

# **Japanese EFL Learners' Perceptions of English as an International Language: The Gap between the Societal Demands and the Classroom Realities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Although EFL learners are now being exposed to various types of English that are used in actual international communication, students of EFL in Japan have not yet been widely exposed to concepts such as EIL (English as an International Language), World Englishes, and Globish. This is due to the fact that in English Language Teaching in Japan, there seems to remain a preference for English spoken by native-speakers, and a lack of awareness amongst students as well as teachers of how diverse the English language really is. Currently, EFL learning contexts in Japan do not necessarily expose learners to the type of English that is recognized at the societal level as a tool for international communication. In this article, I explore Japanese EFL learners' perceptions of English, and address several problems in Japanese classrooms with respect to reconciling the gap between English as a tool for international communication and English as an academic subject. I conclude with suggestions on how to close the gap between societal demands and the realities that exist in Japanese schools.

## **INTRODUCTION**

With the rise of globalization accompanying the strong demand for English as a fundamental tool for international communication, the concepts of EIL (English as an international language), ELF (English as a lingua franca), and WE (World Englishes)

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are spreading worldwide. Consequently, new varieties of localized English are now emerging and used worldwide for the purpose of international communication. In terms of Japan, however, despite the increase in opportunities to encounter various types of English in different domains, English spoken by non-native speakers is not perceived positively by Japanese learners overall (Chiba, Matsuura, & Yamamoto, 1995). Such perception might be due to classroom practices in Japanese EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts, which have been sometimes criticized for their “insufficiency of contact hours, lack of intensity, and few chances to make use of what children have learned” (Yano, 2009, p. 246). Whereas the Japanese society, especially business sector, demands *functional* English used as a communication tool, school institutions seem to present it just as a school subject for meeting high-stakes exams. In other words, there is a gap between “the stated goals of educational policies” which seems to reflect the societal demands on the one hand and “actual teaching practice” on the other (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009, p. 172).

Regarding this gap between inside and outside of the classroom, Matsuda (2009) has argued that although English proficiency as an essential skill for Japanese people is demanded quite strongly in the business sector, “it is played down” in the educational sector (p. 37). The gap between these two sectors might imply the difference in terms of what aspect of English is valued; whereas the former may value the functional aspect of English, the latter might value the linguistic or cultural assets believed to be involved in this language.

McKay and Bokhorst-Heng (2008) have mentioned that “the distinction between English-medium instruction versus learning English as a subject often resulted in different standards of pedagogy, learning and proficiency for different sectors of society” (p. 182). Indeed, recently, more and more Japanese parents are sending their children to English conversation schools on the ground that these schools “provide language instruction that differs from that based on the grammar-translation method that is traditionally used at school” (Seargeant, 2005, p. 335). This phenomenon can be viewed as a criticism toward Japanese EFL classrooms in schools, where English is presented as an *ends* which is only assessed on high-stakes exams, rather than a *tool* for the international communication.

According to Seargeant (2008), people's perceptions of a language are “framed by public discourse about the language” (p. 122). That is, how Japanese people perceive English is constructed by the representation of English in overall society. Furthermore, in EFL contexts where English exposure outside the classroom is limited, the impact of how school institutions treat English is significant. Given this strong influence of classroom practices on learners' perceptions of English, there is no doubt that teachers need to be more sensitive to the existing gap between what the society demands and what the classroom provides.

Thus, in order to reduce the gap between the societal demands and the classroom realities, this article attempts to unpack the complexities of Japanese EFL classrooms, in which Japanese learners are not necessarily presented with English as a tool for international communication. First, I explore Japanese EFL learners' perceptions of

English by paying attention to how they perceive English spoken by native speakers and non-native speakers respectively. Then, I focus on classroom practices which have a great impact on learners' perceptions of English and address problems that hinder innovative changes in Japanese EFL classrooms. Following that, I conclude with pedagogical implications in terms of how teachers can increase learners' awareness that various types of English are now being used internationally and should be equally tolerated as they all play a significant role in international communication.

