Improving Hospitality for Visitors to Japan

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Introduction

In response to the targeting of 40 million inbound tourists to Japan by 2020, universities have responded to calls from government and the hospitality industry to nurture human resources. In addition to course offerings on campus and in the community, the development of overseas internship programs could enable interns to receive hospitality training in English and programs for international students to learn in Japan.

This paper begins by contrasting various greetings—the idioms, local language, and haiku—used in Japan and Taiwan. It concludes by suggesting that promoting Japan as a tourist destination also requires the teaching of hospitality English, Korean, and Chinese to respond to an increasing number of travelers caught up in disasters caused by heavy rains, typhoons, earthquakes and global warming. Ways to adapt to trends in the hospitality industry round out this paper aimed at improving hospitality for visitors to Japan.

1. Greetings

The younger generation in Taipei today use greetings such as “Ni hao!” (Hello) when meeting other young people. They also say 嗨 (Hi), which sounds rather cool among the young generation. The Chinese expression, “你吃了吗 (nǐ chi le ma)” literally translates to “Have you eaten?” It is a greeting still commonly used among the older generation. Perhaps this hospitable greeting is rooted in traditional Chinese culture, where food is strongly attached to people’s emotions and regarded as important. The old Chinese proverb “民以食为天 (Mín yǐ shí wéi tiān),” translates to “Even common people regard food as heaven.” It is no surprise that food is a common subject of discussion in the hospitality industry.

Japanese in general is known for being vague, but in Kyoto its especially or indirect. For example, “Bubu dzuke demo dodosu ka?” can be translated superficially as, “How about some rice soaked in tea?” The expression is more often used to suggest that a guest has overstayed their welcome and should leave. In contrast, a warm personal welcome combined with a cup of home-made soup at check-in was reportedly the key to success at the friendly Townhouse Hotel Maastricht in Germany during the launch of an original opening campaign named “Style, Sex & Soup.”

1.1 Idioms, dialects, and haiku in English

People working in the tourism industry who regularly greet guests, such as the maitre di at a restaurant, the doorkeeper and front desk staff at hotels, or the steward on board a plane are expected to speak the formal and the standard languages of America, Japan, or Taiwan. Some customers might not feel comfortable with regional dialects nor understand local idioms. However, veteran tourists often enjoy trying to immerse themselves in the local culture by learning a few basic phrases and understanding the cultural context behind them.

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themselves deeper into the heritage and the cultures of the countries they visit. These include the fascinating
and colorful phrases of New Yorkers, the kyo-kotoba of Kyoto, and traditional Chinese that were mentioned
above as greetings.

1.2 Idioms

This paper is intended to make a scholarly contribution to the field of teaching and learning of hospitality
English as a Foreign Language (EFL), but seasoned with a unique flavor for students who plan to work with
flair and finesse in the hospitality industry. The hospitality industry is a broad category that includes lodging,
event planning, theme parks, casinos, transportation, cruise ship travel, eco-tourism, fitness, and additional
service sectors. At the heart of it all, the hospitality industry—is really about people. People expect
personalized, friendly and sociable service.

C. W. Nicol is an author and environmental critic living in Nagano who was awarded a hospitality prize from
the government of Japan. Among the many kinds of hospitality that Nicol (2015) claims to have enjoyed all
over the world, the most memorable was with people who appeared to have very little, “Canadian Inuit,
especially, showed me that the essence of hospitality is sharing...with the Inuit, I would have been shocked
had I ever been served beef, pork or lamb. When I go to the Arctic in July, I’m looking forward to sharing seal,
walrus, caribou or char with old friends.”

Hospitality refers to the act of being friendly and welcoming to guests and visitors; and the food, drink,
extertainment, that an organization provides for visitors; as well as the kindness and friendly behavior shown
to guests. Hospitality is a feeling—the showing of attentiveness to the needs of guests. Welcoming and meeting
with visitors is an art which teachers and interns must know.

