

# **Attitudes of Japanese EFL learners towards the concept of the ideal native speaker accents and English pronunciation education**

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## Abstract

This study aims to investigate the attitude towards native English accents by Japanese learners of English in the UK. It explores the problems of Japanese learners' English pronunciation and looks at English pronunciation education in Japan. This study involved collecting data through questionnaires. The participants were 6 Japanese postgraduate students at the University of Leicester. The questionnaires consisted of 11 questions which were about the participants' preference in English accents and their perception of their own English accents.

The findings of this study reveal that Japanese learners of English at the University of Leicester tend to have a preference towards British accents. This is because the participants have experience studying in the UK and they are familiar with British accents.

In addition, this study showed that the students felt that English pronunciation education should be promoted more by the Japanese government and that English teachers should also be further trained.

Further study should focus on the learners who live in Japan and have never studied abroad in order to lessen the bias from only examining one type of student. Furthermore, further research could continue the investigation by using not only questionnaires but also interviews with a larger sample of students.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, English speakers have been increasing more and more rapidly. It is said that English is not only for ENL (English as a Native Language) speakers but also for ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) speakers as well. The prevalence of English has brought with it many issues such as a vague concept of native and non-native speakers and a lack of clarity of the authority of the language use. Generally, it is said that ENL countries are the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and several Caribbean countries (Crystal, 1997, p.4). However, English is learned as a second language and a foreign language by more than 1.5 billion people in over 100 countries and sometimes it can replace mother tongues (Crystal, 1997, p.5). On the other hand, for some EFL learners, there are many difficulties in acquiring English, such as its grammar and pronunciation, because of the big differences between their L1 (first language) and English (the target language). Additionally, there are few opportunities to use English outside of the classroom (Matsuda, 2000; Kinginger, 2009), and it is said that Japanese English education may be insufficient (Suzuki, 2017, p.6). Therefore, many people in Japan can feel their lack of English skills and abilities.

Simultaneously, consideration should be given not only to learners of English, but also to the quality of English teachers and the training system. It seems that English teachers in EFL (English as Foreign Language) classrooms are less confident to teach

English pronunciation because of a lack of the knowledge (Kelly, 2000, p.13), a lack of time (Koike, 2016), a lack of teaching curricula and materials (Alghazo, 2015, p.317), and a lack of training (Szpyra-Kozłowska, 2015, p.9). The Japanese government may need to take into account the enhancement of the teacher training system so that teachers can teach English pronunciation with adequate confidence. This paper will discuss some of the problems of English education in Japan and focus more on English pronunciation teaching in order to explore the perception of ideal accents by native English speakers. It will then examine the ideal native English accents and English pronunciation education for Japanese postgraduate students who are studying at the University of Leicester.

## 2. Literature review

### **2-1. Comparison of some English accents**

The study of Ladegaard and Sachdev (2006, p.106) reveals that the preference in language accents of English-speaking countries may not have a direct connection with the preference of its culture, though some of the aspects could see positive attitudes toward the favourite accent when they are influenced or interested in its culture. As regards, RP (Received Pronunciation), it used to be said that all of its points, which are the ability, social positions and accents, could be superior in quality compared with other accents such as Standard American English, Australian, Scottish and Cockney from EFL students, even though some of them are learning Standard American English (Taylor, 2000; Dalton-Putter et

al., 1997 cited in Ladegaard and Sachdev, 2006, pp.91-92). However, RP was not provided as 'an international model' and in recent years, due to globalisation, 'Americanisation' has increased in the world and shifted to American models, in areas including culture, politics, economics, the military, and the media (Fant, 2002 cited in Ladegaard and Sachdev, 2006, p.92). Furthermore, some researchers point out that Standard American English may surpass RP because of the powerful influence of American culture in the world (Crystal, 1997; Frant, 2002 cited in Ladegaard and Sachdev, 2006, p.92).

## **2-2. English as world language**

Kirkova-Naskova (2010, p.41) states that L2 (second language) pronunciation may be affected by their L1 (first language). In order to acquire L2 pronunciation, it will be necessary for L2 learners to learn the target languages' sounds, structures, intonation patterns, and phonotactic clusters (Archibald, 1998 cited in Kirkova-Naskova, 2010, p.42). Although it might not be influenced by L1 pronunciation if they start to learn L2 at an early age, Piper and Cansin (1998 cited in Kirkova-Naskova, 2010, p.42) point out that the pronunciation of L2 learners could result from their L1 language phonology. In contrast with the idea, many researchers try to see 'foreign-accented speech' positively and free from bias (Munro and Derwing, 1995 cited in Kirkova-Naskova, 2010, p.42).

