

# Is Native-Speakerism Dead?: Japanese English Language Learners' Perceptions About Ideal English Accents to Learn

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**Abstract:** This study investigated perceptions of 178 Japanese high school students about four different English accents: 1) American, 2) British, 3) Indian, and 4) Japanese in terms of ideal accents for English language learning. The study found that the highest number of participants chose Indian English as the most desirable accent for learning. The examination of potential factors and their relationships with participants' accent preferences revealed that participants had made their decisions according to their value judgment in terms of *clarity*, *authenticity*, and/or *familiarity*. Those who chose Indian English predominantly valued *clarity* as an important quality. By contrast, those who chose native English accents valued *authenticity* as an important quality. *Familiarity* was found to be the least popular quality chosen by the participants. In addition, participants' ability to identify English accents was found to be associated with participants' attitudinal decision making. Finally, the study found that the native-centric ideology is still an influential factor which affects English learners' attitudes toward English accents. Based on the findings, implications are discussed in terms of second language identity and ELT ideology in Japan.

**Keywords:** *EFL learner attitude, World Englishes, L2 identity*

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## Introduction

Teaching English as an international language has been extensively discussed in the field of English language teaching (ELT) in the last few decades (Canagarajah, 2005; Crystal, 1997; Kubota 1998; Jenkins, 1998, 2000; Matsuda, 2017). Despite the growing acceptance of teaching English from the World Englishes perspective, one of the concerns recurrently expressed by researchers and educators is that ELT in many parts of the world today presumes Inner-Circle varieties of English such as American and/or British as the most desirable standard varieties of English for teaching (Kachru, 1992).

In Japan, teaching English almost uniformly means to teach either American or British English (Matsuda, 2002). As a result, Japanese English language learners typically develop positive attitude towards English spoken by native speakers. For instance, Matsuda (2003a) conducted a qualitative study to examine the perceptions of Japanese high school students about English language varieties. The results indicated

that the students held distinctively Western centric views of English and that American or British English is the only appropriate English for learning. However, while learners view the select varieties of English as the only authentic English in the world, they tend to negatively view other varieties of English (Cargile, Takai, & Rodriguez, 2006; Matsuda, 2002). Kubota (1999) also shared a similar view regarding Japanese learners' attitudes towards native and non-native English speakers. She argued that "the dominance of English influences the Japanese language and people's views of language, culture, race, ethnicity and identity which are affected by the world view of native English speakers, and that teaching English creates cultural and linguistic stereotypes not only of English but also of Japanese people" (p. 295).

The line of research above suggests that Japanese learners' attitudes towards varieties of English are a reflection of the political as well as ideological nature of ELT in Japan. This native English centric ideology in ELT and its influence on learner attitude is referred to as native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006). A manifestation of native-speakerism is often visible in learners' attitudes towards nonstandard varieties of English speakers most particularly in their accents (Cargile et al., 2006; Dalton-Puffer, Kaltenboeck, & Smit, 1997).

Edwards (1982) posited three potential reasons why the stereotypical negative evaluations of non-standard English varieties are uniformly present across different languages and cultures: 1) intrinsic linguistic inferiorities or superiorities, 2) intrinsic aesthetic differences, or 3) social convention or preference (p. 21). Among these three potential factors, "social convention or preference" has been supported extensively by researchers (Cargile et al, 2006; Ladegaard, 1998; Matsuda, 2003a). In a similar vein, Cargile et al, (2006) argued that learner attitudes towards English accents are influenced by personal factors such as linguistic proficiency, personal beliefs, and preference.

