

A Critical Analysis of Scarce Collection Development Resources: English Language Materials at Japanese Academic Libraries

By James Hicks

Focused collection development policies are central to building and maintaining library collections and supporting library programs and services. Regular weeding can improve accessibility, tailor the collection to more closely match the library's mission, and allow for the more effective use of a limited budget. My career has led me to focus on the impact of collection development policies on academic libraries in Japan, but collection development decisions impact libraries of every size and purpose throughout the world.

Over the past 25 years I have worked as an English as a Foreign Language instructor in Japanese junior high schools, corporations, technical colleges and, for the past 18 years, universities. I have utilised my own advanced degrees in international relations and library and information science to design content-based lesson plans that allow students to use English in productive and meaningful ways while expanding opportunities for the development of critical thinking skills through information and media literacy.

In my experience, student motivation for studying English and using English-language resources varies according to a range of factors from personal interest in travel or culture to job opportunities in global-facing industries or international organisations. Despite some students having these personal or professional motivations, a significant number of students do not have any internal or external motivation for studying English because they will not rely on English as a necessary skill in their personal or professional life. This leaves a gap between the aspirational goals of the education ministry and the motivations of the average Japanese undergraduate.

Japanese universities and their academic libraries are facing budgetary constraints due, in large part, to a gradual decrease in student enrollment caused by a declining population. It is worth considering whether English language resources are being utilised sufficiently to justify their inclusion in Japanese academic library collections at current levels.

Japanese academic libraries face many of the same challenges as their counterparts in the United States. Academic libraries in both countries face severe budgetary constraints, rising costs for print serial subscriptions, limitations in shelf space, and increasing demands for e-resources and additional access points for digital information. All of these issues are directly linked to collection management and the constant need to adapt the collection to the demands of both the local academic community and the broader institutional objectives of the university.

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In addition to these common challenges, academic libraries in Japan face unique political, economic and cultural factors that can influence the collection development process and even work in opposition to the creation of a dynamic and current collection. One interesting factor involves the inclusion of significant numbers of non-Japanese materials in virtually every academic library in Japan. These print books in non-Japanese languages exceeded 30% of library holdings at the nation's 1393 academic libraries as recently as 2012 (MEXT, 2012). The vast majority of these non-Japanese materials are in English. Low use of these English-language materials due to limited English language ability among the user community combined with low levels of research activity among Japanese undergraduates suggests that excessive acquisition of English language materials in Japanese academic libraries represents a misallocation of valuable resources that could be used more effectively in other areas.

Comparative Library Statistics

As a means of gauging the current state of academic library collections in Japan, a comparison will be made of statistical measures from U.S. and Japanese academic libraries. U.S. academic libraries were selected for comparison due to the large population of both countries, the advanced development of the two economies, and the high levels of academic achievement shared by the two countries. The ease of gathering library statistics about American and Japanese academic libraries was also a deciding factor. When considering the two countries it is important to keep in mind that the U.S. population is approximately three times that of Japan.

One simple measure of an academic collection is its size. Many academic libraries are not as burdened by the need to see heavy circulation of their materials as public libraries. They are free to indulge in a certain degree of 'just in case' collection

development. This is largely due to their duty to support research efforts in even the narrowest fields of study within the academic community.

The National Center for Education Statistics' Institute of Education Sciences 2010 Report (2011) on academic libraries in the U.S. showed over a billion volumes held by the country's 3689 academic libraries (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 7). These libraries included 592 with less than 5000 volumes, 227 with more than one million volumes, and an average collection size of 291,685 volumes (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 7).

Japanese academic libraries also include some quite sizeable collections. For example, the University of Tokyo library holds nearly ten million volumes while the private Keio University library has over four million, which led Cullen and Nagata (2008) to conclude that "larger Japanese academic libraries do not seem noticeably poorly resourced compared with their Western counterparts" (p. 166). This conclusion is verified by recent government statistics that show holdings of more than 317 million volumes at Japan's 1393 academic libraries, which indicates an average collection of 227,700 volumes (MEXT, 2012). These collection sizes are impressive, as they rival academic libraries in the U.S., and they seem to indicate a dynamic user community and vibrant research capacity. But before drawing any conclusions, the use of these materials must be considered.

To better understand the overall usage of the academic library collections we need to measure the turnover rates. Turnover is calculated by dividing the total circulation of materials by the total holdings in the collection to determine the overall use of the volumes in the collections (Library Research Service, 2013). Table 1 shows the total holdings and turnover rate for the average US and Japanese academic library.

Table 1

Academic Library Holdings, Circulation, and Turnover Rate

	Academic Libraries	Total Holdings	Total Circulation	Turnover Rate
United States	3689	1,076,027,407	176,736,415	0.1642
Japan	1393	317,186,098	30,164,214	0.0951

As indicated in Table 1, the turnover rates differ significantly, with the U.S. collection being used at a 70% higher rate than the Japanese collection. What explains this broad discrepancy in similarly sized collections? A few possible explanations exist: a lack of research skills development by Japanese undergraduates; a high percentage of underutilised materials due to insufficient English language ability; a lack of clear collection development policies; or the lack of a professional class of academic librarians engaged in periodic review and deselection of materials. These explanations will now be explored in detail as potential contributing factors in the low turnover rate.

