

Developing language awareness: A study of Japanese students' perceptions toward English language education

Mieko Yamada⁴³

Abstract

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In globalized societies where English users and users are diverse, promoting intercultural communication skills becomes important in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education curricula. Drawing on discussions of language awareness, this article explores how Japanese EFL teacher trainees perceive their own English learning and use and how they plan to structure their future English teaching within a multicultural and multilingual Japan. To elicit actual voices and experiences of EFL teacher candidates, in-depth interviews were conducted with Japanese students who were enrolled in the English language teaching courses at one of Japan's national universities. The article discusses the findings from interviews, and suggests that as a part of EFL teacher training, both teachers and learners should be encouraged to foster language attitudes in order to establish more egalitarian intercultural relationships among English users.

Keywords

language awareness, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), intercultural communication, Japan

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43 *Purdue University Fort Wayne, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, 2101 East Coliseum Boulevard, Fort Wayne, IN, 46805-1499, Phone (office): 260-481-0147/Fax: 260-481-6985, email: yamadam@pfw.edu*

Preliminary notes

According to Gudykunst, B. W. (2003, vii), “[i]ntercultural communication generally involves face-to-face communication between people from different national cultures, but the term also is used frequently to include all aspects of the study of culture and communication. One major area of research within the broad rubric intercultural communication is cross-cultural communication”. Based on this definition, the term, “intercultural communication”, is used in this paper.

Japan’s education is based on the 6-3-3 system: six years in elementary school (*shogakko*), three years in junior high school (*chugakko*), and three years in high school (*kotogakko*). Students at the age of 7-12 years old (i.e., first to sixth grade) typically go to elementary school, those who are 13-15 years old go to junior high school, and those who are 16-18 years old go to high school. The compulsory education period is nine years in elementary school and junior high school. According to the most recent course of study (MEXT, 2017), junior high school students take a total of 140 classes per year.

ALTs are mostly hired through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, which is administered by governmental authorities (see <http://jetprogramme.org/en/>). According to MEXT (2016), the number of ALTs who were placed at all levels of school was 18,484 in 2016 and increased by about 0.5% compared with the previous year. As of 2015, the ALT placement rate was 61.7 % at elementary school, 22.1% at junior high school, and 9.7% at high school.

Introduction

In a globalized era, individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds use English in various contexts and for various purposes. Because of the diversity of English uses and users, the importance of intercultural communication¹ skills has become stressed in the fields of linguistics and language education (e.g., Crystal, 2003; Breidbach, Elsner, & Young, 2011; Friedrich, 2007; Gomes de Matos, 2000, 2002). One primary goal of English language education is how it can prepare students with the attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed for making egalitarian intercultural relationships.

In Japan, the promotion of English language education has intensified. Because English is believed to be the language used for global communication, developing students' English proficiency is considered key for Japan's future. The Japanese government continues to implement reforms in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education throughout all levels of schools (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2013, 2014). To create English-speaking environments in Japanese EFL classrooms, Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), who are native speakers of English, are being set. In addition, local volunteers who do speak fluent English (e.g. Japanese and/or other non-native English speakers) are also considered important resources (MEXT, 2013). In this sense, the cultural and ethnic diversity of various English speakers living in local communities appears to be recognized. Japanese teachers are required to co-teach English with ALTs in order to offer communication activities in English. Given such situations, how do Japanese teacher trainees cultivate their English ability and prepare for English-speaking intercultural interactions and their future teaching?

This paper investigates how Japanese EFL teacher trainees perceive their own English learning and use and how they plan to structure their future English teaching within a multicultural and multilingual Japan. In-depth interviews were conducted with Japanese university students who were enrolled in the English language teaching courses in order to elicit their actual voices and the experiences related to their English learning. The strengths of this research rely on incorporating the voices of language learners in classrooms, which is increasingly appreciated as a useful method for teaching communicative skills in a target language (Breidbach, 2011; Hatano, 2009; Osborn, 2006). Especially because they are the ones who will teach English in Japanese schools, their perceptions of their own English proficiency and learning experience will likely influence their self-images and attitudes toward teaching (Breidbach, 2011; Chun, 2014; Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011). This paper attempts to provide additional insights for analyses of English uses and users and to further explore the place of English language education within multicultural and multilingual settings.

1. English language education in Japan

As Japan's interaction has increased in an international community, communication skills in English have become essential. The emphasis of English learning has shifted from grammar-based to practical skill-based. The 1989 course of study guideline indicated the importance of the acquisition of communicative skills in English, and in the same year, the subject "Oral Communication" in English was introduced in high schools (Tanabe, 2003:336). English as a foreign language officially became compulsory in junior high schools² under the 1998 course of study, and implementation started in 2002 (MEXT, 2004). The age at which students begin to take English classes has become younger. Since 2011, English has been introduced into

elementary school curricula, and it has been taught as early as the fifth grade (MEXT, 2018). Furthermore, the Japanese government plans to proceed with a step-by-step reform of EFL education throughout elementary, junior high, and high schools to provide adequate support for international visitors and immigrants (MEXT, 2014).

