

Japanese English as a Variety of Asian Englishes and Japanese Students of English

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1. Introduction

The subject of English as an international language is not new at the International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication (ICCC) as well as other conferences that take interest in languages and intercultural communication. As Bates Hoffer describes, the 1999 conference in Louisville, Kentucky, was significant in that "Asian Englishes took center stage during the first panel session on the first day" (1999/2000).

In this panel, English as a multinational and multicultural language was studied from different angles. Nobuyuki Honna of Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, the main speaker, presented his paper titled "Some Remarks on the Multiculturalism of Asian Englishes." Following Honna was Tina Tajima of Shirayuri College in Tokyo, who introduced a Japanese Dictionary of Asian Englishes she had been compiling. The presenters of specific varieties of Asian Englishes were Hiroshi Yoshikawa of Chubu University in Nagoya, who discussed Korean English, and Tetsuya Enokizono of Kobe City College of Technology, who studied Indian English.

There were two reasons for my organizing a panel of Asian Englishes and playing the role of a moderator at the 1999 ICCC. One was that all the presenters of the panel as well as myself were active in the steering committee of the Japanese Association for Asian Englishes (JAF AE). The association tries to promote research on globalization and diversification of the English language in Asia. The history of JAF AE, though a short one, and its activities are described in detail by Tina Tajima in her conference review in *Asian Englishes* Vol.2 No.1.

The second reason was this journal, *Asian Englishes*, first published in Tokyo in the summer of 1998. Honna, the Editor in Chief, have been working closely with Tajima and me, the editors, and Enokizono, an editorial assistant, to publish the best papers dealing with various issues involved in the diffusion of English and its diversification in Asian and the Pacific. Thus, I found our academic environment good enough and made us well prepared to hold a panel of Asian Englishes at the conference.

My own role as the organizer of the panel was to introduce general background in which JAF AE and *Asian Englishes* were established. My concern

was in the learning situation (students' consciousness and their attitude toward English) rather than the teaching situation (the teachers' view). Therefore, part of my research on university students' situation based on a questionnaire was presented as the introductory part of the panel to present one way to look at Japanese variety of English. Without understanding the students --- where they are, where they are heading for, what they are aiming at, how much they are motivated, etc.--- the teachers' efforts and enthusiasm in helping the students could often take a wrong direction.

2. The Study

The questionnaire was given in May 1999 to 337 women students at Toyo Eiwa University; 233 were freshmen, 100 sophomores, 1 junior and 3 seniors. These students belong either in Human Sciences Department where they mainly study psychology, sociology, education and religion or in Social Sciences Department where they focus on international relations, economics, area studies, or politics. None major in English.

Several questions were given to the students during a class period with the intention of knowing the students and their overall tendency better. I focus on only three of the questions in this study to suit the concern of this paper. The first question was "How do you evaluate your proficiency --- are you happy about it?" To answer this question, students were provided with five choices --- very happy, rather happy, happy, rather unhappy and quite unhappy. They were asked to choose only one of the choices. The second question was "What are your purposes of studying English in university?" The students had 13 choices to choose from as shown below, and they were free to choose as many as they liked:

- a. To understand native speakers and their cultures.
- b. To understand non-native speakers and their cultures.
- c. To communicate with native speakers.
- d. To communicate with non-native speakers.
- e. To job-hunt.
- f. To use English for work in the future.
- g. To acquire knowledge obtainable through English.
- h. To acquire skills obtainable through English.
- i. To study or travel in native speakers' countries.
- j. To study or travel in non-native speakers' countries.
- k. To enjoy the process of language study.
- l. To improve G.P.A.
- m. No specific purposes / not clear.

