



# Who are you when you speak English?

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This qualitative study investigated Japanese private university students' perceptions of their identities as English speakers. Students responded to written questions concerning the ways in which speaking English affects and is affected by identity and community issues. Questions focused on 1) the idea that English-speaking ability enables a student to join a wider English-speaking community and 2) personal identity changes and development related to use of English. The results showed that students feel that they are more expressive and assertive when using English, that English affords them a greater connection to the world community, that English is seen as "cool" and "international," and that meaningful communication with other English speakers (both native and nonnative speakers) was a major motivating factor for some students.

この質的研究は、日本の私立大学学生が英語を話す時、英語の話し手として彼らがどのようにアイデンティティを自己認識しているか調査したものである。学生達には、アイデンティティやコミュニティ問題がどのように英語に影響を与えているか、また英語がどのようにこれらの問題に影響を与えているか、書かれた設問に答えてもらった。設問は、以下2点に重点が置かれている。①英語を話す能力が、学生をより広範囲の英語圏コミュニティへの参加を可能にするという考え方、②英語を使用することによる個人のアイデンティティの変化と発達結果は、次のとおりである。学生は、英語を話すとき、より開放的に、そしてより積極的に自己主張ができると感じている。英語により、世界コミュニティへのより大きなコネクションを得ることができる。英語は学生からは、「カッコいい」「国際的だ」ととらえられている。そして、ネイティブ、ノンネイティブスピーカーを含む他の英語の話し手との有意義なコミュニケーションが、一部の学生にとって刺激を与える大きな要素であった。

**T**his project began when a university student asked a question about American politics and in the ensuing discussion mentioned that she never talked about politics in Japanese. When asked why, she said that she was too shy to discuss it in Japanese, but felt that she was a “different person” in English and was willing to talk about a wider variety of subjects. She stated that this feeling of being a different person when speaking English was a major factor in her continuing study . . . and she is one of our best students. This exchange made me wonder if I had been overlooking identity-related factors when considering the motivation of my students.

Why do Japanese college students study English? The obvious answers are elements of what Gardner calls “instrumental motivation”: the mandatory nature of the subject, better job prospects, and the ability to travel and study overseas (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Although these reasons are certainly important, I believe that there are other issues involved, especially for the more successful learners: issues of identity. Some students desire to become part of a larger community, although not necessarily the community usually assumed when thinking in terms of Gardner’s “integrative motivation.” Integrative motivation has usually been viewed as a desire to fit into the culture of the second language. In the case of many learners, however, this is not exactly the case. Unless they are willing to move overseas, Japanese students have little opportunity to become part of an English-speaking culture (Benson, 1991, p. 34-48).

Learning another language can have far-reaching social, personal, and interpersonal effects, and I think part of the answer lies in what Bonny Nelson calls “imagined identity,” the personal vision that learners have of what kind of a person they want to become. This study attempted to identify some of the identity factors that may affect Japanese students’ motivation to learn English.

The results suggest that some students want to become fluent speakers of English not only for the obvious reasons (test scores, etc.) but because of the kind of people they will become. Many of the subjects saw English language fluency as desirable not because they wanted to become Americans or Brits, or because they saw English as integral to their careers, but because in their eyes fluent speakers of English of whatever nationality are cosmopolitan, international people who are part of a larger world culture.

I suggest that perceived identity changes when speaking English may play an important role in motivation to learn English for at least some Japanese students.

One important caveat is that while this study focuses on English, I make no claim that English is any more suited to self-expression than other languages, or indeed to making one feel more “international.” In my experience Americans find anyone who can speak French or Italian to be a step up on the sophistication ladder. I leave the question of exactly what combination of linguistic features, individual personality differences, social pressure, and cultural norms may be responsible for these feelings. This study focuses only on the immediate beliefs and experiences of the subjects, and how we as English teachers in Japan can take them into account in our teaching.

## Subjects

For this study I recruited 11 Japanese university students whose English is advanced enough to converse easily and to understand the questions. Several of the students had been abroad for at least a short time, and all were fluent enough to have extensive conversations in English about various topics. In some cases, the subjects were currently studying in the United States. Student ages ranged from 19-25, and most (eight) were female. As my focus is on motivation of Japanese university students, I limited the subjects to Japanese students.