In many EFL countries, British English tends to be used because of the history of the United Kingdom, but in recent years it has been used in various ways which are introduced into their own languages from English (Kachru, 1992a cited in Gill, 2009, p.135).

Brutt-Griffler (2002, p.113) notes that English was widespread from the beginning of the 17th century in some areas due to migration and colonisation by British people. It is clear that English could be a 'world language' because of its spread into Asia and Africa as EFL, and it is required for political and economic situations (Quirk, 1988 cited in Brutt-Griffler, 2002, p.113). Davies (2003, p.2) points out 'the native-speaker concept' is complex and vague. In the same way, Paikeday (1985) quotes that Chomsky's argument that the distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' could be nonsense (Paikeday, 1985 cited in Davies, 2003, pp.2-3). In contrast, some researchers use this concept, and Halliday (1978) concludes that it is difficult for adult learners to acquire a second language or a target language as a 'native' speaker, though they might be able to master it (Halliday, 1978 cited in Davies, 2003, p.4). Brookfield (1933) states that a children's language learning system could be built by observing, participating and interacting with people around them (Brookfield, 1933 cited in Davies, 2003, p.4). Davies (2003, p.8) asserts that even though there are some places where people use English as their first language (L1), such as Singapore, Nigeria and India, they do not tend to think that they are 'native' speakers of English.

Although it is difficult for native speakers to listen to English-pronunciation with a heavy foreign accent, and pronunciation errors can lead to communication breakdowns (Rogerson-Revell, 2011, p.5), it may not interfere with communication because native speakers are able to become accustomed to the foreign-accented speech (Kirkova-Naskova, 2010, p.57). For international

communication, 'intelligibility' should take priority rather than acquiring 'native' accents of English if L2 learners want to communicate with people by using L2 language (Jenkins, 2000 cited in Kirkova-Naskova , 2010, p.57).

### **2-3. The issues of the pronunciation education**

Seyedabadi et al. (2014, p.1929) point out that pronunciation teaching has a tendency to be ignored in foreign language education because of the lack of time. Tsubota et al. (2004, p.173) state that there are not many teachers who have the skills to teach English pronunciation in Japan, and it could be difficult to teach it because it involves dealing with individual students and may consume time, even if teachers have some knowledge and skills. Sakamoto (2012, p.414) states that English education can be communicative or enjoyable in elementary schools, but after students enter junior high schools, it turns into a grammar-oriented and translation-based education owing to the entrance examinations of high schools and universities. Martin (2004, p.50) explains that the Japanese education system has a tight schedule, difficult examinations, strict rules compared to American schools, and Japanese students need to attend school for approximately 60 more days than others. For instance, they have to attend club activities, school ceremonies, and school events in addition to ordinary lessons (Martin, 2004, p.50).

Although Japanese English teachers should be proficient in English, in the present situation, the majority of them do not have sufficient English skills, and it may be difficult for them to teach.

Martin (2004, p.50) emphasises that it might be impossible to acquire English in Japan because firstly, students only have a few hours of English class per week in junior high schools. Secondly, there are many factors such as tight schedules or timetables and difficult exams. Lastly, cultural and linguistic aspects of the Japanese language could influence their lack of English abilities. According to Martin (2004, p.53), this may be owing to katakana being one of the Japanese writing systems and it being used to express words which are derived from foreign countries.

Japanese people adopt foreign vocabulary into Japanese by using katakana, for example, they pronounce them, as follows: “test” is ‘tesuto’, ‘bus’ is ‘basu’, and ‘and’ is ‘ando’ which are called ‘Japanese English’ (Martin, 2004, p.53). Furthermore, it causes issues such as misunderstandings, failure of communication and a bad influence on their English pronunciation (Martin, 2004, p.53). In the same way, the work of Jenkins (2007, p.174) reveals that a ‘strong Japanese accent is unintelligible and is difficult to understand.

According to McKenzie (2008, p.80), Japanese EFL learners tend to favour native English accents such as British English and American English over a non-native variety of English. However, in recent years, Japanese EFL learners’ familiarity with non-native accented English is changing, and it is being accepted gradually because of globalisation (McKenzie, 2008, p.80).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3-1. Participants

The participants in this study were 6 Japanese postgraduate

students at the University of Leicester (2 males, 4 females) who study a variety of postgraduate courses such as criminology, translation and museum studies. The participants ranged in age from 20s to 30s. One of them was mostly raised in America, and one of them had the experience of studying abroad in the UK for a few years in her school days. They were asked about their past experiences about studying and learning English in Japan. It was not possible to collect data from more than 6 people because there were only 7 Japanese postgraduate students at the University of Leicester at the time.