Authentic hospitality is the key to success at friendly hotels. A warm personal welcome with a cup of home-
made soup at check-in helps make guests feel at home and appreciated. The first interaction with guests is all
we have to make them feel at home in a hotel. Polite hospitality begins with the word, welcome. Or the phrase
“Welcome to your second home.” We don’t get a second chance to make a first impression. Followed up by, “It’s
my pleasure,” “We appreciate your visit,” and “Is there anything else I can do for you?” until the check-out
salutation “We’re looking forward to having you again as our guest.”

There’s a rather unique tradition in Japan about the way guests are treated. You might think the art of
bowing has become superficial, yet the bowing of the cleaners who rush to prepare shinkansen train carriages
before the next passenger boards is remarkable. In Japan, people do greet each other by bowing. A bow can
range from a small nod of the head to a deep bend at the waist. A deeper, longer bow indicates respect and
conversely a small nod with the head is casual and informal.

Bowling with your palms together at chest level is not customary in Japan. If the greeting takes place on a
tatami floor, people kneel to bow. Bowling is also used to thank, apologize, make a request or ask someone a
favor. I don’t know of any other country where such politeness and good manners are the norm.

1.3 Dialects and borrowed language

The art of giving hospitality isn’t unique to any one culture or people. Yet Japan is branding the term. Most
hotels, shops and restaurants in Japan get their staff to follow hospitality manuals on service and etiquette. For example, *omotenashi* (おもてなし) is a Japanese word that has recently been widely borrowed by English speakers to mean anything and everything to do with the extraordinary customer experience you find all over Japan. Omotenashi refers to the hospitality, treatment, reception, and service that visitors can receive in Japan. On Sept. 7, 2013 in Buenos Aires, the Tokyo 2020 Bid Committee’s Cool Tokyo ambassadors—the prime minister, governor, athletes, a princess, and a television journalist—spoke in English and French to emphasize that people in Japan could best host the Olympics. Multilingual TV talent Christel Takigawa set media buzzing worldwide by making great play of the word *motenashi* by attaching the honorific prefix “o” and enunciating it slowly as o-mo-te-na-shi. Also in 2013, the Japanese term *washoku* was added to the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list in English. With the support of the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture (MAFF) (2014), hospitality organisations leveraged the recognition of Japanese hospitality from UNESCO by providing culinary training activities for the would-be chefs around the world to guarantee the quality of serving Japanese fare (Kikuchi 2015). Washoku does not refer solely to a dish or a cuisine. It refers to the dietary culture and way of serving food as performed by Japanese people. Another Japanese word that has been adopted in the English hospitality lexis is *mottainai*, meaning irreverent waste. In its full sense, however, the concept of mottainai conveys appreciation for the gifts of nature or the sincere conduct of other people. In such a caring culture, even at the dinner table the Japanese consider it rude to leave even a single grain of rice in the bowl. *Umami* is originally a Japanese word that translates roughly as savoury or deliciousness. To teach and to learn about hospitality in the English language requires knowing borrowed words from the Japanese language.

### 1.4 Haiku as greetings

Despite its succinct form, haiku contains the essence of Japanese people’s aesthetics, view of nature, philosophy, thought, and sentiments. Hospitality refers to the act of welcoming guests and visitors—therefore it should not be surprising to learn that haiku in English have been subtly and skillfully used to finesse diplomatic situations such as formal greetings, state dinners, and summit meetings worldwide.

There are several historical examples of haiku being shared by heads of states as forms of greeting in Tokyo, Brussels and Washington D.C. For example, on June 4, 2014 the EU Council President Van Rompuy welcomed Prime Minister Abe by quoting a haiku poem originally read in Kamakura by Yamaguchi Sodo, an Edo-era haiku poet who had befriended Matsuo Basho: *Me ni wa aobayama hototogisu hatsugatsu*. Full greens flood your sight, Then little mountain cuckoos, First fresh bonito

The above poem was a good selection for a dinner as it implies the green leaves please the eyes, the birdsong thrills the ears, and the freshest first fish of the season delights the palate.