The selection of higher skilled speakers was made for two reasons. First, this study was designed to uncover motivating factors of successful learners and to see if some

of these factors are related to identity issues. Second, it made translation of the questions unnecessary, although in a wider study, translation of questions into Japanese would likely be helpful.

### Instrument

While a more thorough study with far more participants and a carefully focused instrument would no doubt be desirable, resource and time limitations dictate that this be a pilot project, a preliminary investigation to determine how to more narrowly and usefully focus a larger study. Because I wanted to cast a wide net, more likely to bring in many ideas and thoughts, I decided to present subjects with many open-ended questions and let them respond as thoroughly as they felt able.

I prepared a list of questions that I felt were likely to elicit useful responses and were broad enough to allow subjects to add other comments. The questions were:

- Why did you start studying English?
- Why do you study English now? Have your reasons changed?
- What do you like about studying English?
- Do you think being able to speak well in English has changed your life? In what ways?
- Do you feel that it has given you more opportunity? In what ways? Or is it just a required subject?

- Are there any negative effects from speaking English well in Japan? Does it affect your relationships with other Japanese people? If it does, explain.
- Are there things you feel more free to talk about in English? In Japanese?
- What do you feel is the biggest difference between speaking in Japanese and speaking in English?
- In which language do you feel more free to speak your mind? (Don't think about vocabulary.)
- What topics are easier to discuss in one language or the other?
- Do you feel that your personality is different when you are speaking English?

Subjects were emailed the list of questions to think about a few days before the answers were collected. They were asked to answer as many questions as they felt they understood well and had meaningful answers for. Some answered via email, and some were interviewed face-to-face. As this study is concerned with broad themes for further investigation, more rigorous data collection techniques were not considered necessary but should be designed for a more thorough study.

### Results

Due to the open-ended nature of the questions, results will be presented as broad-brush categories, illustrated with quotes from subjects. The quotes selected are representative

of answers received. Most subjects answered most of the questions, some in more detail than others. The question about changes in motivation was answered by almost all subjects, and in surprising depth. Some questions were seldom answered in depth. For instance, no subjects mentioned any negative social effects from speaking English, although one did suggest that this may have been true in the past.

Responses fell into three main themes: perceived personality changes when speaking English, greater perceived connection to the world through English, and changes in motivation.

### *Perceived personality changes*

The majority of the subjects felt that their personalities were indeed different, or that different aspects of their personalities came to the fore when speaking English. Most subjects reported feeling a certain freedom from social constraints, especially in regards to controversial subjects. Several felt that speaking English with native speakers provided a greater depth of expression and allowed them to express their opinions more freely. This suggests that the difference lies in the cultural characteristics of the speakers rather than in English itself.

I feel more free in speaking English. English speakers express emotions more than Japanese, so I can express also my emotions...

I become a little more stable and firm when I speak English. Because I learned quiet modesty is virtue in Japan, but it's not necessarily in other countries.

I can give my opinion clearly in English.

But in some cases, subjects reported that in speaking English with both English native speakers and other Japanese, she felt freer to talk about controversial subjects.

I talk with my friend in English about some difficult topics, like Koreans in Japan. When we speak about such things in Japanese, we feel nervous and embarrassed, because we don't usually talk such things in Japan. It is very interesting to me.

In my classes we have to discuss things Japanese don't easily talk about. We talk about homeless people and politics, and I never spoke to others except for my friends before. In Japanese, I feel it's rude to speak about these things except my family or close people. But I can talk about it to foreign people and Japanese in English without trouble. English is useful for solving problems.

### *Greater perceived connection to the world through English*

Most subjects reported feeling more connected to the world through their knowledge of English and stated that this had been a major motivating factor in their studies. Several students said that as English is the major international language, they needed to speak English well to be really prepared for the world. A few students mentioned that they needed English for employment because companies are looking for employees who can communicate with foreign contacts.

If I can speak English, I can talk with billions of people. That is the most attractive thing.

I feel like I can go out into the world now. I'm part of something bigger, not just limited to Japan. I can hear new ideas and new thoughts more easily.

We must be able to speak English well. We have a global economy, to be part of it we need to communicate well with foreigners.

Two students discovered the neutral language advantage that English can offer to people of differing cultures (Kachru, 2005, pp. 11-36).