The purpose of giving the first question, "How do you evaluate your proficiency of English --- are you happy about it?" was to understand the degree of

their satisfaction and confidence in their own skills. The students were asked to judge on the five scales; very happy, rather happy, happy, rather unhappy and quite unhappy. The words "happy" and "unhappy" were used deliberately in hope of preventing students from evaluating themselves lower than they actually believe their proficiency to be, for they usually tend to appear not too confident and therefore to judge themselves modestly if words such as "good" and "proficient" were used.

With the second question, "What are your purposes of studying English in university?" I intended to find out how much they are aware of different speakers of English in the world. In a similar study with a questionnaire (Takeshita 1993; Honna & Takeshita 1998), it had become clear that Toyo Eiwa students' image of English was strongly flavored with things American, and that they were little aware of the existence of non-native speakers of English and of their possibilities of communicating in English with various speakers with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

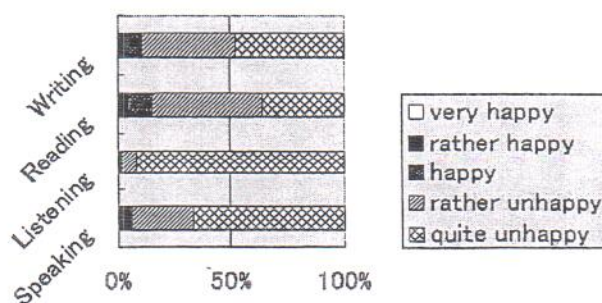
The last question, "What comes to your mind when you hear 'Japanese English'?", tried to look into the students' image of their own variety, for it must be closely related to their level of confidence and eventually to their willingness to speak up in English. Takeshita (1993) and Honna and Takeshita (1998) clarified that the students thought Japanese English to be inferior to native speakers' varieties especially in terms of pronunciation with American English as the standard. Not being able to speak as native speakers do led the students to a feeling of failure and even guilt.

3. Results of the Study

3.1 Students' evaluation of their proficiency

Graph 1 shows the students' response to the first question, "How do you evaluate your proficiency --- are you happy about it?" It is quite evident that the great majority of students are very unhappy about their own proficiency in all four skills, especially in the speaking skill. Taking into

Graph 1. How do you evaluate your proficiency - are you happy about it?



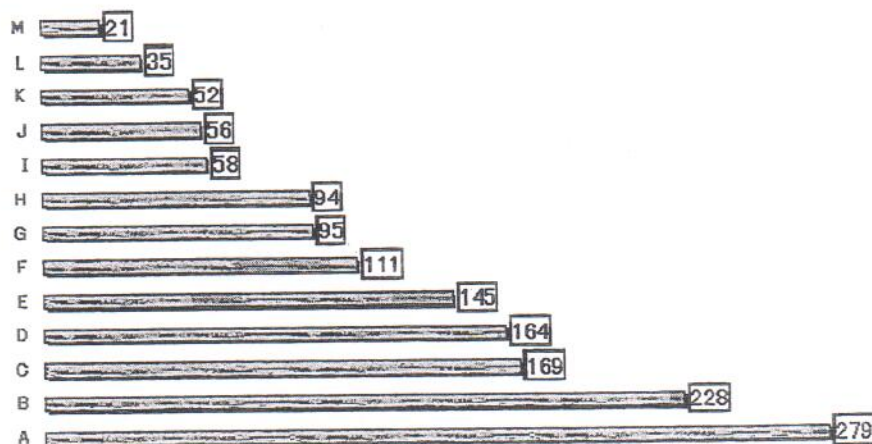
account the fact that these students have studied English at least six years before entering university, this is quite an unfortunate situation.

The percentage of the students who seem happy with their skills roughly coincides with that of returnee students who have an experience of living in a country where people speak English as a native language, or of studying at an international school overseas. It is also true that these students' English, mostly Americanized, prevents regular students from speaking up with a Japanese accent and sometimes intimidates them, resulting in their losing confidence in what they have acquired in English courses in high schools.

3.2. Students' purposes of studying English

Graph 2 shows students' response to the second question, "What are your purposes of studying English in university?"