The current president of the US was a hotelier who has greeted many a guest to his establishments, yet it was
former U.S. President Barack Obama who declared, “I am sure that I am the first President ever to recite a haiku at a state dinner.” He then recited:

Spring green in friendship
United States and Japan
Nagoyaka ni

Strikingly, this mixed-language haiku contains vocabulary borrowed from the Japanese language meaning a “harmonious feeling.” Obama diplomatically chose to share the Japanese language, the season word, the 3 lines and 17-syllable form to not only welcome but to accord with his guest’s expectations. The 3rd line could have been rendered in English as “harmony feeling” and still maintain 5-7-5 syllables, but instead the Japanese was used. The former president’s marked choice—to call attention to the Japanese trait of harmony by using the Japanese phrase was highly appreciated by his guest.

The reference to spring green is an accepted seasonal reference. The color can also create synesthesia, rhetoric that describes one sensory impression in terms of a different sense, for example “green friendship.” The diplomatic color green helped to advance the green agenda of Obama and Abe as leaders in sustainable energy development.

The bilingual haiku that Obama crafted was a good selection for an official greeting. State Dinners at the White House are meticulously planned and cost in the order of a half million dollars. The haiku was not said lightly, off the cuff. In addition to making his guests comfortable, the social motivation for using more than one language in the same poem was perhaps on account of the Japanese language and culture being able to convey an idea of harmonious feeling better than the American language and culture. Moreover, the haiku seems to reveal a case where the Japanese language had a higher symbolic value when describing the concept of harmony to that of American English (that values individualism), the social prestige associated with the Japanese language motivated the borrowed words.

2. Universities Respond to Calls to Nurture Human Resources

Japan’s recent increase in inbound tourists has prompted domestic hospitality industry sectors, such as food-and-beverage and lodging, to improve language services for foreign tourists; particularly so in the case of English and Chinese. Except for the major hotel chains which have accumulated their own know-how, many companies are not sure how to effectively tackle this issue.

Some are making use of language training programs provided by inbound industry consultants or local government-affiliated associations and organizations. Most Japanese businesses in the hospitality industry have not been able to improve the language abilities of their staff. English is not a second language in Japan, it is but a foreign language and seldom used in daily life outside classrooms or places where foreigners and English-speaking tourists mingle. Amano (2015) claims the majority of businesses “have remained stagnant with respect to improving language services.”
2.1 Japan Tourism Agency

Efforts to establish a Japan Tourism Agency a decade ago, were initiated by government on Jan. 31, 2003 when then Prime Minister Koizumi announced in a policy address that "by 2010 Japan will double the number of foreign tourists to 10 million." A secretariat for the Japan National Tourism Organization was opened on April 1, 2003. On Dec. 13, 2006, legislation passed unanimously in the Diet to establish the Tourism Nation Basic Law which was enacted from Jan. 2007. On Jun. 29, 2007 the Japanese Cabinet approved the Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Plan, and finally on Oct. 1, 2008, the Japan Tourism Agency was inaugurated. At that time, the Commissioner of the Japan Tourism Agency, Yoshiaki Hompo, pledged:

We must be willing to change ourselves and be determined to create a new sense of awareness and culture befitting the new agency under the slogan "JTA, open to you." For that purpose, it is our intention to develop a tourism administration that values agility, efficiency, and results. It is also our intention to take on new policy developments with decisiveness and enthusiasm, such as working to attract overseas visitors with an eye to reaching the 20 million mark in 2020.

Having already reached that goal in 2016, the central government of Japan reset its goal of increasing the annual number of visitors to Japan to 40 million by 2020 when Tokyo hosts the Summer Olympics and Paralympics.

The Visit Japan Campaign was launched to redress an imbalance of inbound and outbound tourists, noting "In comparison to the 16 million Japanese traveling overseas annually, only 5 million foreign tourists visited Japan. The Visit Japan Initiative aimed to lessen the gap at the earliest possible stage (JNTO 2008)."