English proficiency has all but become inevitable in Japan. To teach “*ikita eigo*” or living English within the domestic context of Japan (MEXT, 2018), native speakers of English as ALTs³ increasingly co-teach English with Japanese teachers in classrooms. Because English as “foreign language activities” has been introduced to the fifth and sixth graders in Japanese elementary schools since 2011 (MEXT, 2018), ALTs are even more heavily relied on by Japanese elementary school teachers in order to teach English communication. The Japanese government also schedules to place ALTs in all elementary schools by 2019 as well as increases the presence of ALTs in junior high and high school classrooms in order for students to use English in practical settings such as conversations, presentations, and discussions (MEXT, 2014).

However, this escalating promotion of English language education has neglected Japan’s own ethnic and linguistic diversity. Due to the transcultural flows of globalization, the growth in numbers of foreign visitors and immigrants has created ethnic and linguistic diversity in many parts of Japan. Because of the increased number of ethnic and linguistic minority students who are enrolled in public schools (Yoshimura 2011), it should be anticipated that those immigrant students with different native languages, other than Japanese, also learn English in Japanese schools. Given this situation, Japanese teachers need to recognize those students’ language learning experiences and language uses. If the emphasis of English learning and teaching continues in Japan, the role of English language education has to be reexamined from multicultural and multilingual perspectives.

2. Developing language awareness

Language awareness, i.e., awareness of the social context of language use and practice, has been stressed in the field of second and foreign language education (e.g., Breidbach, Elsner, & Young, 2011; Fairclough, 1999; Hawkins, 1984; Kubota & McKay, 2009; McKay, 2012). This concept was originally advanced to foster learners’ literacy development and value their own language repertoires. Conceptualizing language awareness, Hawkins (1984) argues that language should be taught as an integral subject, involving students’ native and target languages, and the individuals and their social environments in which they live. Moreover, Breidbach, Elsner, and Young (2011) explain that advanced language awareness promotes the learners’ consciousness of and sensitivity to their own learning experience and language use.

To help students develop their language potential, teachers play an important role in classrooms. Indeed, school or formal education is essentially political as an institution in which various groups attempt to regulate their cultures, histories, and visions of social justice (Apple, 1999). The school curriculum is built on selective customs, beliefs, and resources, mirroring the power and authority structures of the school and the society. Even though multiple traditions and realities exist, only certain knowledge gets to be legitimate as official knowledge. To encourage students to freely express their desires, needs, and interests, teachers should first recognize how power or authority shapes and limits knowledge taught in classrooms.

This further suggests that both language teachers and students need to cultivate a critical awareness of language. Critical language awareness enables them to acknowledge and challenge the unequal power structures and arrangements that are manifested in language education (Fairclough, 1999; Kubota & McKay, 2009). Fairclough (1999) explicates that global capitalism increasingly requires individuals to have an awareness of discourse because it creates new problems as well as possibilities for people. Thus, a critical awareness of discourse is necessary for exploring new knowledge and possibilities and also “for resisting the inclusions of the interests and rationalities of economic, governmental and other organisational systems into everyday life” (Fairclough, 1999:78). In this view, understanding diversity is crucial. Diversity embraces individuals’ cultural backgrounds, experiences, and thoughts regardless of one’s socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, religion, age, disability, and language (Page, 2011). It is the state in which people freely express themselves as the way they are and appreciate each other’s differences and similarities. Insufficient knowledge of diversified English uses and users will reinforce prejudice and discrimination about English speakers and also inhibit individuals from endorsing social fairness and justice. Therefore, critical language awareness encourages teachers and students to foster their cultural tolerance and prepare them for creating egalitarian intercultural relationships.

English as a second and foreign language teaching was historically based on the native-speaker model and the assumption that English language learners aim to achieve native-like proficiency (McKay, 2012). That is, native English-speaking teachers were viewed as the ideal language model in terms of pronunciation and communication. English-speaking communication primarily focused on interactions between native and non-native speakers. However, contemporary English uses increasingly occur in multicultural and multilingual situations. Therefore, English language instruction needs to pay attention to interactions between non-native and non-native speakers as well as between native and non-native speakers.

While the perception of English as the language for global communication has been dominant, the concerns of English adoption and its appropriate use have also emerged. According to Park and Wee (2012), three elements are applied in many situations to evaluate how a language is appropriately used: allegiance, competence, and authenticity. The appropriateness of English use would be determined by those who are naturally competent in the language because they are native to an English-speaking community, and therefore, speak authentic English. One’s nativeness is strongly linked to the authenticity of one’s language use, and it would definitely influence one’s perception of an appropriate use of language or level of language proficiency.