## **JAPANESE PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH AS A LANGUAGE OF THE INNER CIRCLE**

Under globalization in which “a multidimensional set of social processes that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges” (Steger, 2003, p. 13) is taking place, a common tool is essential for international communication. With economic and technological progress, Japan is no exception; more people have encountered various types of English on various occasions, which would result in the overall social demand for EIL, or *English for international communication*. According to Yano (2001), *English for international communication*, which seems fundamentally equivalent to EIL, refers to English that is “free from the sociocultural constraints of any English-speaking society's norms of communicative behavior” and that “accommodates any varieties of English as far as they are comprehensible to the educated speakers of any other varieties” (p.129).

However, despite the fact that English is not just spoken by native speakers, most Japanese seem to regard English as a language of the people in the Inner Circle under Kachru's classification (i.e. the people speaking English as a native language, such as in the U.S., and the U.K.). Indeed, the previous study on Japanese learners has shown that native speakers' English tends to be perceived as *the standard* and that the closer to native-English, the better (Evans & Imai, 2011; Rivers, 2011; Yoshikawa, 2005). As Rivers (2011) has argued, the English language represented by native English speakers plays “an influential role in the shaping of an idealized linguistic model within Japan” (p. 388).

Contrary to this strong association of English with the Inner Circle, English spoken by non-natives, or the people in “the Outer or Expanding Circle” under Kachru's classification (i.e. the people speaking English for intra-national communication, or people speaking it as a second / foreign language), is not perceived positively (Chiba et al. 1995; Matsuda, 2003b). According to Shibata's (2009) study, JTEs (Japanese teachers of English) at senior high school are reluctant to approve of non-native ALTs (assistant language teachers from the Outer or Expanding Circle) in terms of teaching English in classrooms even though their English is grammatically correct. Such reluctance seems to be derived from the pedagogical view point that

learners should be provided with a *role-model* input (i.e. native speakers' English). That is, as Yano (2009) has pointed out, the "functional clarity and international intelligibility" of newly emerging varieties of English particularly used in the Expanding Circle has not got enough attention in Japan (p. 248).

The JTEs' preference for native speakers' English seem to be consistent with the Japanese learners' perceptions of English; Yoshikawa's (2005) study on his university students in the department of World Englishes has shown that even though students learn about the concept of WE (World Englishes) as a requirement and attend the language seminars held in the Outer Circle countries, they have "a stronger preference for traditional English varieties" while showing "lower tolerance of New Englishes" (p. 360). Considering that these students have more opportunities to know the concept of WE by being exposed to various types of English than students majoring other subjects, this finding may suggest that the association of English with the Inner Circle has taken firm hold among Japanese people.

This tendency to regard English as the language of the Inner Circle could be interpreted to mean that "nonnative speakers are viewed as lacking skills in comparison with native English-speaking teachers" (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008, p. 183). The people's indifference or intolerance of English in the Outer or Expanding Circle is assumed to be affected by the lack of conscious exposure to English spoken by non-natives. In other words, classroom practices in school settings, which seem to unconsciously provide native speakers' English, might contribute to the present reality that the concept of EIL, which attempts to "legitimize a pluricentric view of English" (McKay, 2010, p. 91), has not yet been ingrained among Japanese people.

Outside school contexts, however, the demand for EIL seems to be growing as globalization proceeds. Thus, what is occurring in the outside world is not reflected in the Japanese EFL classroom at school. If "the diversity of Englishes owes much to the ongoing contact among diverse users of Englishes with users of other Englishes and languages" (Matsuda & Matsuda, 2010, p. 373), the educational emphasis in current Japanese EFL classrooms appear to be contradictory to what is occurring worldwide. It seems that *homogeneity* rather than *diversity* is being promoted at school. In this sense, our current EFL classrooms should be criticized for the lack of opportunities for learners to know what varieties of English are being used in actual international communication. Given such insufficient exposure to diversity of English in the classroom, it could be a natural consequence that the perception of English as the property of people in the Inner Circle is further fortified among Japanese people.

This lack of consideration about the concept of EIL in the classroom practices is partly due to high-stakes examinations such as universities' entrance examinations. Indeed, in order to put more emphasis on the communicative aspects of English, there have been some changes in terms of the format or assessment approach, such as the introduction of listening tests to the National Center Test since 2006, and the use of essay-writing or face-to-face interviews for the recommended admission test, or so-called AO (Admission Office) test taking place in some universities. However, these are not enough to change the overall tendency to mainly assess examinees' linguistic

knowledge represented by grammatical knowledge and reading comprehension. As a consequence, in order to get learners ready for these tests, most teachers end up in using a conventional *yakudoku* or a grammar-translation approach while they feel the necessity of teaching English for communicative purposes. This pressure to get learners ready for high-stakes tests prevent them from implementing CLT (communicative language teaching), which the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is trying to promote in its government language education policy for the enhancement of communicative skills in English among secondary students.