The Japan Tourism Agency set numerical targets to match outbound and inbound tourism by 2020. It opened 13 offices in key cities and 3 websites so that it could quickly adapt promotions in the English language. JNTO set a vision statement "To build a nation on inbound tourism initiative and to further international exchange through tourism." It has aggressively encouraged inbound tourism, but outbound has remained flat since 1996, when 16,694,769 Japanese visited abroad until 2017 when 17,889,292 did. Approximately 150,000 Japanese travelers visit Taiwan every month, whereas 300,000 Taiwanese visit Japan.

In 2007, 8,346,969 overseas residents visited Japan, by 2017 they reached 28,691,073 visits (JNTO, 2018). Taiwanese travelers accounted for 4,564,053 (15%) of those trips. Over 20 million international travelers had visited by Aug. 15, 2018 just prior to a sudden halt in the surging visits cause by severe flooding and a series of super typhoons at Kansai airport and major earthquake in Hokkaido. The number of foreigners visiting Hokkaido had skyrocketed to 6.11 million overnight stays in Hokkaido in fiscal 2017, marking the sixth straight annual increase. To mitigate the shortfall of visitors in summer, JNTO quickly offered up to 70 percent reductions in autumn and winter hotel accommodations in Hokkaido.

The successful basic policy set 10 years ago called for (1) an increase in domestic travel by the Japanese as well as visits to Japan by international travelers, while expanding overseas travel by the Japanese; (2) the promotion of sustainable development of tourism in order to achieve prosperity for the people into the future; (3) the achievement of vibrant regional communities that residents can take pride in and feel attached to; and (4) the enhancement of Japan's soft power as a peaceful nation, in order to establish an honored position in the international society.
To reach these numerical targets required the "development of attractive, internationally competitive tourist destinations," "enhancement of the international competitiveness of the tourism industry," and "nurturing human resources who can contribute to tourism promotion" JNTO (2008).

The effort to attract international tourists was supported by a wide spectrum of society, including local governments seeking to boost business, travel industries wanting to fill planes and ships, hoteliers and Airbnb renters pushing for full capacity, retailers counting on tax-free sales, and students seeking jobs. The societal impact of increasing numbers of tourist was widely debated, usually weighted towards how to bring in even more visitors.

The decade-long tourist boom has been fueled by a surge in visitors from China, Korea, and Taiwan who have been circuiting the Golden Triangle Route and guided to travel from Tokyo, to Mt.Fuji, to Kyoto and Osaka. Who people prefer to travel with has changed over the same time, from group tours to family tours to individual tours.

Group tours in the form of cruise ship visitors have supplemented the surge in numbers. Repeat visitors are important to building a sustainable tourist industry, however, so it must be recognized that many experienced travelers have ultimately switched to individual tours.

### 2.2 Colleges and universities offer hospitality English courses

Although the number of schools that focus on English for the hospitality industry—namely 'Hospitality English' or 'English for Hospitality'—has been increasing in response to societal fluctuations, the "English instructors at these institutions do not necessarily have prior knowledge, experience, or expertise about the hospitality industry in general." As well, Amano points out that English levels of Junior College students enrolled in the "Tourism, Hotel, and Wedding Consultancy" program lie at the 210–430 TOEIC levels compared to 'Foreign Languages and Intercultural Understanding' major students range from 310–560 TOEIC scores.

A framework for designing and teaching courses such as 'Hospitality English' is necessary for these teachers and content interesting enough to motivate any kind of student is essential. A new hypothesis is that more humanity is needed in the hospitality industry. That means hotels need to start thinking more about their local community, too. Hotels will likely begin reclaiming the role they once had as community centers, only this time they'll have evolved to solve challenges unique to modern times. A central hotel lobby where you can gather with other travelers or locals is a distinct advantage to diminish the surge in Airbnb's, that are increasingly booked by tourists arriving from abroad. Airbnb might place you in the heart of a local neighborhood and you might be introduced to a local host but in many cases, the experience of a house-stay can also be isolating. So expect hotels to host events and recreate front lobby space to make guests feel as though they really "live there."