3. Attitudes toward English and its speakers

As English-speaking populations have diversified, the importance of egalitarian intercultural relationships has been highlighted. The term, Peace Linguistics, reflects an increased concern of issues for human rights and peace among linguists and language teachers (Crystal, 2003; Friedrich, 2007; Gomes de Matos, 2000, 2002). Peace Linguistics has emerged as a field of sociolinguistics which benefits from the knowledge of Peace Studies, and it aims to create and maintain peaceful relationships through language practices. This approach acknowledges language diversity and multilingualism in both international and intranational settings and stresses the need to cultivate attitudes which “respect the dignity of individual speakers and speech communities” (Crystal, 2003:355). In this sense, English users are required to learn and foster how to be responsible for their own language uses and interactions, rather than how to be proficient speakers of English.

Teaching about how to be responsible for egalitarian intercultural communication may be useful in Japanese EFL classrooms. Studies of Japanese attitudes in English-speaking intercultural communication (e.g., Hammond, 2006; Kobayashi, 2010; Kubota & McKay, 2009; Matsuda, 2003; Rivers & Ross, 2013; Simon-Maeda, 2004) have pointed to their racialized attitudes toward English speakers and the idealized images that Japanese have of native English speakers. In Japan, native English-speaking teachers are viewed as the ideal model in terms of pronunciation and teaching authentic or real English (Kubota & McKay, 2009). Moreover, English learners, as well as both native and nonnative English teachers, often believe in “the power of European-looking, ‘accent-free’ English teachers” (Kobayashi, 2010:325). When it comes to employment settings, an individual’s native or nonnative status is clearly used as part of the job qualifications for teaching conversational English (Simon-Maeda, 2004). These attitudes certainly reflect the images that Japanese construct of native English-speaking teachers, but they also reflect their perceptions of their own English uses as nonnative English-speakers. If Japanese students who wish to become EFL teachers view their own English use as “incorrect English that deviated from the ‘real’ English of native speakers” (Matsuda, 2003:493), this perception will likely lead them to devalue their own use of English and thus result in reinforcing language hierarchies among English speakers.

This privileging of particular groups or individuals serves to maintain a linguistic hierarchy and may also reinforce biases with regard to other groups and feelings of inferiority among the Japanese. In fact, the tendency to privileging people from particular regions, racial/ethnic groups, or of native/nonnative categories offers a potential for justifying an unjust social arrangement. Corson (1999:18) proposes a critical approach to social justice that would be “more respectful of minority group interests and more closely linked to the way the world actually is”. He continues:

A critical realist approach would consider the interests of those whose language varieties are different from the dominant one – whether they were nonstandard varieties of English, or quite different languages – because a critically real approach to social justice recognizes diversity as part of the reality of the human condition: language diversity no less than other forms of diversity. (Corson, 1999:21)

Therefore, it is reasonable that a variety of English uses and users should be discussed and analyzed in EFL classrooms. This could serve to prevent misconceptions and misunderstandings about the varieties of English speakers, including those of the Japanese learners themselves. Critical discussions could result in reduced prejudice and discrimination against nonnative speakers of English. If Japanese students were to treat nonnative English speakers as equally privileged, they might not only regard their own English use as comparable but also consider other nonnative speakers of English to be comparable to the native speakers.

4. Research setting and method

Based on the request of the director of the English Language Teacher Program at a regional university in Japan, individual interviews were conducted in the summer of 2015. Because this study targeted a population with specialist knowledge of the research issue, a nonprobability sampling was selected (Armstrong, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Three criteria were formed for soliciting participants, those who: 1) have taken EFL classes co-taught by ALTs and Japanese teachers during their Japanese schooling; 2) have taken an English teaching practicum; and 3) plan to take the prefectural examination and teach English in Japanese

schools after their graduation. Therefore, the targeted participants in this study were all potential EFL teachers.

Given the director's permission, I visited two courses specialized for English teaching practicum and distributed fliers to the potential interviewees. Those who were interested in being interviewed contacted me and scheduled dates and times. The interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured to allow participants to interpret the questions and respond as they wished. Three initial questions were asked to elicit responses and encourage insights in greater detail: 1) What did you experience in your English language classes through your schooling?; 2) How have you developed your English proficiency?; and 3) What contexts and situations have influenced your future English teaching? While these basic questions were asked of each student, probes were added as necessary for individual respondents. Student responses opened avenues for additional information. Each interview lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. The interviews were conducted in Japanese, and they were tape-recorded, transcribed, and translated from Japanese to English by the author.

