds of ingredients have been used in the dishes served at a hotel restaurant. Or perhaps s/he aims at being able to demonstrate how Japanese tourists visiting Finnish Lapland should prepare themselves for a reindeer or husky sledge ride (Länsisalmi 2002).

8 DISCUSSION: CHALLENGES OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY IN POLYTECHNICS

This paper has attempted to provide a brief overview of some recent trends of language education planning in Europe in general and in Finnish polytechnic education in particular. The main focus of the paper was on the current issues of Japanese language needs in European and Finnish working life.

If lesser taught languages such as Japanese and Chinese are included as optional foreign languages in the curricula of higher level professional education, the focus should be put on social skills and communicative language skills, such as simple telephone interactions, self-presentations, rudimentary reading and writing, basic field-specific terminology, attending to guests, understanding orders and requests, and – particularly in the case of Japanese – apologizing. Graduates should also possess intercultural awareness and practical cultural knowledge, for example, knowledge of Japanese business culture and manners.

Unfortunately, available Japanese language textbooks and other teaching materials hardly suit the various specialized needs of the heterogeneous student body of beginner's level Japanese students at polytechnic institutions. Such commonly used textbooks as *Shinbunka shokyû nihongo* (2000), for example, concentrate excessively on communication skills essential to foreign students studying in Japan and respond poorly to more specific (professional) needs. Admittedly, more material is available for business Japanese, also at the beginner's level, but other professional fields, such as social studies, health care, environmental studies, tourism and media studies, still lack suitable material. Another obvious problem with Japanese language teaching materials in European educational institutions is that very little appropriate material exists in the students' (and non-Japanese teachers') native language. Luckily, problems faced by Japanese language teachers scattered all over

Europe have recently been acknowledged also in Japan, and *The European Japanese Language Teaching Materials Project* (Ôshû kyôiku purojekuto 2002) is likely to bring some much needed aid. Another problem of less frequently taught languages in polytechnics is linked to the time allocated to language studies. Rare languages, such as Japanese and Chinese, are taught in minimal quantities, and professional and pedagogical training or support, provided locally by particular polytechnics or nationally by seminars or special projects, rarely reaches the part-time teachers, who often teach these languages periodically at several diverse educational institutions in one locality.

In polytechnic language education, contents and teaching methods should be geared towards interactive oral skills and preparation of integrated work tasks (Huhta 1999: 13), applying pedagogical tools such as problem-based learning, case simulations, preparation of portfolios, and so forth. Valid and competent language pedagogy should further incorporate methods directed at improving students' intercultural communication competence and autonomous language learning abilities. As European language policy makers put it, "intercultural communication skills are assuming an ever-larger role in global marketing and sales strategies" (Commission of the European Communities 2002: 6). Admittedly, these ideals may be applied to beginner's level Japanese language education only to a certain degree, but I believe that minimal awareness of these issues should be an indispensable requirement for all polytechnic language teachers, for full- and part-time teachers alike. The market value of Japanese is not yet high in European working life, but further analysis and identification of specific Japanese communication needs and the development of Japanese language curricula towards such needs may prove to provide an invaluable competitive edge for Europe.

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