Graph 2: What are your purposes of studying English in university?



- A. To communicate with native speakers.
- B. To study or travel in native speakers' countries.
- C. To understand native speakers and their cultures.
- D. To use English for work in the future.
- E. To acquire knowledge obtainable through English.
- F. To communicate with non-native speakers.
- G. To job-hunt.
- H. To enjoy the process of language study.
- I. To study or travel in non-native speakers' countries.
- J. To acquire skills obtainable through English.
- K. To understand non-native speakers and their cultures.

- L. To improve G.P.A.
M. No specific purposes/not clear.

Two hundred and seventy-nine out of 337 students replied that one of the purposes of studying English is to communicate with native speakers. The second most purpose was to study or travel in native speakers' countries, which many of them had already experienced. And the third was to understand native speakers and their cultures. Taking into account the fact that Toyo Eiwa students in the 1993 study proved to be extremely conscious of the United States rather than Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, etc. when they thought of a native speakers' country, it is quite probable that what these students mean by "native speakers" actually mean Americans.

In contrast, the students who have non-native speakers of English in mind were not many. Although they must be aware of the fact that English will help them communicate with non-native speakers of English with different cultural backgrounds, there were not many students who thought of communication with non-native speakers of English as a purpose of studying the language. The fact that only 52 students wish to understand non-native speakers and their cultures presumably shows: (1) that they are not as interested in non-native speakers as they are in native speakers, and (2) that their understanding of the possibility for them to interact with various non-native speakers through the English language is not enough.

3.3. Students' image of Japanese variety of English

Chart 1 shows students' response to the third question, "What comes to your mind when you hear 'Japanese English'?" The students were allowed to answer in sentences, phrases, and words, either in English or in Japanese. Chart 1 is a collection of some of the prominent answers and does not cover all the answers given by the students.

| Chart 1: What comes to your mind when you hear "Japanese English"? | N of students |
|--|---------------|
| Some Prominent Negative Reactions | |
| (1) In relation to native speakers? | |
| Japanese pronunciation, not native-like? | 21 |
| A kind of language not understood by native speakers? | 14 |
| Japanese accent, not native-like? | 13 |
| Pronunciation different from native speakers'? | 4 |
| A kind of language considered to be strange by native speakers? | 3 |
| Incorrect usages to native speakers' ears | 2 |

| | |
|---|---------------|
| (2) In relation to grammar? | |
| Imbalance between grammatical knowledge and communicative ability? | 35 |
| Too much focus on grammar? | 32 |
| Not usable in conversation because of priority over grammar? | 15 |
| A kind of language too strict in grammar | 9 |
| (3) In relation to pronunciation and accents? | |
| Poor pronunciation? | 58 |
| Wrong pronunciation? | 24 |
| Japanese pronunciation, not native-like [also above]? | 21 |
| Wrong/inappropriate intonation? | 11 |
| Japanese accent, not native-like [also above] | 4 |
| (4) In relation to the Japanese language and people? | |
| Katakana English? | 33 |
| Usable only among Japanese? | 14 |
| A kind of language made up by Japanese? | 19 |
| English scattered with Japanese words | 9 |
| (5) Others? | |
| Not practical? | 22 |
| The fact that I cannot speak English? | 21 |
| Not fluent? | 19 |
| English for examination? | 15 |
| School English | 10 |
| Positive Reactions | N of students |
| Correct grammar? | 2 |
| Clear and understandable pronunciation for Japanese people? | 2 |
| International? | 1 |
| A kind of language indispensable for global community? | 1 |
| Should be welcomed because it is communicative? | 1 |
| Japanese should use "Japanese English" to participate in world activities | 1 |

Before asking the students to answer the third question, I made it clear that the kind of English they could use for communication not only with native speakers but also with non-native speakers is called "Japanese English." However, I received a very pessimistic view of the Japanese variety of English. It seems that they are primarily concerned with pronunciation; their pronunciation is not good enough because it is not native-like.