To analyze the data, I began by reviewing the transcripts and identifying the essential themes that emerged from the interviews. I underscored statements and narratives that provide a more profound understanding of what the students experienced through their EFL learning, and then developed "clusters of meaning" from the statements/narratives into themes (Creswell, 2013:82). Out of 51 enrolled in the English teaching practicum courses, 19 students (9 males and 10 females, all in their 20s and 30s) met the above-mentioned criteria and agreed to participate in the interviews. In terms of overseas experience, 12 participants had studied abroad with durations from one to eight months, and their travel destinations were Australia, Canada, and the United States. The other seven had never been abroad. Three major themes emerged from the data, and these are the headings of the following discussion: 1) the role of native English-speaking teachers in Japanese EFL classrooms; 2) the role of Japanese teachers in English classrooms; and 3) English language education in a globalizing Japan.

Because the project was exploratory in nature, limitations should be acknowledged. The number of students interviewed was, of course, small, and any conclusions drawn must be considered tentative and exploratory. In addition, the data depend on how the interviewees made sense of their experience as Japanese EFL learners. Indeed, they were knowledgeable about Japanese education, particularly its EFL education. Thus, findings and conclusions might change, based on individuals with a different range of experiences. Nevertheless, this study provides a beginning understanding of some Japanese students' experiences in EFL classrooms, and how their experiences impact their perceptions of themselves as future EFL teachers.

5. Findings

5.1. The role of native English-speaking teachers in Japanese EFL classrooms

Generally, the students reported that native speakers as ALTs came to teach English language classes weekly or monthly. A few, however, did indicate that ALTs had not always been present, sometimes even throughout an academic term. Still, throughout elementary and junior high school years, all of them had experienced English classes with ALTs, even though the frequency of their visits varied. In their high school years, however, the students explained that they had little or no exposure to oral communication in English. About a half of them said they did not learn conversational English at high school even though they were enrolled in the Oral

Communication class. Although the mastery of English proficiency has been emphasized in the course of study guidelines and educational policies, most of the English language classes that the interviewees took were still grammar-based. They assumed that passing the *juken* (i.e., entrance examination) to get into a college or university was the priority. Therefore, the majority of the students admitted that they learned English only for getting a good grade or passing the *juken*. It was after studying at the university, they realized that learning conversational English would be necessary for communication with other English speakers.

There were four major merits of nonnative English speakers co-teaching with native English speakers. First, Japanese students feel that they are able to learn “real” and “authentic” English through communicating with native English speakers. Several interviewees mentioned that they felt they were learning English in an authentic setting if foreign teachers taught it in class. They praised native speakers’ pronunciation, calling it “clear”, “beautiful”, and “correct”. Student A remarked, “Native speakers’ pronunciation is clear and beautiful. It’s authentic!” Furthermore, he commented that students can compare different dialects and word usages, depending on where native English-speaking teachers are originally from. Student B explained that a benefit of co-teaching with an ALT was to demonstrate how foreign people speak English, exhibiting real English. He also mentioned that native speakers’ pronunciation is different from how Japanese people speak even though they may be quite fluent in English. Similarly, Student C expressed her desire:

When I first saw ALT and heard their speaking English, I thought, Wow! Cool! Their English sounded different from most Japanese EFL teachers’ pronunciation....I used to think it would be cool if I became a fluent English speaker.

The presence of native English speakers in class, then, was highly appreciated because it helped Japanese students learn authentic English use. For them, finding different ways of speaking English between Japanese teachers and native speakers motivates Japanese students to study English for its actual use.

As a second merit, native English-speaking teachers offer opportunities for Japanese EFL students to learn about attitudes, manners, and gestures in addition to English pronunciation while they engage in live conversations using English. Because they have to be spontaneous and responsive to other English speakers, they do not have time to wonder if they use grammatically correct English. Student D emphasized that Japanese students should try to use English as often as possible, rather than be afraid of making mistakes in their English use. She commented:

Many Japanese junior high and high school students attempt to speak grammatically correct English because this is how we have learned English through our schooling. I also used to be like that. But, during actual conversations, people do not always care whether their English is grammatically correct. So, I decide to take advantage of English-speaking environments so that I can learn how to respond in English as well as body language.

In other words, Japanese students need to be encouraged not to worry whether they speak perfect English. Rather, they should enjoy spontaneous conversations.

The third merit is that students are able to learn directly from native English speakers about their home countries and cultures. The interviewees felt that English learning was more effective when Japanese students heard directly from native English speakers talking about their home countries and cultures, rather than when Japanese EFL teachers tried to explain

foreign cultures to them. Student E said, “It is inspiring to Japanese students when they are able to directly talk with native English-speaking teachers and learn about their cultures”. Her observations suggest that Japanese students would tend to become more enthusiastic and pay more attention in class when native English-speaking teachers were present.