While a number of the available studies to date have shown that English language learners typically develop negative attitudes towards nonstandard varieties of English, Mckenzie (2008) found that Japanese university students showed complex and mixed attitudes towards often negatively rated English accents. For example, Scottish English (a nonstandard native variety) and heavily accented Japanese English (a non-native variety) were rated positively by the participants in terms of *social attractiveness* whereas these varieties were rated negatively in terms of *social competence*. A notable finding of this study is that learner attitudes may well vary according to the evaluation criteria adopted (e.g., *social competence*). Thus, it is possible, whether it is positive or negative, that learner attitudes are not a fixed property of any given-English variety, but rather learners' attitudinal decisions may well be in constant flux depending on the evaluative context. However, many of the previous research studies were undertaken without much consideration for the potential impact of evaluative context on learners' attitudinal decision-making towards English accents. In particular, the impact of native-speakerism on Japanese learner attitudes were examined without actually exposing learners to the English varieties in question. Thus, the focus of the previous studies was on examining the preconceived notion of Japanese English language learners (JELs) about native/non-native English varieties. To address these limitations, the present research

attempted to explore the roles of factors associated with learner attitudes towards English varieties in a particular evaluative situation—the most desirable English accent for learning. The study thus attempted to provide an account on how learners may determine their attitudes towards English accents in the specific evaluative context by exposing learners to the sample speeches of four different English varieties.

In order to guide the study, the researcher posed the following research questions:

RQ1. What factors are associated with JELLS' choice of an ideal English accent for learning?

RQ2. Is Native Speakerism a viable factor in explaining JELLS' choice of an ideal English accent for learning?

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

A total of 178 Japanese high school students participated in this study. All participants were recruited from the same private high school located in a local town in Tokyo, Japan. In this school, participants were taking various English classes (e.g., English Reading and Oral English) taught by both Japanese as well as non-Japanese English teachers from U.S., U.K., and Malaysia.

### **Instrument**

The data were collected through a questionnaire (Appendix) which consists of two sections. The first section was designed to elicit data on the basic demographic information of participants such as age, and school grade. Additional questions were designed to obtain data on the nationalities of English teachers (e.g., American) by whom participants had ever been taught and the lengths of their English studies.

The second section of the questionnaire aimed to elicit data on the attitudes of participants towards four English different accents: 1) American, 2) British, 3) Indian, and 4) Japanese. In addition, this section asked if participants determined their preferences due to the following qualities as perceived by participants: 1) Clarity, 2) Familiarity, 3) Authenticity, and 4) Other factors.

Aside from the questionnaire, data collection involved the use of audio samples representing the four English accents. These samples were retrieved from an online public database, International Dialects of English Archive (Meier, 1997). All sample speakers were female and read the same short story containing all English language phonemes (see Appendix). The sample speakers are all native speakers of their respective English varieties.

### **Data collection Procedures**

Data were collected at school during a regular English class period. The researcher explained the purpose of the study and distributed the consent form as well as the questionnaire. All participants signed the consent form and completed the questionnaire

in Japanese, which is their native language. Participants were first directed to answer the first section of the questionnaire. In the second section, participants listened to the sample speeches of two native varieties of English—American and British—and two non-native varieties of English—Indian and Japanese. These samples represent the three concentric-circles—a well-accepted classification framework of English varieties around the world—proposed by Kachru (1992). In order to control for a potential effect of preconceived attitudes towards English varieties, participants were directed to listen to the samples with no explicit information with regards to the varieties of English which the samples represent. Thus, participants had to determine their attitudes solely by listening to the phonological properties of the sample speeches such as segmental sounds, stress, rhythm, tone, pitch and intonation. In addition, potential differences in participants' listening skills were controlled by providing the speech script read by the sample speakers.

After listening to the samples, participants assigned a number to each sample by the order of their preference for learning. Then, the participants were asked to identify in which country each variety of English is spoken and write their responses. After this task, the researcher revealed which variety of English each sample represented. Finally, the participants were allowed to rearrange the order of their learning preferences if the disclosed information affected the order of their initially selected preferences. In addition, those who made any change at this stage were asked to explain their reasons for the rearranged order in the questionnaire.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The researcher conducted frequency and crosstabulation analyses to examine:

- 1) the initially selected most desirable accent for learning,
- 2) potential factors which affect the initial choice of participants' learning preferences,
- 3) the participants' ability to identify English accents,
- 4) the observed change in their learning preferences, and
- 5) reasons for the change in their learning preferences.