Many pointed out the gap between their ability to communicate in English and their grammatical knowledge; they know the structure of the language because they have studied for several years but they cannot express themselves freely in it. Their dissatisfaction in their communicative ability corresponds with their unhappiness about their speaking skill manifested in Graph 1.

What did not exist in the 1993 study but does exist in this one are some positive comments on the Japanese variety of English. Though not many, some

students are beginning to see the possibilities and advantages of Japanese English. One acknowledges it as an internationally acceptable variety, another thinks Japanese people should be active in the global community in their variety, and still another student insists on the necessity of using Japanese English as a world citizen. The tendency to look at Japanese English with an optimistic eye is definitely new.

4. Conclusion

The above discussion portrays a general view of Japanese college students. One may suspect that this view does not represent the whole college students' attitude, for the students studied here are females, occupying a very small portion in the total student population. However, the reliability rests in several aspects: (1) they are fresh from high school where English is taught with a rather standardized curriculum nationwide; (2) just as a great majority of Japanese college students, both male and female, these students do not major in English (if English-major students were studied, quite a different attitude toward English would be obtained, such as their purpose of studying English is to enjoy literary works written in English) and (3) these are various students with different academic interests, from politics, international relations, economics, education, psychology and counseling, etc, who must have been scattered indifferent faculties in a bigger university.

Readers who are interested in English teaching in Japanese high schools may refer to Honna and Takeshita (1998) who elaborated the guidelines for junior and senior high schools presented by the Ministry of Education as well as the ideas behind them, and the textbooks used in Japanese classrooms in order to attain the goal. The knowledge of the environment in which these students have been educated will strengthen the understanding of their present situation.

The present study elucidated that the students are extremely unhappy with their level of skills. This is partially because their speech sounds different from native speakers', and partially because they aim at perfection. They also seem unhappy that they have focused too much on learning the grammar. It also made it clear that one of the prominent purposes for these students to study English at the college level is to communicate with native speakers, and they are not well aware of the possibility of communicating with non-native speakers who outnumber native speakers.

This is an unwelcoming situation when we consider the function of the English language as a means of global communication as has been pointed out by Honna and Takeshita (1998): Despite the global spread of English as a language for wider communication, many Japanese still believe that English is the property of the U.S.A. and Britain. They are ashamed if they do not speak English the way native speakers do. Behavioral acculturation also is presupposed as a must.

Then, it is the duty of English teachers in Japan to help their students have a new awareness of English that "English has become a 'various' language" (Honna

& Takeshita 1998). Students of English should realize that Japanese English is not an inferior form of English but one variety of the "various" language, or world Englishes. They should be guided so that they could be confident in becoming speakers of Japanese English that is a fine output of the English education in Japan.

Honna and Takeshita (1998) reported a series of workshops conducted for Japanese teachers of English in which they came to understand the multinational and multicultural nature of the English language and the significance of Japanese variety of English. Such an opportunity can surely alter Japanese consciousness of and attitude toward English, resulting in giving people a different view of the language and confidence in them.

A similar experience must work with students as well. As it is not yet very common for Japanese college students to encounter and communicate with non-native speakers as teachers of English in classrooms, indirect way of having an access to various Englishes will be effective: reading articles in Asian Englishes, for example, will help them be acquainted with different varieties of English used in neighboring countries. Spending several hours at the national conference of the Japanese Association for Asian Englishes (JAF AE) will give them opportunities to have an access to various kinds of English without traveling afar.

Many young Japanese students of English today will be active participants of intercultural communication in Asia and elsewhere in the 21st century. Practical changes in their skills, such as increasing the average TOEFL score for Japanese examinees, may take a lot of time and effort. However, no time should be wasted in altering their awareness of the English language. You cannot buy much when you think you have as little as 1,000 yen, but you will be surprised to buy something valuable when you think you have as much as 1,000 yen.

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