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Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Reasons for learning English as a global language

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## Reference data

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Recently EFL (English as a foreign language) learners do not simply learn grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, but are required to express their opinions in English while maintaining their cultural identities and to communicate with a variety of people in the rapidly globalized world. Meanwhile, the emphasis on English often widens disparities in the learners' local community, spreads linguistic and cultural homogenization, and even evokes nationalism in opposition to invasive globalism. The present study investigated how Japanese university students look at the world, their futures, and themselves through learning English in such complex realities. The students displayed both idealistic and critical views of English as a global language, and they listed communications skills as the most important quality to be *kokusaijin* (an internationally-minded person or cosmopolitan). Their internationalization, however, looked outward to the English-speaking West, and even when looking at the diversity in Japanese society, they tended to see internationalization/interculturalization as limited to the English language and Anglo-culture.

近年、日本の英語学習者は単に文法・語彙・発音などを学ぶだけでなく、急速にグローバル化する世界の中で、自らの文化的アイデンティティを保ちつつ意見を明確に述べ、様々な人々と意思を伝え合うことを求められている。一方、英語への偏重は人々の間に格差をもたらし、言語的・文化的均一化を促進し、侵略的なグローバリズムに対抗するナショナリズムさえ呼び起こすことがある。本論は、このような複雑な現実の中で、日本の大学生が英語学習を通して世界・将来・自身をどのように見ているのかを調査研究したものである。分析の結果、学生らはグローバル言語としての英語を理想的にも批判的にも捉え、コミュニケーション能力が国際人にとって最も重要であると考えていることが分かった。また、学生らの国際化は西欧の英語圏に向けてイメージされ、日本国内の国際性、文化的多様性をも英語と英語の文化を通して見ようとする傾向があることが明らかになった。

**G**lobalization, with increased human contact across national and cultural borders and rapid exchange of products and information, has brought global standardization of economic activities and a flow of cultural commodities into Japan as well as many other parts of the world. Although, in principle, globalization is supposed to bring linguistic and cultural diversity to local communities, in

reality it has increased emphasis on the English language and appreciation of Western, in particular American, values and lifestyles. Meanwhile, the inclination towards the English language and Anglo-culture has evoked classic nationalism in Japanese society, responding with an essentialized image of Japanese language and culture. Neither such Anglicism nor Japanese essentialism promotes multiculturalism in internationalized Japanese society (Kubota, 2002).

In the past several years, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has appealed the need for English as a common international language that links people who speak different languages and that enables Japan to obtain the understanding and trust of international society, in pursuit of a greater international presence and further national development. MEXT, for these purposes, has released “an action plan to cultivate Japanese with English abilities” (2003). According to the action plan, because globalization affects not only business but also politics, society, and culture, Japanese people must acquire English to meet the intensified economic competition and to solve worldwide issues, such as environmental problems, in cooperation with international society. At the same time, as any Japanese individual may have a chance to be involved in the global market and participate in international activities, the action plan calls for the development of their communication skills in English. MEXT also proposes that, because many Japanese are not so good at expressing themselves, their ability to express ideas and opinions should be practiced in Japanese first, in order to make it possible in English.

Following the national policy, Japanese schools have reformed their English education curricula, setting new goals for learning/teaching English and improving teaching methodology, with more focus on communication, motivating students to learn English for international and intercultural understanding, and introducing English classes in elementary schools. However, as more emphasis is placed on the promotion of English as an international language, it provokes some reaction and resistance from the people and society, because it helps widen disparities in the local community, spread linguistic and cultural homogenization, and elevate nationalism in opposition to invasive globalism. Facing such complex realities, how do Japanese students look at the world, their futures, and themselves through learning English? The present study investigated (a) What motivates Japanese university students to learn English and (b) What qualities they value in order to be *kokusaijin* (an internationally-minded person or cosmopolitan).

## Participants

The participants were 70 1st-year students at a Japanese university in Tokyo (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Participants**

Group	Major	Male	Female	Total
A	Community and Human Services	16	19	35
B	Tourism	9	26	35
Total		25	45	70

## Data collection

Data were collected in July, 2007 by asking the participants the following two questions in written form:

1. Why do you think you need to learn English? Give three reasons.
2. What abilities do you need in order to be kokusaijin?