The purpose of the analyses above is two-fold. One is to identify factors associated with participants' attitudinal decisions toward different English accents. The other is to examine if native-speakerism may contribute to participants' attitudinal change after the initial selection of the most preferable accent for learning. In summary, the following three categories of factors and their association with JELLS' attitudes toward four English accents are examined:

1. Linguistic factors: The term 'linguistic factors' indicates the linguistic qualities as perceived by participants in terms of clarity, familiarity, or authenticity. The linguistic factors in the present study are operationalized as follows:
  - a) *Clarity* refers to listeners' perceptions as to how easy it is to understand a sample speech. I have intentionally used the term to distinguish it from *intelligibility* as defined by Smith & Nelson, (2009). Since it is unreasonable to expect participants

- to know the precise meaning of the term as we understand, I have opted to use *clarity* to mean acoustic qualities that are conducive to “intelligibility,” “comprehensibility”, and “interpretability” (Smith & Nelson, 2009, p. 429)
- b) *Familiarity* refers to listeners’ perceptions as to how familiar a sample speech sounds.
  - c) *Authenticity* refers to listeners’ perceptions as to how proper English-like a sample speech sounds.
2. Individual factor: the ability to correctly identify English accents.
  3. Socio-political factor: native-speakerism, which refers to the socio-political convention to view native varieties of English as the only legitimate and authentic English for learning.

## Results

### The most desirable English accent for learning

A frequency analysis was used to determine the most preferred accent that participants initially indicated. Table 1 shows that 110 participants perceived Outer Circle English accent (Indian English) to be the most preferable accent for learning. 64 participants chose Inner Circle English accents (American or British) to be the most preferable accent for learning. Finally, four participants chose Expanding Circle English accent (Japanese English) to be the most preferable accent. The analysis showed that Indian English was perceived to be the most favorable accent for learning.

**Table 1**  
The most desirable English accent for learning

<u>English Varieties</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Inner Circle	64	36.0
Outer Circle	110	61.8
Expanding Circle	4	2.2
Total	178	100.0

### Potential factors

**Linguistic Factors:** As shown in Table 2, the results of crosstabulation analysis indicate that *clarity* is highly associated with Outer Circle English, while *authenticity* is associated with Inner Circle English. *Familiarity* is the least popular reason associated with the most desirable accent. However, although the number is small, a proportionately higher number of participants who chose Inner Circle English reported *familiarity* as the reason for their choice.

The results suggest that participants who chose American or British English accent as the most desirable for learning may value *authenticity* and they possibly desire to speak with native-like accents. As for *familiarity*, American or British English has long been the standard variety of English taught at schools in Japan. Thus, it is no surprise

that some of the participants who chose the Inner Circle English selected familiarity while there is no possible explanation as to why some participants in the Outer Circle group selected *familiarity* given the fact that none of the participants had never been taught by Indian English speakers. A majority of the participants in the Outer Circle group, however, appears to value *clarity*. They may have chosen Indian English because it sounded clearer or more intelligible to them and thus they assumed it would be easier to learn.

**Table 2**

Relationships between linguistic factors and the most desirable English accent for learning

Linguistic Factors	Inner Circle	Outer Circle	Expanding Circle	Total
Authenticity	59 (33.5%)	5 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	64 (36.0%)
Clarity	1 (0.5%)	99 (55.6%)	3 (1.7%)	103 (57.8%)
Familiarity	4 (2.7%)	6 (3.0%)	1 (0.5%)	11 (6.2%)
Total	64 (36.0%)	110 (61.8%)	4 (2.2%)	178 (100.0%)

**Individual Factor: English accent identification ability.** Table 3 shows the summary of participants' accent identification ability and their choice of the most desirable accents. There are five levels of identification ability: *No identification*, *Low*, *Middle*, *High* and *Highest*. Each of them corresponds to the number of correctly identified accents ranging from 0 to 4. For example, *No identification* means that participants could not correctly identify any of the four accents whereas *Highest* means participants managed to correctly identify all four accents.