I began to speak to Korean students in English, and it's a wonderful experience. If we speak Japanese, maybe they feel nervous, and I don't speak much Korean. But in English we are both beginners.

In English class, Asian students and Japanese are the same, just students, so we are equal. I made a good friend with my journal partner from China. We could help each other with English.

Despite the fears of some of linguistic imperialism forcing Western culture on students, subjects did not see English coming at the expense of their native culture. In fact, one student felt he was now able to represent Japan to the world

After I began speaking to foreign people in English, maybe I could have a more cosmopolitan outlook than before. Because we can talk about our own countries, each other and know the way of thinking and change the opinion. Many Asian people do not like Japanese, but they have never

met Japanese. If we can speak to them in the world language, we can become friends.

### *Changes in motivation*

One of the more interesting and useful results of this project was the data regarding changes in motivation. Although only one question asked directly about changes in motivation to study English, nearly all subjects responded to it at length. All subjects reported positive motivation changes, and none said their motivation had decreased, although this may be due to sample bias.

Most subjects reported that English was originally seen as just another required subject and one they dreaded. As a difficult, mandatory subject, they spent a great deal of time studying, but motivation was largely external: the pressure to pass exams and gain scores that would help them graduate and find work.

Most could locate a particular time when they became more motivated to study English, and, significantly, nearly all said that communication with native speakers was a precipitating factor.

I felt English was hard and boring. I thought why do Japanese have to learn it. But when I met my American teachers, I found they wanted to know about me, and about Japan, and asked them to talk about Japan in English. This made me have a new mind about English.

I don't like studying English then, but talking to foreigner at (university) was really fun for

me. Because when I could get through to the native speaker, I thought my efforts paid off. The impression moved me to study more. I love English.

I met a Canadian student at my high school, and we became friends. She was so different, but inside the same. After that year I wanted to know all the world's people, so I began studying English more.

In one case, hearing a Japanese teacher joking with a foreign teacher in English spurred her on; this anecdote touches on a bias I have always had toward nonnative-speaker English teachers seeing themselves as models of successful learning.

When I could hear a Japanese teacher telling a joke and laughing with foreign teacher at my high school, I felt she was so cool. I wanted to be able to understand and talk in English, too. If they are Japanese and they can do it, so can I. I felt I could be an international person.

Some students felt that although they could not effectively speak during their early studies, once reaching a skill level at which they could meaningfully communicate, they suddenly began to enjoy talking in English.

For long time, teachers pushed me to speak, but I was not ready. I could understand, but I didn't know the words. After a while I could talk back. When I could talk back, I could be in a real conversation, and it was fun. I could speak to a Canadian, and she could understand me!

## Conclusion

This study, while anecdotal, did highlight the issues I set out to examine. Factors related to identity did indeed have a strong impact on motivation to study English. Subjects reported that they feel more free to speak about some topics in English, that access to a wider community gives them more opportunity, and that meaningful communication with foreigners helps them to become more open and develop their personalities. Most of the students did see their personalities change when speaking English, and they saw this change as empowering and invigorating. Recognizing factors that motivate our students can help us tailor our instruction to the goals of the students and introduce students to some reasons they may not have thought of before.

Another aspect of this research that can be directly applied concerns Japanese English teachers. Meaningful communication in English is not limited to conversations between Japanese and foreigners. Japanese English teachers should become more involved in interactions between students and foreign teachers. One subject reported her attitude toward her Japanese teacher shifted when she saw that teacher joking with a foreign teacher; the Japanese teacher became “cool” and “international.” We should not neglect the influence of being cool on young people! Japanese teachers provide an important model of successful learning, including demonstrating that an accent does not necessarily hinder communication (Bailey, 2005, p. 51).

One of the most striking features of many of the replies was the effect that a brief incident could have on motivation. While attitudes toward second language learning may be formed over a long period of time, several subjects

noted a particular incident or time that transformed and solidified their desire to learn English. This occurred when they were able to meaningfully communicate in English, either with native speakers or other nonnative speakers. A recurrent theme was that they saw themselves as different, as international people, as cool people who could speak another language. Whatever the exact mix of factors that went into each subject's experience, we as teachers should be mindful of the power of self-image and help our students see themselves as people who can learn English and who have something to say.

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