## Results

### *Reasons for learning English*

One hundred and eighty-nine reasons for learning English were returned in response to the first question. They were classified into four categories and their subcategories (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Reasons for learning English**

Reasons	n	Total
1. Personal experiences		36
1a. Experiences in Japan	22	
1b. Experiences abroad	14	
2. Current needs and interests		23
2a. Culture and information	12	
2b. Communication with foreigners	7	
2c. Study	4	
3. Future needs and hopes		25
3a. Getting a good job/working internationally	17	

Reasons	n	Total
3b. Traveling/living abroad	6	
3c. Studying abroad	2	
4. General facts and beliefs		105
4a. World politics/business	40	
4b. Communication with foreigners	24	
4c. Cross-cultural understanding	18	
4d. Traveling/living abroad	13	
4e. Language study	5	
4f. Image of speaking English	5	
Total		189

### *Personal experiences*

Of the 22 experiences in Japan (8 successful and 14 unsuccessful cases of communication in English), there were three bitter memories about when the respondents were in elementary school: They were afraid of foreigners or could not understand a foreign teacher or friend because they did not know English. As the students grew up and learned English, they experienced more successful communication such as “I could talk with a Chinese lady in English at Ikebukuro,” “I was happy that I gave directions to a foreigner in English at Shinjuku,” “I spoke English to a Korean customer at a convenience store where I was working,” and “I talked with my father’s friends from Denmark in English.” On the other hand, there were also unsuccessful cases of communication in similar situations: “I could not answer when I was asked for directions by a foreigner in town,” “I could not speak English to a customer

at my part-time workplace,” and “I could not speak English to a Chinese girl. I wish I could have learned about Chinese culture from her.” When it came to “explaining Japanese culture to foreigners,” the students experienced more difficulty than in basic conversation.

The perceived need for English may be affected by where the students grew up. One student from Okinawa responded that “English is a useful tool” because there are many foreigners in Okinawa and she was often spoken to by foreigners in the street. Another student, who lives in Narita, also frequently meets foreigners and feels that English is necessary for her daily life.

Many students spoke English with native-speakers of English for the first time at junior high school. Two respondents recalled that they enjoyed talking with assistant language teachers and learned different views and values. However, the students did not always take opportunities to have a conversation in English at school. One student reported that there was a foreign student in her class, but most of the classmates did not talk to her because they could not speak English well.

Among 14 experiences of traveling and studying abroad, there were six successful and eight unsuccessful cases. One student who went to elementary school in Singapore noted how English helped her and her classmates from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds communicate with each other. Other respondents went abroad on a short study program at high school. One of them reported that she had a good time with her host family and learned a lot in the U.S., and another student recalled that she enjoyed talking in English with students from France, Spain, and

Korea while in Ireland. One international student stated that she could not speak Japanese when she came to Japan but could communicate in English with Japanese people. Other students, however, regretted that they could not speak English very well and make friends actively while they were abroad. One student reported that, while staying with a family in the U.S., she was shocked that she could not speak English as proficiently as she had thought. Now she wants to meet her host family again and talk about a lot of things, and by then she wants to improve her English. Another student who spent some time in Australia noticed the difference in the way of thinking between Japanese and Australians. She hopes that, if she masters English, she can understand more of the way of thinking of English-speaking people and have better communication with them.

Similarly, students who had been on short sightseeing tours reported both successful and not so successful experiences. One student responded that it was exciting to communicate with foreigners in English and to be able to read maps and signs while traveling. Another student, however, was sorry when she could not talk to a local girl in English. Yet another tried to make friends with Americans while in Los Angeles, but got into difficulty because she did not have a good command of English.

### *Current needs and interests*

The students’ cultural interests center on American and British cultures, primarily music and films, and the foreign news they watch is exclusively English news. The respondents noted that “without English [they] cannot use a computer and get information on the Internet,” and with

English they feel that “the world is close.” Even in Japanese society, they see many English words used, which cannot be understood without knowledge of English. Knowledge of English seems to affect the daily lives of Japanese people. One student reported that her “grandmother cannot change her lifestyle because she does not speak English.”

Some students enjoy talking with foreign friends living in Japan and corresponding with pen pals in other countries, such as Gambia in Africa. They want to know more about their friends and their friends’ countries. Those who do not yet have foreign friends also wish to have such a chance, and appreciate conversations with native-speaker English teachers as their only opportunity to be in contact with foreigners.

Other students have imminent reasons for learning English, such as passing the tests and doing assignments for their English classes at university. For them, English is a school subject, which gives them “a sense of achievement” if they master it. Some students feel the need to read in English because their field, tourism in this case, is not yet advanced in Japan.

### *Future needs and hopes*

Many of the student’s future needs and hopes involved getting a well-paid job and working at an international organization or enterprise. One of them even imagines that if he cannot speak English when he becomes a company president, he will be laughed at. Another student majoring in community and human services expects to communicate in English with many caregivers from the Philippines who

will have come to Japan by the time he starts working in the social welfare field. Other students majoring in tourism foresee the need for English when they work as airport staff or travel agents.

Traveling and studying abroad are other reasons for learning English. Although some students wish to travel around the world, most of their desired destinations are English-speaking countries such as the U.S., the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

### *General facts and beliefs*

More than half of the reasons given for learning English were based on the students’ world-views rather than their personal experiences, needs, and hopes.

In 12 out of 40 political and business reasons, it was noted that, because the U.S. is “the superpower,” “the world leader,” “the center of the world,” and “the most important” and “the strongest country” in the world,” Japanese people need to learn English to survive internationally. Otherwise, Japan cannot “import food from” and “negotiate trade with” the U.S., and “win in the world.”