As expected, not many participants were able to precisely identify which sample represents which variety of English. However, the vast majority of correctly identified accents were British and/or American accents. A notable point is that proportionately more participants with the two lowest identification ability groups—*No Identification and Low*—selected Outer Circle English as the desirable accent compared to Inner Circle English. As presented earlier, Indian English was perceived to be clearer than American or British English given the locus of association was found between Indian English and *clarity*. Hence, those two low identification groups appeared to have chosen Indian English for its perceived clarity. The result suggests that English learners with lower identification ability may well choose an English accent that is more understandable to them.

**Table 3**

Participants' English accent identification levels and the most desirable accent for learning

		Most Desirable Accent			Total
		Inner Circle	Outer Circle	Expanding Circle	
<u>Identification Level</u>	No Identification	9 (5.6%)	26 (15.0%)	0 (0.0%)	35 (20.6%)
	Low	16 (9.7%)	41 (22.5%)	1 (0.5%)	58 (32.7%)
	Middle	27 (15.1%)	26 (14.6%)	1 (0.5%)	54 (30.2%)
	High	8 (4.4%)	13 (7.5%)	0 (0.0%)	21 (11.9%)
	Highest	4 (2.2%)	4 (2.2%)	2 (1.2%)	10 (5.6%)
Total		64 (36.0%)	110 (61.8%)	4 (2.2%)	178 (100.0%)

**Socio-political factor: Native-speakerism.** After the researcher revealed which varieties of English the four sample English speeches represent, participants were allowed to change the order of their learning preferences that they had initially indicated. Table 4 shows the results of frequency analysis on participants' most desirable English accent for learning before and after the identification of the four accents.

**Table 4**

Most desirable English accent: Comparisons between pre and post identification

	Inner Circle	Outer Circle	Expanding Circle	Total
Before identification	64 (36.0%)	110 (61.8%)	4 (2.2%)	178 (100.0%)
After identification	93 (52.4%)	84 (47.1%)	1 (0.5%)	178 (100.0%)

A notable shift occurred in the numbers in Outer Circle English and Inner Circle English. After the identification of the sample speeches, 29 participants—26 from the Outer Circle group and three from the Expanding Circle group—changed their initial choice and selected Inner Circle English (either American or British) as the most desirable English accent for learning. This indicates that the identification of the samples affected the participants' preferences. In other words, the knowledge of which sample represents what English variety appeared to have caused this shift.

In order to further examine the cause of this shift, the researcher analyzed the comments obtained from 29 participants who changed their initial choice. Table 5 presents a summary list of participants' comments explaining their reasons for the change. Some of the comments were virtually the same in meaning. Thus, they were summarized into one statement. These 29 participants initially chose Outer Circle or Expanding Circle as the most desirable English to learn. However, after the identification of the samples, they moved to the Inner Circle group.

As the comments clearly indicate, the participants uniformly displayed positive attitudes towards native varieties of English by ascribing a privileged status to American or British English. In addition, the participants collectively expressed that native English accents are most suited for English language learning. Based on the nature of the comments, the socially created image that they have about American or British English as the authentic English is what seems to have determined their attitudes and prompted the shift. In other words, the shift from their initial attitudinal decisions could be

attributed to the influence of native-speakerism.

**Table 5**

Participants' reasons for selecting American or British English accents

a. If I were to learn English, I want to learn native speaker English.
b. I feel like American English is the real/authentic English. So I want to learn native speaker English.
c. American English is the most common accent of all. That is why.
d. I want to learn British English. That's the REAL English.
e. I don't think Japanese English works in a practical situation. But I think British or American English works in the real life communicative situation.
f. I chose Indian English but I want to learn American English.
g. I want to learn English spoken by people who really use it.
h. I hear Japanese English all the time. I want to learn American English as much as possible.
i. American or British English is suited for education.
j. American English is the official English. So it's the most desirable English to learn.
k. I feel like American or British English is "ah that's more like it!" but Indian or Japanese English? Nah.