Finally, Japanese students are able to gain new English words and phrases through communicating with ALTs because native speakers do not necessarily use the same phrases or expressions. “Some students may often interact with other English speakers, but others have no chance at all to meet English speakers”, Student F said. To her, the presence of ALTs at school is critical because they help EFL learners develop their communication skills. Moreover, she compared her experience of learning sign language to English language acquisition. Student F explained:

I do volunteer to help people with disabilities. Once a week, I talk with hearing-impaired individuals using Japanese sign language. During our conversation, I often ask how they say things in the sign language. I learn a lot from them, and I find it fun! I think learning the English language is the same as learning sign language. While interacting with those people, I spontaneously learn new expressions. This does not reflect what you asked about an ideal English class because students cannot earn any grades in that situation...but such natural or practical settings will be beneficial for students to develop communication skills in English because they are usually motivated and eager to be able to use English.

Because of the limited chances of using English in many areas of Japan, this student thought that schools need to create more opportunities for students to interact with native English-speaking teachers.

Despite the positive effects of co-teaching with ALTs, several interviewees expressed some concerns, saying that the presence of native English-speaking teachers could also generate anxiety among students. Japanese students were unlikely to voluntarily talk to native speakers and even hesitated to speak English with them because they were so afraid to make grammatical mistakes and were also embarrassed about their pronunciation. Especially when speaking tests were given in front of native English-speaking teachers, Japanese students tended to become extremely nervous. Student G commented:

Japanese EFL teachers would be able to easily understand how nervous students are and how uncomfortable with speaking English in public because they are Japanese and have similar experience. However, ALTs may simply show negative reactions in their facial expressions when the English that Japanese students speak does not make sense to them.

Based on this observation, it is possible that Japanese EFL teachers may be more sympathetic about students’ feelings and circumstances because they too were once EFL students. By the same token, students would not talk to native English-speaking teachers directly even though they wanted to communicate with them. Instead, they would go to their Japanese teachers. For example, Student C reported that some Japanese students would become nervous when they see only native English-speaking teachers in class:

Looking back on my own experience during my elementary school years, I remember that I felt a shock when I first saw a native English-speaking teacher because they are foreign people. Although I wanted to practice my English with the native English-speaking teacher, I never talked to him because I was too nervous. I am not sure if this type of reaction is unique to Japanese, but whenever I saw non-Japanese people, I

used to feel very nervous and anxious...so I imagine that many Japanese students would feel nervous, and even afraid, that they might not understand what native English speakers were saying.

She continued that the level of discomfort would often depend on how well Japanese EFL teachers communicated with the ALTs. If the ALTs only spoke English in the classroom, most students would not understand them at all. Thus, prior to class, it appears that Japanese EFL teachers need to act as a bridge between their students and the ALTs during the class.

Given the interviewees' comments, the extent to which native English-speaking teachers understand the Japanese language seems important. In many cases, native teachers speak only English and understand little or no Japanese. Unless native English-speaking teachers can use some Japanese, they cannot fully make Japanese students understand what they say in English. Some interviewees even mentioned that native English-speaking teachers may not be so useful in Japanese classrooms because many Japanese students are not accustomed to native speakers' English pronunciation. Student C said, “Native English-speaking teachers do not necessarily know Japanese students' levels of understanding in English”. Student C felt that before coming to class, Japanese EFL teachers need to make time and discuss their teaching plans with native English-speaking teachers. Moreover, Japanese teachers should be required to specifically tell the native speakers of English what they are expected to do in class in order to work effectively. Similarly, Student H pointed out:

Native speakers do not necessarily speak correct English as written in textbooks. Because it is conversational English, it is not necessarily grammatically correct. If ALTs use casual English or slang, Japanese students may get confused because it has not been introduced in the textbooks.

Therefore, if Japanese EFL teachers expect ALTs to use certain English expressions, they need to explain how they want ALTs to be collaborative.

5.2. The role of Japanese teachers in English classrooms

The greatest strength of Japanese EFL teachers is of course their ability to speak both Japanese and English. When Japanese students do not understand what ALTs say in English, Japanese teachers can explain in Japanese. Although ALTs may speak some Japanese, in many cases, they are not fluent Japanese speakers. Student D responded, “Japanese students and teachers can communicate well because Japanese is their native language”. When Japanese students are stuck and cannot figure out meanings of English words or sentences, Japanese teachers can fully explain those in using Japanese. Based on the interviewees' observations, Japanese language learners appeared more comfortable when Japanese teachers were present in class because they spoke the same language.

Another strength of Japanese EFL teachers is related to their qualifications. According to the interviewees, Japanese teachers understand the Japanese educational system, and they can follow its educational expectations and policies while focusing on how effectively students can learn in the classrooms. Student I noted:

Because Japanese teachers are trained to become professional EFL teachers through Japanese education, they understand the nation's educational goals and cultural values. Native English-speaking teachers must be fluent in the language, but they are not necessarily teachers who learned various teaching methods when they were university students. I even wonder how many ALTs have learned about the characteristics of Japanese education before coming to Japan to teach English. They

may not know what Japanese educational goals are or what cultural values are considered important in Japanese education.