The Japanese Educational System

As Japanese politicians engage in another round of soul-searching regarding Japan's economic doldrums and rapidly aging society, changes in the educational system aimed at nurturing 'global talent' are seen as a solution (Kameda, 2013). Some feel that the current educational system has failed to create sufficient numbers of innovative workers with the creativity and confidence to succeed in multicultural environments.

Branstetter and Nakamura (2003) commented a decade ago on the "relative weakness of Japanese academic science" (p. 4) and the substandard "quality and level of academic research in Japan" (p. 14) as compared to the U.S. in a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper on structural impediments to growth (including insufficient innovative capacity). For years Japan produced many more engineering graduates at the B.A. level per capita, but many fewer PhDs in science and engineering as compared to the U.S. (Branstetter & Nakamura, 2003, p. 15). The B.A. engineering students fuelled the growth of the pre-bubble years and helped Japan become an economic powerhouse in the 1980s, but the comparatively meagre number of students pursuing higher degrees may have contributed to Japan's inability to continue its economic dominance.

This tendency to produce few specialists may be related to a common cultural practice in Japan in which companies and local governments rotate employees between departments every few years in order to create employees with generalised knowledge rather than encourage the creation of expert employees in specific areas. In the case of Japanese academic libraries, staff are rotated in and out of the library every five or so years from a pool of low-level, administrative staff with the intention of creating "multiskilled generalists" (Cullen & Nagata, 2008, p. 167). This practice, aimed at revitalising employees through new challenges and encouraging a wide range of experience, applies equally to business, government and librarianship, with considerable impacts on organizational structure, institutional policies, and productive output.

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As for library use, according to Ishimura, Howard and Moukdad (2007) Japanese students at the undergraduate level are "seldom required to use academic libraries for coursework and research" (p. 5). In fact, students often view libraries as a place to study or chat with friends (Nagata, Toda & Kytömäki, 2007) rather than a place to conduct

scholarly research. The author's personal observations at numerous Japanese academic libraries over the past 18 years support this conclusion. Institutions of higher education do not place a strong emphasis on research projects that would require extensive use of English language materials at the undergraduate level.

Even graduate degrees can be viewed as a negative in a group-oriented society. The notion of an elite specialist being able to solve a problem better than a group of people working together as a team challenges prevailing egalitarian ideals (Tanikawa, 2010). Some companies prefer new employees who are easy to mould rather than M.A. or M.B.A. graduates with new ways of thinking that conflict with traditional ways of conducting business. The low turnover rate at Japanese academic libraries may be impacted by these cultural tendencies, educational policies and business practices.

English Language Ability

With nearly 30% of Japanese academic library collections made up of English language materials, the English language ability of the typical user and its relation to the turnover rate for these materials is worth examining as an explanation for the relatively low turnover rate at academic libraries in Japan.

Japanese educators have been long pondered the ability of the students to acquire satisfactory English language skills as compared to their Asian and European counterparts. Theories abound in which the deficiency is blamed on cultural factors, geographic isolation, economic success, and even neuroscience. The precise reason for this skills gap may be unclear, but the results of international test scores are not.

One prominent international test aimed at measuring academic aptitude in English is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), offered as an internet-based test (iBT). Japan regularly scores at lower levels on the TOEFL test as compared to its Asian peers. Despite the fact that the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the "creator of the TOEFL test, does not endorse the practice of ranking countries on the basis of TOEFL scores" (ETS, 2012) such comparisons are often reviewed when considering changes in educational policy. In 2010, Japan's average "TOEFL iBT score was 69 – among the worst out of 33 Asian countries" (Mie, 2013). What is more, analysis of the Test and Score Data released by the ETS for 2010 and 2012 show that the gap appears to be widening. While many Asian countries have seen their TOEFL iBT scores improve over the two-year period from 2010 to 2012, Japan's have not changed (ETS, 2010; ETS, 2012).

These facts may have contributed to the current government's suggestion that a threshold be set for TOEFL scores in order to "gain college admission and graduation, and to qualify for government jobs" (Mie, 2013). Highly controversial policies such as this have been suggested in the past and several previous attempts have been made to promote 'internationalisation' or 'globalisation' as a solution to Japan's economic woes. The ultimate effect of such initiatives has been insufficient to significantly improve the English language ability of the average Japanese student over the past decades. Whether this new initiative to reform the educational system will be successfully translated into government policy is as yet unclear. What seems clear is that current academic library holdings, approximately one third in English, reflect an aspirational set of materials rather than one ideally suited to the actual user community and its needs.

Japanese Academic Librarians

Considering the status and qualifications of Japanese academic librarians may offer some context for the state of collection development policies and practice in Japan.