## Discussion

The present research has identified several factors associated with participants' attitudinal decisions: a) *familiarity*, b) *clarity*, c) *authenticity*, d) *ability to identify English accents*, and e) *native-speakerism*. The findings suggest that JELLS' attitudinal decisions are a result of complex interplay of personal and social factors; learners do not simply follow the same value system or the allegedly pervasive ELT ideology—native-speakerism—in determining their attitudes towards English varieties. Thus, learners' attitudes toward English varieties may well vary depending on their personal values and purposes for learning English. Ellis (2008) stated that learners' beliefs emerge from a variety of sources and they are "situational" and "dynamic" (p. 22). A similar point was raised by Kasai, Lee, & Kim (2011) who argued that students' perceptions regarding native and non-native English are not fixed but highly contextual. The attitudes of English learners towards varieties of English, therefore, are diverse and it manifests as a result of the intricate interaction of social and personal factors rather than a single unifying factor—the native-centric ideology.

Many language education institutions in Japan often uphold *native speaker only policy* and exclude potential English speaking teachers from Outer and/or Expanding Circle countries. (Braine, 1999). This echoes a recurrent argument that native-speakerism has been a major force which affects the hiring practices of language schools in many English as a foreign language countries (Braine, 1999). In the case of Japan, the ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has been placing native English speaking teachers in public schools under the banner of the JET program (McConnell, 1995; Yano, 1992). Also, in Japanese higher education, native speaker varieties of English

are predominantly chosen as the classroom model without a critical evaluation of the pedagogical decision. In the face of the unquestioned norm, some researchers argue that English learners should be familiarized with various types of English including native and non-native accents since the speech community of English speakers in the world represents diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Crystal, 2003, Matsuda, 2017). However, even when the inclusion of other varieties of English is recommended, school administrators typically refuse such recommendation claiming that students want to be taught by native speakers (Braine, 1999). In relation to this issue, the present study suggests that native-speakerism has indeed some level of impact on learners' attitudes as seen in the shift occurred after the identification of the speech samples reflecting how they view native English accents. However, the study also shows that there is no general consensus as to what variety of English students wish to learn. In fact, students seem to make a more complex and varied decision regarding the ideal English to learn while weighing the particular English variety's social standing to linguistic qualities as they perceive. JELLs' attitudes are thus possibly determined through a dynamic interplay of individual as well as socio-political factors in the process of establishing their L2 identity. Through the lens of postmodern perspectives on language and identity, Morgan (2001), for instance, states:

We also think about language differently and in ways that parallel the dynamics of identity. Critical theorists emphasize that language is a social practice, rather than a neutral product of mind or nature. Language is used to *position* people, defining what is possible and desirable for individuals and communities (p. 42).

The relationship between L2 pronunciation and L2 identity has been widely studied from linguistic, social, and/or political perspectives. The results of the previous studies repeatedly showed that L2 pronunciation is inextricably linked to L2 identity (e.g., Jenkins, 2000). Correspondingly, it raises an important ethical question regarding the educational right of English learners and of active construction of their L2 identity. For example, is it a justifiable practice to force a particular English variety on learners when some may wish to learn a different variety of English for their personal reasons or purpose of learning? If so, what is a justification for such practice?

The present research has shown that learners' choice of ideal accent for learning varies as some value *authenticity* while others value *clarity* suggesting that their construction of L2 identity may well be on different paths—to become a native-like speaker and/or to become an intelligible speaker of English. Under native-centric ELT practices and English education in general, it can be argued that students are not given a fair opportunity to determine what is *possible* and *desirable* in their own right. English language education particularly in Japan, in this sense, is a highly top-down practice which may deprive students of the right to choose and actively construct their L2 identity. What perhaps is lacking in the current ELT practice in Japan is the awareness of *de facto* role of the English language wherein anyone who is an effective English user should have equal access to the vast speech community of English speakers around the globe. Learners may choose to pursue a native-like accent as an individual choice to construct his/her L2 identity. In the same manner, learners may choose not to. As the

present study demonstrated, JELLS' perceptions of ideal English accents for learning are highly value-laden. In addition, considering the significant connection between L2 pronunciation and L2 identity, ELT practitioners in Japan may need to revisit their assumption of the essential goal of English teaching, and how it may influence students' L2 identity development in their learning process.