Thus, Japanese EFL teachers are perceived as professionals who easily capture the levels of student learning, such as how students understand certain items (or do not), and how teachers can help them study. In contrast, ALTs often do not have the same experience and educational training as Japanese teachers. To become competent EFL teachers, linguistic knowledge and skills are indeed important. However, teaching skills seem critical to the role of Japanese EFL teachers, which makes their role different from the role of ALTs.

Moreover, Japanese EFL teachers have already experienced learning English as students through their own schooling. In their English teaching, Japanese teachers can share their own stories with students, and they are able to show how they studied English when they were students. Student J explained:

Japanese teachers can offer their own views from a Japanese perspective by presenting how they acknowledge other countries as well as their home country. By doing so, Japanese students are able to compare how these teachers view different cultures with how those who are native speakers of English view themselves and their own cultures.

Because Japanese EFL teachers have also made efforts to improve their English, they are clearly better able to understand and share their students' struggles and troubles in English learning, especially with students who dislike or are not good at studying the language. To become competent EFL teachers, linguistic knowledge and skills are indeed important. However, teaching skills are also critical to the role of Japanese EFL teachers, which makes their role different from the role of ALTs.

Despite their qualifications, the interviewees pointed to Japanese EFL teachers' insufficient English proficiency as a major weakness. For example, Student K stated that Japanese teachers do not have the same English language ability as native speakers. Some Japanese EFL teachers can read English well but cannot speak it fluently. He continued, "Even though they try hard to practice and reach native-like English proficiency, it would be difficult to acquire the same level of proficiency. Japanese EFL teachers cannot show real English". Student L said "I think native speakers' pronunciation and intonation are beautiful". She further explained that some of her Japanese EFL teachers pronounced English in the same way they speak the Japanese characters, saying "*ai amu a suchudento*" [I am a student]. "Native speakers should teach how to pronounce English, rather than we, Japanese teachers, teach English pronunciation", she continued.

Most of the interviewees mentioned that Japanese EFL teachers cannot teach "proper", "real", or "authentic" English because they do not pronounce words the way native speakers do. Student M said, "If Japanese teachers speak English with a strong Japanese accent, they cannot make other English speakers understand". Student D even reported that she did not rely on what her Japanese teachers taught because "the English language taught by the Japanese teachers was not real". She continued:

How they pronounce English or how they communicate with other English speakers...if Japanese EFL teachers have studied abroad and learned proper pronunciation or communication in English, I'd consider them qualified to teach us conversational English, foreign cultures, and so forth. But I do not think that those

who have never been abroad are qualified to teach real English because their experience would lack the authenticity of English use.

From the students' perspective, to become a qualified EFL teacher in Japan, studying abroad seems critical for developing English language skills. However, in reality, there are not many teachers, especially elementary school teachers, who have experienced abroad. Still whether or not elementary school teachers have study abroad experience or training for English language teaching, they are now required to teach English to the fifth and sixth graders, while working with ALTs.

Some Japanese EFL teachers tend to teach English grammar and never speak English in class. In traditional English language teaching, Japanese teachers often focused on grammar, not conversational English. This tendency still happens to this day. Student N said:

I wonder if they are not confident or if they cannot speak it. Japanese children today go to *juku* or cram schools to take conversational English, and so they may pronounce English better than Japanese EFL teachers. Unlike native speakers of English, Japanese EFL teachers do not have to use English on their everyday lives for survival. They may have limitations in teaching English proficiency. They teach English for *juken* or passing entrance exams, rather than teaching practical and conversational English.

Although the ability to use both Japanese and English is considered a strength for Japanese EFL teachers, a balance of using both languages in class seemed to be a key for the students.

Given the strengths and weaknesses of native and nonnative English-speaking teachers, the interviewees did appear to see the need for both teachers in order for English to be effectively taught in Japanese schools. Student F explained that ALTs are useful when students learn how to pronounce English properly, whereas Japanese teachers are most useful in making the process of learning English more apparent and effective. When she was a high school student, her English teacher shared various approaches and useful textbooks to effective English learning for different purposes. “Learning from her, I have found whatever works for me”, she said. Thus, depending on their goals and preferences, students may need to be taught various approaches and techniques for studying English.

5.3. EFL education in a globalizing Japan

Three major values of English learning in a globalizing Japan emerged from the interviews. First, the students considered English useful for connecting people with different native languages because English is most widely used around the world. In fact, many of the interviewees said that English is the world's common language. Even though people speak different native languages, they can communicate with each other through English. Student D said, “Whichever countries we visit, knowing some English words would help us communicate with other people”. Moreover, learning English may be a good motivation for Japanese students to learn about other foreign cultures and languages. Even after graduating, they can study other languages, depending on their interests. In this sense, they can broaden their world views while gaining various ideas, opportunities, and possibilities. Even if they do not go abroad, they can connect with others through the internet, which often requires them to understand English.