### **3-2. Materials and procedures**

Data was collected using questionnaires, and in order to measure the perceptions and attitudes of students' 'native speaker concept', an 11-item questionnaire was distributed (Appendix). The questionnaires were distributed by email to the 6 participants, and the respondents completed it. The questionnaire consists of three yes/no questions, two 5-point scale questions, one order of preference question and five follow-up questions. Questions 1-4 were concerned with the issue of English pronunciation education in Japan, and questions 5-7 related to the perception of English pronunciation for the participants. Questions 8-10 were concerned with the connection between pronunciation and communication, and the last question was related to learning English pronunciation in Japan.

#### 4. Results

As mentioned in the literature review, Japanese English education is not sufficient and the results of this question “Have you ever been taught ‘native’ English pronunciation at your school in Japan?” showed that half of them (three participants) answered “Yes” and they described that pronunciation education was provided for the entrance exam such as “Which syllable had the most emphasis?” or “Choose the syllable that has the same pronunciation with the following word” or playing some games with ALT (Assistant Language Teachers). One problem of teaching pronunciation involved the question of who should be in charge of the lesson: Japanese English teachers, native English teachers or bilingual teachers.

According to Martin (2004, p.50), katakana (Japanese English) pronunciation affects Japanese English pronunciation. Moreover, Tsubota et al. (2004, p.173) state that there are not many Japanese English teachers who can teach ideal English pronunciation, and there are few opportunities to speak using authentic English in the lessons. In the same way, Martin (2004, p.52) points out that Japanese English teachers tend to avoid teaching English classes in English, especially grammar, reading, and translation lessons, and most of the instructions might be given in Japanese.

The third question was whether Japanese pronunciation education is sufficient, and five of them answered “No”. Although, one of them answered “Yes”, he wrote “It is difficult to check individual pronunciation and teach students in the whole class”.

Given his answer, he may have meant to say “No” but he misread the question and answered “Yes”. Many participants answered that there are no opportunities to listen to ‘real’ English pronunciation in English classes in Japan because the style of teaching is grammar-centred and exam-oriented. Some of them mentioned that the teachers’ lack of proficiency contributed to insufficient English pronunciation education.

The fifth question, whether they are satisfied with their English pronunciation, used a 5-point scale. Although, one of them who is bilingual answered 5 (strongly agree), the other answers were three 2 (disagree), one 3 (neutral) and one 1 (strongly disagree). This indicates that the participants were unsatisfied with their pronunciation. The study of Tokumoto and Shibata (2011, p.392) points out that Japanese EFL students do not prefer to speak English with their L1 accent. In other words, they are not satisfied with their pronunciation because they think that their English pronunciation has a strong Japanese accent. However, there are few ways to solve this problem due to the lack of pronunciation education, skilled teachers, appropriate lessons and opportunities to practice in real life situations.

With respect to the sixth question, which was an order preference question, four of them chose British English and two of them chose American English. Surprisingly, most of them answered that they did not know Canadian and Australian English well and some of them mentioned that they could not distinguish them though most of them wrote that the Australian accent might be difficult to understand, and it had the hardest pronunciation. The

study found that some participants think a British accent sounds more polite, elegant, clear, and easy to understand and pronounce. One of them answered it is easier to pronounce the /r/ sound than in any of the other accents. In contrast, an American accent has many linking sounds, and it may be difficult to understand, according to some participants, but Japanese people may be familiar with and accustomed to American culture through American dramas and films. As Ladegaard and Sachdev (2006) stated, there are no direct connections to the preference of the country's culture and language, whereas it could be that they influence each other (pp.105-106).

Next, the seventh question asked the participants what they think of Japanese English and "real" English pronunciation by Japanese speakers. The interesting answers were "People who speak English with a Japanese accent are less reliable or not cool.", and "People who speak English with native pronunciation are more reliable, sophisticated and look amazing." These perceptions could be seen in the work of Chiba et al. (1995 cited in Tokumoto and Shibata, 2011, p.393), and it points out that Japanese people have a tendency to prefer British and American accents and do not prefer the 'non-native' accents such as Japanese English because they think 'native' accents sound more intelligent, confident, fluent and clear. One of the answers showed that Japanese English pronunciation cannot be understood in real life situations by foreign people.