These classroom practices not only contradict the societal demands, but invites learners' mistrust towards EFL classrooms at school. In Kikuchi's (2009) study, one college student criticized the *yakudoku* method, looking back on the lessons at his senior high school, saying that this conventionally used method deprived learners of "any chance to engage in genuine communication in the target language" (p. 466). This student's criticism of classroom practices implies that the existing discrepancy between the *demand* from society or even learners and the *supply* from the EFL classrooms is an issue that must be addressed immediately. If the use of the *yakudoku* method is mainly due to high-stakes examinations, changes should be considered in designing the tests. As Matsuda (2003a) has suggested, the innovative mode of assessment which can assess communicative effectiveness in an international context (e.g. role play, oral presentation) "may encourage students to focus on language functions that include but go beyond grammatical accuracy" (p. 724). Such innovative changes should be made in the high-stakes exams in the future.

Given that various types of English are currently used in international communication, efforts to raise learners' awareness of various types of English should be immediately considered. As Chiba et al (1995) have stated, it is "a rather arduous task to arouse students' attention to world Englishes" (p. 77). However, the classroom reality is quite opposite. Matsuda (2003b) has pointed out that most of the English used in teaching materials is American or British English, and that examples of English used in the Outer or Expanding Circle is "absent" in the main textbooks (p. 438). As Matsuda (2002) has argued, unless there is any attempt to change these phenomena, the absence of diversity of English would lead learners to internalize "some stereotypes and prejudices against part of the world that they were not even familiar with" (p. 437).

So far, this article has explored Japanese learners' tendency to regard English as a language of the Inner Circle, and has pointed out that this tendency might be attributed to EFL classroom practices at school. From the necessity of preparing learners for high-stakes exams, English tends to be presented as a chunk of de-contextualized knowledge isolated from the English used in actual communication, and with the overemphasis on native speakers' English in most cases. This absence of exposure to various types of English and the lack of association between English outside the classroom and English inside the classroom could be the reason why the concept of EIL has not yet permeated Japanese people.

In the next section, given the significant impact of classroom practices on learners' perceptions of English, I explore the mechanism of how learning contexts

influence learners' perceptions more in depth, especially by focusing on 1) the role of teachers, 2) teaching materials, and 3) teaching methods.

## **THE IMPACT OF LEARNING CONTEXTS ON JAPANESE LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ENGLISH**

This section attempts to explore the mechanism of how language classroom practices, from which learners get most of the input of a target language, have an impact on their perceptions of English. A language classroom is, so to speak, a *community* where learners can acquire knowledge through interaction with others. It could be the very place where what Duff (2010) calls *language socialization* takes place. Duff (2010) defines *language socialization* as a process of newcomers' learning linguistic or social norms of a specific community "on the basis of observations and interactions with more experienced members of that community" (p. 428). When it comes to English classrooms, *newcomers* (i.e. learners) are expected to acquire both linguistic knowledge (e.g. grammar and vocabulary) and non-linguistic knowledge about English (e.g. how, where, why, or by whom English is used) through interacting with *more experienced members* (i.e. teachers or other classmates with experience of using English).

Besides serving as a place for acquiring knowledge, language classrooms are also a place for influencing learners' perceptions of English. Seargeant (2008) has mentioned that the reason why someone wants to learn the language relates to "how they perceive the language" and that these perceptions are "framed by public discourse about the language" (p. 122). In EFL settings, where English input is scarce outside the classroom, the public discourse which frames people's perceptions seems to have a close relation with school education. Therefore, whether learners can find any meaning in learning English is significantly affected by what their language classrooms are like.

Thus, given that EFL classrooms are a place for language socialization as well as for the shaping of learners' perception of English, key variables of classroom practices, such as 1) the role of teachers, 2) the representation of English in teaching materials, and 3) the teaching methods, are worth analyzing in exploring the gap between the societal demands and the actual classroom practices.