Second, these students clearly see that English is strongly linked to their personal economic interests, such as their future careers. Because more and more Japanese corporations are

expanding their businesses overseas, increasing numbers of Japanese workers are going to be required to use English, especially within English-speaking countries. Somewhat less directly but no less important, political and economic demands also influence the nation's education system. Since 2011, elementary school teachers have been required to teach a Foreign Language Activities class (i.e., English language class) to fifth and sixth graders. Therefore, university students as well as elementary school teachers are now eager to obtain English language skills. Student E clearly stated the argument that English is important for global communication:

Although English is not so often used for interactions within Japan, English learning still benefits many Japanese. High English proficiency is commonly believed as one's strength, and this belief actually comes from Japanese corporate desire. If Japanese corporations expand their businesses overseas, they want to hire workers who can command of both Japanese and English in order to compete and increase high economic productivity in a global community.

Similarly, Student L stated that all Japanese should know English to some degree. She said, "I would feel inferior if I don't have the ability that other people already have..." When asked what she meant by "inferior", she responded, "I don't think it fair if we [Japanese] don't acquire English proficiency, but everybody else *naturally* has". She then told a story of a Chinese friend:

A Chinese student came to my high school. I assume that she had been in Japan since she was a junior high school student because she already spoke fluent Japanese. She seemed to get along well with other Japanese students, as if she were like everyone else without any trouble. That Chinese girl must have learned English since elementary school years because she spoke both English and Japanese fluently. At the end, she passed the entrance exam and got into a good university in Japan.

She clearly appeared to observe how one's social environments could shape one's educational opportunities and future careers.

Finally, learning English is important because of the *juken*, Japan's entrance examination system. In short, Japanese students who prepare for entrance exams need solid English reading and writing skills as well as conversational skills such as listening and speaking. While English teaching tends to emphasize the importance of developing communication skills in English, this other benefit of English learning practices in Japan should be mentioned. Student N explained:

Unless EFL teachers teach students English for passing exams, their parents or family members will complain about their teaching. Of course, it must be fun for children to only learn about conversational English. Given this situation, it will be hard for teachers to show outcomes to students' parents. However, it's easier for parents to find results through the *juken* system.

Because of the emphasized importance of English proficiency, Japanese families often invest considerable time and money in their children's English learning, and therefore, they want to see positive outcomes of their investments.

In contrast, some students showed an ambivalence regarding Japan's tendency of emphasizing only English. Student C commented:

I think learning English is a good thing, but it may be meaningless for those who are not interested in English at all. No matter how hard teachers, administrators, and politicians emphasize the importance of English proficiency and encourage Japanese

students to learn the language, English is hardly used in Japan, isn't it? If one thinks it meaningless, he or she would not value learning about it at all. In Japan, there are only Japanese...because almost all are Japanese, there is almost no chance to use English in Japan even though I think it valuable to learn English.

For Student C, English learning is useful because it enables students to access resources — information and people — primarily available in English. Knowing only one language (i.e., Japanese) would limit one's capacity and future opportunity. However, learning English would be meaningless for those who don't value such opportunities.

Another student, Student H, expressed a different view of English learning only, acknowledging that Japan pays little attention to opportunities for learning other languages: “I am hoping to find English learning as fun as I feel with learning Japanese sign language. I believe that learning about other languages will expand my life and future career goals”. She found both English and sign language equally important.

6. Discussion

According to the interviews with the Japanese teacher trainees, both Assistant Language Teachers and Japanese teachers were found to be important for efficient English learning and teaching although they fill different roles. The students tended to believe that Assistant Language Teachers could teach “correct” and “proper” English because they are native to the language. Moreover, they felt they were exposed to “real” and “authentic” English only when they were taught English by those native speakers. In contrast, Japanese EFL teachers better understood their students and their education system and thus were able to help them learn. However, despite their acknowledgement of Japanese EFL teachers' qualifications, many of the interviewees pointed to Japanese teachers' insufficient English proficiency and incorrect pronunciation. Without the presence of native English speakers, the students appeared to believe that authentic English-speaking situations would not exist in the classroom.

This conceptualization of authentic English may be linked to the notion of *living* English which is clearly indicated in the nation's EFL education policy (e.g., MEXT, 2003, 2008). Within the EFL context where English is rarely used outside the classroom, Japanese EFL learners are mainly exposed to the native variety of English through teaching materials and native English-speaking instructors (Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011). The interviewees' perceptions of authentic English may also be influenced by the social environment where one's nativeness is highly emphasized. Consequently, their limited exposure to nonnative varieties often results in devaluing their own English use as a nonnative variety. If they do not consider that Japanese EFL teachers can offer authentic English, Japanese EFL students do not see themselves as being able to participate in authentic English-speaking interactions. This limited view of authentic English is problematic to the Japanese EFL learners who especially wish to become EFL teachers because it will influence their perceptions of their own language use and also shape their perspectives on English language teaching and assessments (Chun, 2014; Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011).