Business organizations such as the Association of Corporate Executives have called upon colleges and universities to train students for the travel industry. In response to the development of tourism in Japan, the Japan Association of University and Colleges for Business Education (JAUCB) assisted colleges and universities to set up departments that could train students to meet the demands of the industry. For example,
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university offerings could include the following four groups of subjects for a Tourism Coordinator who could manage Hospitality Supervisors, Bar Persons, Waiting Staff, Tour Guides, Kitchen Hands, Hotel Chefs and Cooks, Travel Agents, and Air Line Staff.

Group I subjects such as history and literature that relate to regional tourism assets (to identify and promote historical figures). Students need to acquire sufficient knowledge on geography and cultural factors such as religions and food to be able to communicate with guests and deal with intercultural issues.

Group II subjects could include hospitality, hotel management, international tourism, presentational skills, and sight-seeing practicums useful in tourism-related industries (travel agencies, hotels and airline business). Students need to acquire knowledge and a deepened understanding on the concept of hospitality and its associated operations; and to have acquired skills to access industry information sources and find information as required, which are often written in English. Students need enough English proficiency to communicate in various settings with foreigner tourists. Working in hotels requires practical training in 3 basic service areas at the international hotel: experiencing guest room maintenance, helping around the front, and crewing in the restaurant.

Group III subjects related to business administration such as accounting could be offered to students who need to conduct routine duties adequately in the field of commercial hospitality.

Group IV subjects could include language skills. Hospitality careers are enhanced with English, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese language studies at the university level. The ability to speak foreign languages puts international students at a definite advantage in the hospitality industry. Developing these learners’ cultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes in interactive settings is embraced in these courses. The course designer needs to have the students engaged in interactive learning within the classroom and beyond. CLIL focuses on the learning of content, and the simultaneous learning of a foreign language. Believing that delivery of the CLIL approach requires the Hospitality English classroom to embrace an intercultural ideology, Amano (2015) invited foreign guests (internship students and volunteers) to the classroom a few times for roleplaying practice and discussion on the similarities and differences of traditional hospitality in different cultures.

Group V subjects could include field work. The traditional concept of hospitality offered to foreigners in Kagoshima can be studied at Sengan-en, a Japanese garden and stately home that has been passed down in the Shimadzu family for over 350 years. Today the house provides a glimpse into the lifestyle of a feudal lord, Prince Shimadzu Tadayoshi, who lived in this house at the end of the 19th century. The distinctive features of traditional Japanese architecture were designed with hospitality in mind, the private inner gardens were seen by visiting overseas royalty such as Edward VIII of the UK and Nicholas II of Russia. Visitors from Taiwan are often invited to take a stroll around the house lived in and loved by generations of the Shimadzu family. The World Heritage site encourages tourists to experience how important dignitaries were welcomed at Sengan-en.
Group VI subjects could include practical internships both domestically and overseas. Internships to assist foreign students from Taiwan to land future jobs in Japan would be enhanced by domestic internship program for foreign students. Internship matches the job hunting that foreign students hope to do. For example, a job related to sightseeing.

3. Teaching and learning of hospitality English in response to global warming

Japan is a country vulnerable to natural disasters. Global warming seems to be increasing the intensity of flooding and typhoons. Therefore in setting the goal of increasing the annual number of visitors to Japan to 40 million by 2020 when Tokyo hosts the Summer Olympics and Paralympics, the central government must set up measures to assist foreigners in Japan in times of need.

3.1 The teaching and learning of hospitality English for tourists in trouble

Lack of information for tourists in English or other languages was a major issue in the disasters in western Japan triggered by Typhoon No. 21 in early September that shut down Japan's third largest airport, the Kansai International, as well as a powerful magnitude 6.7 earthquake that shook Osaka Prefecture in June.