### **The Role of Teachers**

Teachers are responsible for designing, managing, and leading classroom practices based on both the national and the school curriculums. However, as Sakui (2004) has pointed out, teachers are "not transparent entities who fulfill curriculum plans and goals as prescribed by their authors, but who filter, digest, and implement the curriculum depending upon their beliefs and environmental contexts" (p. 155). In

Japanese schools, where teacher-centered classrooms are still main-stream, the impact of how teachers teach or behave in classrooms on learners is quite significant. Sometimes, how teachers manage the classroom would be taken more seriously than what is stated in the curriculum. Indeed, Kikuchi's (2009) study on learners' motivation has shown that an individual teacher's behavior in the classroom is the most significant factor for depriving learners of their learning motivation. This finding may imply that teachers' self-awareness of their own impact on learners and their confidence in their rationale for their own teaching should be seriously addressed.

In EFL settings, not only the exposure to English outside the classroom is limited, but also the majority of input available to learners in the classroom is, in many cases, determined based on teachers' selection. However, as Matsuda and Friedrich (2011) have pointed out, although such a selection must be made after much consideration about "learner goals, teachers' background, local attitudes toward English(es), and the material availability," the reality is that "American or British English is selected simply because that is the way it has been, and their appropriateness for a particular course of action in some contexts is rarely questioned" (p. 338). Considering the significant impact of classroom practices on learners' perceptions, teachers' own language and literacy practices, as well as ideologies in the classroom might sometimes "prevent students from participating more fully, equitably and competently" (Duff, 2010, p. 447). Thus, in designing and implementing classroom practices, teachers should be more conscious of their own beliefs about English, particularly about how tolerant they are of *Englishes* deviant from the English in the Inner Circle, and what kind of attitude they would like their learners to have towards exposure to a wider range of English.

### **Teaching Materials**

In addition to teachers' beliefs or ideologies about English, the teaching materials, which are, a major resource of knowledge to most EFL learners, greatly affect learners' perceptions of English as well (Schneer, 2007; Matsuda, 2002b). How English is represented or what kinds of English are provided in the textbooks may have a great influence on learners' perceptions of English because "classroom lessons tend to be constructed closely around the textbooks" (Matsuda, 2002b, p.185).

However, it has been pointed out that many textbooks involve problems in terms of how they represent the English language (Cook, 1999; Matsuda, 2002a; Matsuda, 2002b; Matsuda, 2003a; Schneer, 2007). Matsuda (2002a) has criticized the treatment of English in major textbooks endorsed by MEXT. She has stated that "the current representation of English in textbooks is problematic from the perspective of *international understanding*" which MEXT itself has attempted to ingrain among Japanese people (p. 438). According to her, major textbooks in Japan tend to focus "almost exclusively on the Inner Circle" by making native speakers play key roles whereas the use of English as an international language in the Outer Circle is *absent* (Matsuda, 2002a, p. 437). Her other study on state-endorsed textbooks, particularly the ones for the 7th graders, has shown more specific findings that the number of characters from the Outer or Expanding Circle other than Japan is limited, and that although

Japanese characters outnumber inner circle characters, "they produce fewer words" (Matsuda, 2002b, p.189).

A similar argument can be found in Cook's (1999) argument about fundamental differences lying between native and non-native speakers. He has stated that the status of L2 *users*, or the English speakers *not* in the Inner Circle, is in need of redress in that "they are virtually never represented positively" (Cook, 1999, p. 200). Thus, the overall negligence or intolerance of the wider use of English by major Japanese state-endorsed textbooks has been pointed out.

In addition to this lack of presentation of the diversity of English, textbooks by MEXT have also been said to reinforce the discourse of nationalism or *Nihonjinron*, leading to the tendency to regard English as the language of *others* (Hashimoto, 2000; Schmeer, 2007). The concept of *Nihonjinron* is the idea that Japanese people should recognize their national identity and enhance their own *Japaneseness* in order to be internationally understood, especially by the Western countries. Schmeer's (2007) study on major state-endorsed textbooks in Japan has revealed that the textbooks tend to "locate Japan in opposition to a Western counterpart or constituency" probably for the purpose of raising the students' self-awareness of Japanese identity (p. 605). However, as he has pointed out, the stronger self-awareness of the national identity would lead to the reinforcement of "us-and them" mentality. In other words, English might continue to be regarded as a language of *others*, not as *our* own language.