The authenticity of language use, proficiency, and nativeness are all interrelated. Widdowson (1998) argued that the authenticity of language use should be established in each localized setting. People use language to engage in social interactions and make appropriate connections within the context of shared perceptions and knowledge. Thus, they localize or indigenize language to fit it into their own uses for their own communities. In turn, the context of language is built from the local knowledge of the particular community in which it is located. In this sense, bringing authentic or real language into the classroom is difficult because “[t]he

authenticity or reality of language use in its normal pragmatic functioning depends on its being localised within a particular discourse community” (Widdowson, 1998:711), and the classroom often cannot provide the contextual conditions for it:

Listeners can only authenticate it as discourse if they are insiders. But learners are outsiders, by definition, not members of user communities. So the language that is authentic for native speaker users cannot possibly be authentic for listeners.

From this view, native English-speaking teachers cannot even offer authentic English to learners because it would not be authentic or real *in that particular context*. In other words, when learners of a new language argue that only native speakers’ speech is authentic, they understand “authentic” incorrectly. Thus, teachers and learners must redefine the concept of authenticity. Listeners (in this case Japanese EFL teachers and learners) are responsible for authenticating the English use for their own discourse.

Rather than debating whether or how authentic English should be brought in the classroom, those concerned with the issue of the authenticity of English use should focus their attention on interactions or situations that involve multiple types of English speakers. The language that nonnative or Japanese EFL students speak within their social contexts is a form of authentic or *living* English. In this sense, EFL teachers are to help their students not just prepare to *engage authentically* in situations that are relevant to their own contexts but also learn how to be responsible for their language uses in order to create and maintain egalitarian intercultural relationships. Indeed, it would be most appropriate for both teachers and students to incorporate their voices and experiences in the language classroom, as these are situations that are authentic in their everyday lives. In that way, the students would find their language-learning experiences to be more valuable.

In light of this argument, it would seem that Japanese EFL teachers, should teach their students using more practical situations in which they focus on real-world interactions in English. Although limited, English-speaking situations certainly do take place in Japan, and Japanese EFL teachers could provide such situations where their students could improvise in their use of English. For example, all the interviewees recognized that there were residents in their communities whose native languages were neither Japanese nor English (such as Chinese, Brazilian, and Korean). By using these actual examples, to set up mock conversations, Japanese teachers could draw students’ attention to multicultural exchanges and the social problems related to them. In doing so, students would not only become more aware of social trends but also attempt to learn how to express their thoughts and feelings by using English as well as their native language.

Overvaluing or idealizing native English-speaking people greatly affects the motivations and identities of Japanese EFL learners. It also degrades the circumstances of other language-speaking communities such as those of domestic Koreans, Chinese, and Brazilians. Because issues of racism have become more prominent in Japan (e.g., Hammond, 2006; Houghton & Rivers, 2013; Rivers & Ross, 2013), it would be strategically important to adopt an approach to teaching English that incorporates educating about diversity and social justice. This could lead to teaching about the human rights of all language users, including those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Crystal, 2003; Friedrich, 2007; Gomes de Matos, 2000, 2002).

Learning about the varieties of English uses and users offers an opportunity for all English speakers, both native and nonnative, to raise awareness of issues of diversity and social justice when intercultural communication takes place (Corson, 1999). Drawing on this perspective, I

maintain that the pursuit of egalitarian intercultural relationships among English speakers is crucial in globalized societies. Stereotypes and misinterpretations regarding native and nonnative speakers have the potential for reinforcing negative treatments against any individual speakers of English. Moreover, any sense of inherent inferiority with respect to nonnative pronunciation or semantic choices connotes a belief in the inequality between communicators and thus points to an issue of human rights in English teaching. Therefore, understanding EFL learners' perceptions of native and nonnative speakers is a first step to create more equitable situations for all speakers of English.

Conclusion

Because the sample of students on whom this study is based is small, it is not clear to what extent Japanese students who study English are able to anticipate and prepare for racial and ethnic conflicts and tensions that might occur during their interactions with people from different backgrounds. However, without first understanding domestic social relations, EFL students would certainly be less able to maintain positive intercultural communications let alone to recognize the nature of racial and ethnic conflicts in global settings. Limited though the data may be, a collaborative and locally-situated approach to EFL training would appear to help researchers conduct more thorough analyses of English uses and users and to possibly seek new meanings and roles for English language education. Further research is needed to investigate the impact of diversity on both individuals and the social structures in which they are imbedded. For example, questions remain about how the racial and ethnic diversity of English speakers affects individuals' decisions on language choices and their understanding of social justice, and how, too, these diversities influence the development of language practices, policies, and curricula.

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