Japanese Library Law stipulates that a qualified public librarian in Japan obtain a 'shisho' certification (Tsuji, et al., 2006, p. 238). There is no distinction made between qualifications required for public and academic libraries. This 'shisho' certification is certified by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (Cullen & Nagata, 2008; Matsuoka-Motley, 2011) and it requires "a university degree and twenty credits of library science knowledge, which may be part of the candidate's degree studies" (Cullen & Nagata, 2008, p. 164). It must be noted that many feel this certification is not equivalent to a Master of Library and Information Science degree (Matsuoka-Motley, 2011, p. 275; Tsuji et al, 2006, p. 239). Tsuji, et al. (2006) found in a 2005 survey of 'shisho' certification that many shisho instructors do not have a background in Library and Information Science; only 51.4% have a Master's degree, and about 26% have had no experience as an information professional (defined as less than one year experience) (Tsuji et al., 2006, p. 240-242).

The quality of the certification is also called into question by the fact that the number of students who obtain the 'shisho' far exceeds the number of positions available at public libraries. According to Tsuji et al. (2006) this popular certification is obtained by more than 10,000 university students each year despite the fact that only 14,000 full-time public librarian positions are available in Japan (p. 238). The certification appears to represent more of a job option than a career path in

these tough economic times. This view is supported by Tsuji et al. (2006) survey results, which reveal that many Library and Information Science instructors feel that "students have little awareness, motivation or interest in anything other than certification" (Tsuji et al., 2006, Table 10).

Academic librarianship does not offer any greater status than public librarianship in Japan and even with the large surplus of 'shisho' certification holders "less than 50% of library staff . . . hold a professional qualification" (Cullen & Nagata, 2008, p. 164) at academic libraries. There has also been a trend towards outsourcing at university libraries since the passage of the National University Corporation Law in 2003. The passage of this law allowed national universities to develop "distinct educational and research functions through a more autonomous management policy" (Cullen & Nagata, 2008, p. 163), which includes outsourcing services such as "public services operations, reference desks, circulation desks and user education" (Matsuoka-Motley, 2011, p. 273).

Academic libraries are currently split between university library staff who are more closely connected to the mission of the academic institution, and commercial library staff who are employed by commercial vendors to provide specific services. This has led to some instances of "poor information sharing and communication" (Matsuoka-Motley, 2011, p. 276) among academic library staff. Though the user may sometimes benefit from the targeted expertise of the commercial staff, the existence of two separate primary objectives (commercial vs. educational) may lead to unclear collection development policies and an inability to adapt in a timely and efficient manner when changes in policy are required. It is quite possible that such a bifurcated and, at times, insufficiently trained library staff might not have the confidence or status to press for the stringent library performance analysis necessary to justify expenditures on English language resources.

Conclusion

The existence of such a large percentage of non-Japanese materials at Japanese academic libraries, the vast majority in English, represents a misallocation of valuable resources that could be better spent elsewhere. Academic library collection development decisions are currently constricted by budgetary pressures at the national and institutional levels. As universities compete for a shrinking number of students due to Japan's low birthrate, universities have prioritised spending towards public relations and admissions and away from libraries (Matsuoka-Motley, 2011, p. 273).

In such an environment every yen counts, and collection development decisions should reflect what is best for the user. The evidence presented here indicates that university students are not currently in need of large numbers of English language materials due to a combination of limitations in the English language skills necessary to benefit from such an extensive amount of English language material and a general lack of priority placed on engaging in scholarly research at the undergraduate level. Accumulation of such large numbers of non-Japanese materials may be partly due to the dearth of professional academic librarians charged with habitually fine-tuning the collection to the immediate needs of the student and faculty user communities.

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Current trends indicate that less Japanese students are choosing to study abroad (NIER, 2011). This does not bode well for increased English language ability and the usage of English language materials in the future. On the other hand, the government recently established the 300,000 International Students Plan as part of a global strategy to "open up Japan to the whole world and expand flows of people, goods, money and information between Japan and countries in Asia and other regions of the world" (MEXT, 2008, p. 3). This framework has a target date of 2020 for encouraging 300,000 highly capable international students from a variety of countries, regions and fields to study in Japan through a range of educational measures and promotional efforts (MEXT, 2008). This latest attempt to globalise Japan's educational institutions and businesses may lead to some increase in the use of English language materials, particularly at the thirty universities selected as the focal points for this latest push toward globalisation, but the needs of the average Japanese undergraduate do not justify such a large percentage of English language holdings nationally.

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A solution to this problem could be to increase access points to and availability of e-resources such as online databases and digital journals at Japanese academic libraries. A survey of academic library directors in the U.S. found that most predicted a huge shift in spending towards digital journals and databases and a corresponding decrease in

spending on print materials (Long & Schonfeld, 2010, p. 29). Japanese academic libraries may be better served by increasing the number of databases and computer access points rather than print materials in general and English language print materials specifically.

To better understand the exact usage statistics for English language materials as compared to Japanese language materials, further research is needed on language-specific circulation at academic libraries across Japan. At present, with less and less of the budget being allocated to the library and its holdings, Japanese academic libraries would be wise to reconsider the value and use of English language materials and consider a gradual reallocation of the collection development budget towards materials of more relevance to the user community.

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