Therefore, the insufficient provision of information on the use of English in the Outer or Expanding Circle as well as the representation of English as if it were the language of the West or *others* in the textbooks reinforce learners' association of English with the Inner Circle. Unless these textbooks present English as a language which looks familiar, relevant, and essential to the students, it might be difficult for them to find any meaning and become motivated in learning English. However, it is true that tremendous time is required for any changes to happen in the representation of textbooks. For one thing, how the textbook represents English might significantly depend on how English is perceived by the textbook writers, who are not necessarily familiar with the concept of EIL. Besides this, many bureaucratic procedures should be taken to make any revision in the nationally-endorsed textbooks. Therefore, in terms of how to overcome those deficits about the current textbooks, McKay & Bokhorst-Heng's (2008) have made the realistic suggestion, stating that teachers should "achieve more diversity in the uses and users of English by supplementing the textbook" by assessing their representation to see what is missing in the textbook in terms of exposure to the diversity of English (p. 189). Matsuda and Friedrich (2011) have made a similar argument that rather than relying exclusively on the existent materials, "teachers can supplement them with textual, audio, and visual samples of other varieties of English" (p. 338).

### **Teaching Methods**

Other than teachers' belief or ideology about English and the teaching materials, teaching approaches could also be an influential factor for learners' perceptions of



English. As mentioned in the previous section, although the MEXT tries to promote CLT in its language education policy, the reality is that a *yakudoku* or grammar-translation remains as the *de facto* method most commonly used by JTEs in the classroom.

Indeed, this gap in teaching methods between the stated curriculum and the actual implementation in the classroom might reflect a push-pull relationship between *jitsuyo Eigo* or practical English (i.e. the one which regards English as a communication tool, valuing a functional aspect of English) on the one hand, and *kyoyo Eigo* or liberal arts English (i.e. the one which regards English as a subject of academic study) on the other. It has been said that the current MEXT's promotion of CLT is a response to the strong critics from the business sector advocating *jitsuyo Eigo* that the English taught at school institutions is useless (Yanase, 2006, p. 37-38).

Despite this social pressure to put more emphasis on practical English, the preference for the *yakudoku* method over CLT in the classroom remains entrenched for various reasons. Sakui (2004) has pointed out that "grammar-oriented entrance examinations, time constraints, classroom management problems, and rigid curriculum schedules" are the factors behind the use of the *yakudoku* method (p. 162). Besides these factors, Nishino & Watanabe (2008) have added that teachers have low English proficiency and lack confidence in speaking. They have related teachers' tendency to resist CLT methods to their dignity, stating that "their authority might be tarnished if they make mistakes in front of their students" (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008, p.134).

In addition, it is also possible that the concept of CLT itself has not yet become accepted amongst most of the teachers. As Kikuchi & Browne (2009) have mentioned, "the severe lack of teacher training" may have brought about teachers' little understanding about what CLT is, leading to reliance on the *yakudoku* method (p.175). Given that most of JTEs learned English through the *yakudoku* method as learners, it could be quite natural that they teach in the same way as they were taught unless they are provided with any opportunities to know about other teaching approaches. However, as Matsuda & Friedrich (2011) have stated, "it would be unfortunate if teachers resorted back to their familiar ways of teaching not because they believed they were effective but because they were unsure what else could be done" (p. 333).

Classroom practices along with the overuse of traditional teaching methods might be inviting mistrust toward school English education. As previously mentioned, Kikuchi's (2009) study has shown that the "grammar-translation method used in the instruction" is one factor for learners' demotivation (p. 466). However, there is also a contrasting finding with this; Matsuura et al's (2004) study has found out that while most students appear to believe that English education should aim toward teaching practical uses of English, "many express reluctance to participate in English-only classes" (p. 486). These findings imply that even though feeling the necessity of teaching or learning practical English, both teachers and learners have difficulty shifting from the method they have been familiar with to any other method which for them is unknown, and seems more challenging.

This implication involves an important issue: the necessity of always making the

rationale for a specific method explicit. Unless any reasonable and persuasive rationales are given, learners might not be fully engaged in learning. Since classroom language teachers are “the ones most familiar with local expectations regarding the roles of teachers and learners” (McKay, 2008, p. 113), a careful but strategic choice of a teaching method based on their comprehensive understanding about various teaching methods and their consideration about their own learners' needs and learning contexts should be necessary.