## Conclusion

The present research examined JELL's attitudes towards four different English accents with an aim to identify factors associated with their perceived ideal accents for English language learning. The study found that JELL's attitudinal decisions and associated reasons vary depending on their perceived value of each accent in terms of its linguistic quality and/or sociopolitical status. One major limitation to be noted in this space is that the speech samples used in the study were all female speakers and only one sample was used per English variety. Therefore, these samples alone were hardly representative of the corresponding English varieties. Future studies should be conducted while attending to the limitation above and continue to investigate factors associated with the attitudes of English learners towards varieties of English. Such studies should advance our understanding of the nature of learner attitude and may prove useful to critically evaluate the current status of underlying ELT ideology in Japan, and perhaps its impact on the construction of JELLS' L2 identity.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire (Japanese)

日本人英語学習者の英語アクセントへの態度についてのアンケート

このアンケートの目的は、非英語圏の英語学習者の多様な英語アクセントへの態度をより深く理解することにあります。アンケートは二部構成になっており  
アンケート実施中は、他の人との意見の交換や私語等控えて頂くようお願いいたします。

### セクション 1

1. あなたは、何歳ですか。 \_\_\_\_\_ 歳
2. あなたの現在の学年は何ですか。 \_\_\_\_\_ 年
3. これまで、学校で何年英語を勉強してきましたか。 \_\_\_\_\_ 年
4. これまで、学校以外の場所（語学学校・塾・家庭教師等）で何年英語を勉強してきましたか。 \_\_\_\_\_ 年

### セクション 2

このセクションでは、4つのスピーチを聞き比べ、あなたが学習したいという英語の好みの順にそれぞれのスピーチを格付けしてください。4つのスピーチの話し手は同じ原稿を読み上げます（下記参照）。スピーチのサンプルは二回だけしか、放送されませんので注意してお聞きください。最初の放送から約1分間の小休止の後再度全てのサンプルが放送されます。聞き取りが終了したら、それぞれの（ ）の中に1～4の数字を割り当ててください。1は「最も学習に好ましいと思うもの」、4は「最も学習に好ましくないもの」を意味するものとします。

\*Well, here's a story for you: Sarah Perry was a veterinary nurse who had been working daily at an old zoo in a deserted district of the territory, so she was very happy to start a new job at a superb private practice in North Square near the Duke Street Tower. That area was much nearer for her and more to her liking. Even so, on her first morning, she felt stressed. She ate a bowl of porridge, checked herself in the mirror and washed her face in a hurry. Then she put on a plain yellow dress and a fleece jacket, picked up her kit and headed for work.

\*Well, here's a story for you (この部分が聞こえないサンプルもありますのでご注意ください)

5. 下記の指標を下に4つのサンプルを学習したいと思う順に数字を入れて下さい。

最も学習に好ましい 1 2 3 4 最も学習に好ましくない

Sample A ( ) Sample B ( ) Sample C ( ) Sample D ( )

6. 何故、上記の順番を選んだのですか？最も適切な理由に☑して下さい。

よく知っているような気がするから。

わかりやすいと思ったから。 本物の英語という感じがするから。

その他（具体的に理由を記入）\_\_\_\_\_

7. 4つのサンプルを読み上げた話し手は、それぞれどこの国の人だと思いますか。推測で答えても構いません。全く予想がつかない場合は、この質問を飛ばして先に進んでください。（例：Sample A: 韓国）

Sample A:

Sample C:

Sample B:

Sample D:

注意：ここで一旦、記入をやめてください。それぞれのサンプルの話し手がどこから来たかを明示しますので、答えを聞いた後、続く質問に答えてください。

8. それぞれのサンプルがどこの国の英語か明示されました。この情報により、あなたの学習への好みの順序を再度変更したい場合はここで行ってください。あなたの、答えに変化がない場合はここでアンケートは終了となります。

最も学習に好ましい 1 2 3 4 最も学習に好ましくない

Sample A ( ) Sample B ( ) Sample C ( ) Sample D ( )

9. どうして、順序を変更したのか出来限り詳しく説明してください。

ご協力大変にありがとうございました。