In addition to causing tremendous damage, the earthquake wreaked havoc among foreign travelers amid the peak of tourist season in Hokkaido. Although September is an off-peak time for tours to Japan, at least
2,000 Taiwanese tourists were stranded and 471 canceled their tours. The top priority was to find accommodation, and thereafter get the tourists back safely to Taiwan on additional flights via EVA, China Airlines, and Tigerair Taiwan. Canadian tourists didn't fare as well as the Taiwanese. Canadians were at a loss of what to do in the Hokkaido capital on the early morning of Sept. 6. When an English-speaking tourist arrived at a shelter in Sapporo in at 3:08 a.m. on Sept. 6, 2018 he was greeted bluntly with the expression, “No English.” Not being about to decide if the staff were implying “No foreigners” or were just unable to speak English he didn't step inside the safety area. Instead, with his smartphone battery almost dead, he walked for two hours to the Sapporo city government office, which directed him to a shelter where many foreigners had evacuated.

3.2 The teaching and learning of various languages for tourists in trouble

Foreigners from China, Taiwan and Korea in particular faced difficulties from the sudden natural disaster that hit Hokkaido. Central Sapporo was soon filled with people who had been stranded by flight cancellations. Of the 1,600 people who visited the shelters, 60 percent were foreigners. Over 80 South Korean tourists took refuge in the entertainment districts, others stayed overnight in an underground passageway in front of JR Sapporo Station. These foreign tourists had never experienced a strong earthquake and complained that it was scary to face it alone. Canadians said it would have been helpful if there were notices, online sites or smartphone apps available in English. “We had worked out measures to assist residents stranded due to the failure of the public transport system, but we had never imagined that Sapporo would be filled with such a large number of tourists,” said a city government official. Scarce information for foreign tourists was raised as a problem when Typhoon No. 21 tore through western Japan on Sept. 4 and the magnitude-6.1 earthquake, which registered a lower 6 on the Japanese intensity scale of 7, hit Osaka Prefecture in June. About 8,000 people including passengers, airport, and airline staff were stranded at Kansai International Airport, a gateway to western Japan, when it was inundated with floodwater brought about by high waves due to Typhoon No. 21. Tourists from Hong Kong complained that notices at the airport were written only in Japanese and English so Chinese couldn't understand them. How to evacuate foreign tourists affected by a disaster was a priority for the Sapporo city government. A multilingual support center was set up in the wake of a massive disaster in 2013. However, the building that was supposed to serve as a base for the center was shut down because the earthquake knocked out power and plunged the northern island into darkness. The free phone consultation service for foreigners (011-211-2105) was rendered out of service. Information provided for foreign tourists during past disasters was also far from sufficient. An interview survey conducted by the Japan Tourism Agency claimed that tourists from countries where the primary language is English, Chinese or Korean complained that information in their mother tongues was insufficient. The Japan land ministry (2017) website contains information in English about how to protect oneself and shelter information. Such vital information for foreigners in Japan in times of disaster is a necessary part of the teaching and learning of hospitality English.

Conclusion

In ten years Japan has been able to bolster inbound tourism. Those incoming tourists require language
services. Trends toward a wide variety of accommodation, from hotels to Airbnbs have implications for the teaching and learning of English. There is currently an imbalance in the number of inbound and outbound tourists in Japan—particularly the current mismatch with Taiwan needs to be leveled. The promoting of Japan as a tourist destination comes with the responsibility of teaching and learning hospitality English to respond to an increasing number of travelers caught up in disasters caused by heavy rains, floods, typhoons, earthquakes and global warming.

Stakeholders in the hospitality industry including governments and universities are supporting the development of the teaching and learning of hospitality English in Japan, but more needs to be done before the 2020 Olympics and the arrival of 40 million inbound tourists. In addition to offering courses on campuses and on-the-job training in industries, overseas internship programs in Taiwan enable interns to receive hospitality training in English. Hospitality training programs for international students to learn in Japan while working in Japan can also fill the need for more multilingual staff. Universities in Japan need to reimagine the teaching and learning of hospitality English based on trends that impact the teaching and learning of hospitality English and overall guest experience when they travel.

References