In summary, the overall Japanese EFL learners' perceptions of English and the impact of classroom practices (i.e. the teachers' roles, the teaching materials and the teaching methods) have been explored so far in this article, and it has been pointed out that Japanese EFL learners' tendency to regard English as the language of the Inner Circle might be mainly due to how English is taught in the EFL classrooms. Based on these findings, in the next section, pedagogical implications are discussed in order to consider how to overcome the gap between the societal demands and classroom realities, especially by focusing on what teachers should do to address their own classroom practices.

## DISCUSSION

As explored so far, even though the concept of EIL is spreading worldwide, a tendency to associate English with the Inner Circle still exists among Japanese EFL learners, and this tendency might be particularly attributed to the classroom practices at school settings where the exposure of varieties of English is limited. If this learners' tendency is only derived from the lack of exposure to various types of Englishes, the solution could be “to increase the exposure to different varieties” and “more personal contact with people from other cultures, especially non-US/European” (Matsuda, 2003, p. 494).

However, it doesn't seem that it is just a matter of *quantity* of exposure. As Chiba et al. (1995) have pointed out, “unless the appreciation of diverse English varieties, especially non-native varieties, is endorsed, familiarity does not always affect positively Japanese subjects' attitudes toward non-native varieties” (p. 84). In other words, not only sufficient exposures to various types of English, but attempts to cultivate learners' respect toward the diversity are required for the concept of EIL to ingrain among Japanese EFL learners. Thus, as Matsuda & Friedrich (2011) have suggested, teachers should be responsible for increasing learners' “meta-knowledge about Englishes” by making it a lesson focus (p. 339).

In terms of imparting *meta-knowledge about Englishes* to learners and cultivating their respect toward various types of English, non-native English teachers could play an important role. Indeed, it has been said that learners may “prefer the fallible nonnative-speaker teacher who presents an achievable model” (Cook, 1999, p. 200). Varieties of English which non-native teachers use confidently in communication could give learners a chance to consider whether being a native speaker is really necessary to

become an EIL user.

This argument, on the other hand, is not reflected in the reality of the classroom. According to Matsuda (2003a), the majority of AETs (Assistant English teachers) recruited through the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program is from the Inner-Circle (p. 720). Indeed, the current data from the JET program (2012) has shown that as of July 2012, out of 3,986 people recruited as ALTs through this program, the majority are from the Inner Circle countries (i.e. 2,232 from the U.S., 458 from Canada, 419 from the U.K., 242 from Australia, 237 from New Zealand, and 101 from Ireland). Although the number of AETs from the Outer Circle countries has been increasing, this data seems to reflect the overall tendency to prefer native-speakers' English as a role model.

In terms of "native-speaker authority," on which such recruitment prioritizing native-speakers is assumedly based, Matsuda (2003a) has stated that it "threatens to undermine Japanese learners' agency as EIL users" (p. 722). Rivers (2011) has also made a similar argument by saying that reliance upon the native-English speaker model would lead to Japan's inferiority complex, driven by "a failure to match up to an unrealistic, and wholly unsuitable standard" (p. 388). Thus, non-native English teachers including JTEs might be an important resource of varieties of English which learners can realistically seek for, and could play an important role. Therefore, English teachers should be worthwhile making diverse in terms of ethnicity, cultural background, and their first language.

With respect to globalization, English is an essential tool not only for communication, but for economic achievement in that it enables us to "access parts of the world that are not accessible otherwise" (Matsuda, 2002a, p. 436). In terms of the power of English, Tsuda (2006) has made an even stronger argument by regarding it as a language directly linked with individual financial profits, which might amplify our *egoism* (p. 82). However, while such privileged status is given to this language, as Yanase (2006) has pointed out, English is not the one and only or a perfect language per se (p. 45). It seems, this *not the one and only* aspect of English is embodied by the concepts of EIL or WE, the idea that various types of English should be tolerated as long as they are comprehensible.