The eighth question was "Have you experienced a situation in which someone couldn't understand what you said because of your

pronunciation?” and all of them answered ‘Yes’. They mentioned that /r/ and /l/ sounds are problematic for Japanese English speakers, and when they do not have confidence, the volume of their voices could decrease, and the communication could break down.

With regard to the tenth question, “To what extent is the pronunciation influenced in a conversation?” which was a 5-point scale, one person chose 5, three people chose 4 and two people chose 3. This indicates that they think that pronunciation is important to communication in English. The last question was “What kind of practices have you tried in order to acquire English pronunciation?” Half of them answered English conversation lessons and then shadowing, watching English dramas or films, and talking with native English speakers. Half of them had not tried to improve their pronunciation.

## 5. Discussion

Firstly, there were not as many differences among their answers as I expected. However, two participants had experience living abroad when they were teenagers, and their answers seemed different from the other participants, who were educated in Japan. Secondly, most of them chose the ‘British’ accent as their ideal native speaker accent, though it was predictable because they chose a UK university and they are living in Leicester. Yet, the reasons why they chose the ‘British’ accent have a variety of perspectives. Thirdly, all the participants described the problems of English education in Japan and answered that it is insufficient.

Lastly, all of them had experienced situations where conversation broke down when they talked with foreign people by using English because of their pronunciation, whereas one of them, who is a bilingual (Japanese/English) speaker, experienced that her native English pronunciation could not convey correctly what she wanted to say in Japan.

## 6. Conclusion

According to Crystal (1997, p.2), the use of English has been spread throughout the world, and some native English speakers might be confused by the situation in which their own languages are reformed by other countries. It was thought languages should be standardised, but English is diverse and even non-native speakers such as learners of English as both foreign and second language sometimes need to use it in their everyday life. However, in order to communicate with people by using the target language, it can be significant to be intelligible and to use it appropriately.

The findings of this study reveal that Japanese learners of English at the University of Leicester tend to have a preference towards British accents. This is because the participants in this study had experience studying in the UK, and they are familiar with British accents. Moreover, the findings of this research indicate that it may be important to pronounce correctly and practice with 'real' pronunciation. Furthermore, it could be effective for learners to gain confidence when they talk in English even though they have a strong L1-accent, and attempt to communicate and to speak intelligibly. By carrying out questionnaires, this paper

has examined that for Japanese people, though having the concept of native speakers' accent might hinder them in using English positively because they tend to care about the mistakes and failures of their pronunciation, it is very important to teach real pronunciation in Japan and encourage them to use it without hesitation.

In addition, this paper has concluded that these six participants felt that Japanese English pronunciation education should be promoted by the government, and Japanese English teachers should be trained more, and Japanese English competence might be behind the world average. Further study should focus on learners who live in Japan and have never studied abroad in order to lessen the bias from only examining one type of student. Additionally, in further study, the diverse ranges of accents, dialects and applications of English should be taken into account in the questioning of the survey. Furthermore, further research could continue the investigation by using not only questionnaires but also interviews with a larger sample size of students.

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## Appendix

### 7-1. Questionnaire consent form

#### CONSENT FORM

Consent to participate in research

Researcher: Yasuko KIDA

The University of Leicester, UK

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research project which considers “what are the attitudes of EFL learners in the expanding circle towards the concept of the ideal native speaker accent and how can this be incorporated into the teaching of English in Japan?”. This form briefly outlines the nature of the study and sets out your rights as a participant.

Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You may

withdraw or refuse to participate at any time without penalty. If you are happy to participate, please take a few minutes to fill out this survey.

This questionnaire has 11 questions. All information collected during the research is confidential and will only be used for the purposes of research. This means your identity will be kept strictly anonymous and I will not divulge your name to any outside parties. Your name will not be revealed in any publications which may result from this research.

Participating in this research will not affect your grade. Your teachers will not find out your responses. Please answer openly and honestly.

If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact Yasuko KIDA using this email address.

I have read and understood the information in this consent form and I voluntarily agree to participate in this research project.

.....

Your signature/stamp \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Your name (PRINT) \_\_\_\_\_

## 7-2. Questionnaires

① Have you ever been taught how to pronounce 'native' English pronunciation at your school in Japan? ( Yes / No )



⑨ If yes, please explain the situation. (where, when, what word, what did you feel)

⑩ To what extent is the pronunciation influenced in a conversation? ( 1 / 2 / 3 / 4 / 5 )

(1 : Strongly disagree    5 : Strongly agree)

⑪ What kind of practices have you tried to acquire English pronunciation?

(e.g. listening to English songs, watching English films, talking with native speakers, English conversation lesson)

Thank you for your cooperation.