However, it is doubtful whether the government's language education policy as well as teachers who implement the policy are aware of, or seriously consider these concepts. In terms of the government's policy, Hashimoto (2009) has shed a critical view by stating that their policies tend to focus on "how TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) contributes to the nation's economic success and to the formation and maintenance of national identity in an era of globalization" (p. 23). Taking the current Courses of Study for senior high school as an example, there is a statement which *appears* to embrace the concepts of EIL and WE; it says, "*contemporary standard English* should be used" in conducting language activities in the classroom, but "consideration should also be given to the reality that different varieties of English are used to communicate around the world" (MEXT, 2009). According to MEXT's explanation of the Courses of Study for senior high schools (2009), this *contemporary*

*standard English* refers to “English currently used worldwide as a daily communication tool and not the one used only in a specific region or community”. However, considering the deep-rooted tendency among Japanese people to perceive English as the property of the Inner Circle, the overall impression many people are likely to have from this statement could be that this *contemporary standard English* means native speakers' English and that it is the only language they should learn.

English has been considered an important language not only for the survival in the globalization, but for Japan's *kokusaika* or internationalization, that is, the establishment of the national identity which could be internationally understood (Hashimoto, 2000; Schneer, 2007). For this purpose, “critical consciousness” about English is required, let alone “practical skills in English” (Kubota, 1998). However, although “practical skills in English” is given focus by the government's language policy, issues such as the function of English or the diversity of English seem to be underestimated.

As Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer (2002) have stated, the impact of the representation of policy document on teachers' sense-making processes in interpreting and implementing the policy in their own classroom is significant (p. 420). Therefore, in order for every teachers to understand the importance of raising learners' awareness of the diversity of English and cultivating the tolerance and respect toward various types of English, the policy document needs some improvement by clarifying the definition of *contemporary standard English*, and spreading the information on what kind of English is being used in the world, or on for what purpose varieties of English are being used. Improvements should be made not only in terms of the messages that the policy documents convey, but from the perspectives of teachers. As Matsuda & Matsuda (2010) have pointed out, teachers need to fully embrace the complexity of English in order “to prepare students adequately in the era of globalization” (p. 373). That is, they should be more conscious of the impact of their own ideologies, the teaching materials and the teaching methods on their learners. In order for learners *not* to have an extreme worship toward English in the Inner Circle, or negative stereotype or prejudice about English used in the Outer or Expanding Circle, reflection on their own ideology and teaching method as well as the exchange of the opinions among teachers should be necessary.

In summary, it can be said that the overall effort to cultivate learners' critical awareness about English is insufficient at both the macro-level (i.e. the current language education policy) and micro-level (the actual implementation in the classroom) in the current Japanese EFL context. *English as an international language* is a language which “belongs to all those who learn and use it,” and it will become “socioculturally more hybrid, more accommodating, and more comprehensive” in the future (Yano, 2009, p. 253). Yano has even stated that the individual English proficiency “will be judged not by being a native speaker or not, but by the individual's level of cross-cultural communicative competence as an English-knowing bi- or multi-lingual individual” (2009, p.253). If this argument is correct, English education is not just a matter of learning a language itself. Rather, it should cultivate the awareness of cultural

differences and the importance of mutual-understanding between peoples in learners' mind. Therefore, for learners to become competent *users* of English, teachers should empower them with "critical lenses that would allow them to use English effectively to meet their own needs while respecting the needs of others" (Matsuda and Friedrich, 2011, p. 341).

In order to effect a breakthrough in the current Japanese EFL classrooms, Tsuda (2006) has suggested the necessity of *jinkaku-kyouiku* or character/identity-building education through English learning. He has proposed what he calls "Meta-English education" for the purpose of cultivating learners' *jinkaku* or character/identity through learning English (p. 73), which might result in not just the acquisition of English proficiency, but the development of self-consciousness about their own identity. As the world gets more and more interconnected by the medium of world Englishes, this might be a model teaching approach, which most of the teachers are currently missing or even unaware of, but which is definitely worth exploring for the sake of young learners in the future.

## CONCLUSION

In terms of Japanese EFL contexts, there is a huge gap between what the overall society demands for English language education and what teachers in the language classroom at school are offering (i.e. the actual implementation of the curriculum in the classroom). Given the significant and direct impact of learning contexts, particularly the teachers' roles, the teaching materials, and the teaching methods, on learners' perceptions of English, both policy-makers and their practitioners (i.e. teachers) should be more sensitive to how English is currently being used in the actual communication and how English should be provided in the classroom to reflect the reality of *English as an international language* in the outside world. In order to resolve the current discrepancies between what is called for from the society and what is currently offered in classroom practices, the establishment of a system in which voices from both the macro-level and micro-level can be actively exchanged should be seriously considered.

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