Another 20 reasons presented broader views than those focusing on the Japan-US relationship. These respondents recognized that they now live in accordance with “global standards,” and English is “an international,” “the official,” and “the most important” language “spoken by not only people in English-speaking countries” but many other people or “cosmopolitans” to “get along with each other” and “solve various world issues.” In fact, “the movie stars and politicians” they see on TV “speak English regardless of their countries.”

In such a globalized world, English is considered “useful for business” – for instance, in “exporting high quality Japanese technologies” and “making money in developing countries.” The need for English as an international language is felt in a variety of domestic contexts as well as international contexts. First of all, the respondents pointed out that there are already “many foreign companies and workers in big cities in Japan.” Next, due to a labor shortage in Japan, “there will be many immigrants from India and other Asian countries.” In addition, “the Japanese government is trying to increase the number of foreign tourists to Japan. If more Japanese people speak English, more foreign tourists will come to Japan.” Furthermore, in order to survive in internationalized Japanese society, the respondents feel required to study English and “get high TOEIC scores” to find a good job because in such a job “[they] may face a situation in which [they] have to speak English with clients.” They observed that, in the job market, if they can speak English, they can choose from “a lot of jobs,” but if they speak only Japanese, they have limited choices. Sometimes the students are strongly encouraged by their parents: “My father cannot speak English in business, so he always tells me to study English.”

As for international communication, English is viewed as “the most useful language” to communicate with “various people” because “most people in the world learn English at school” and “people in other developed countries speak English.” The respondents acknowledged it is important to “communicate with a lot of people all over the world” and “learn about different countries and cultures” in English. Therefore, if they are not understood in speaking English, they will become “sad.” If they practice communication

in English, they can “improve communication skills” and “express [their] views” to other people.

The exchange of cultures and information was listed as another purpose of learning English. The respondents noted that they need English to “import foreign cultures” and “export Japanese culture.” As “a result of Westernization,” they see many “goods from the U.S. and Europe” around the world, and need English skills to “make the best use” of these cultural goods. They also remarked that they can learn not only “British and American cultures” but “many other cultures through learning English” and “by talking to various people in English.” In the end, they can “know about the world” and look at the world “from many aspects,” and, as a result, they can better “understand [their] own country and culture.” Some respondents commented, “I love my country. I want to tell attractive points about Japan to foreigners when I go aboard” and “to foreign people who visit Japan.”

Even though there were both successful and unsuccessful cases reported in individual experiences, some students believed that if they speak English, they can travel “anywhere” in the world and will “not be in trouble” during the trip. “Without English, [they] cannot do anything” in foreign countries, and with English, they can “read signs” and “ask for directions.” One student even called English “a magical language,” meaning “convenient” and “handy” around the world. Therefore, as another student noted, “the more people travel abroad, the more they want to learn English.”

Other reasons for learning English were in the broader context of language study. Some respondents noted that “English is more popular than other languages” and easier than German or Arabic in terms of grammar, vocabulary,

and pronunciation, and “after studying English it is easier to study French, Spanish, or German because these languages are similar.” One student reported that he “can understand the Japanese language better by learning English.” Another noted that she studies English simply because she likes it.

The last subcategory of general facts and beliefs is the image of English. Some students commented that “English is cool,” and “people want to feel they are cool by speaking English. Japanese people have long wanted to be like Westerners.” Moreover, the respondents pointed out that English indicates “the social status” of its speakers in Japanese society, and that they can have “confidence” if they speak English and feel they are becoming “global people.”

### Qualities in *kokusaijin*

One hundred and five items were given in response to the second question regarding the qualities necessary to be *kokusaijin*. They were classified into six categories as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Qualities in *kokusaijin***

	Qualities	n
1.	Communication skills	33
2.	Understanding/accepting other cultures	24
3.	Foreign language abilities	21
4.	Understanding one’s own culture	14
5.	Attitude	11
6.	Computer skills	2
Total		105

Many students gave communication skills as the most important quality in order to be *kokusaijin*. These communication skills include the skills to “express one’s own opinions” “in front of people” “without fear.” Because they think “Japanese people are not good at giving their opinions” in conversations and discussions, as Americans are, and “the Japanese language is not a logical language,” they need to become able to express themselves “clearly and logically.” Otherwise, they “will not be understood by others” “however good [their] personalities are,” which is “a serious problem.” Such people “may lose in important meetings” in international society.

The second most-frequently given quality was the ability to understand and accept different cultures. The respondents stated “there are many kinds of people and cultures” in the world, and people should not have “prejudice” about others and should not think that their own culture is “the best.” In order to have knowledge about other countries and cultures, they recommended that people should “watch the world news” and “study world history.”

The third quality was foreign language abilities. In most cases, the foreign language meant is English. However, one student admitted that, although English is essential to be *kokusaijin*, being able to speak English is not enough, and in addition to Japanese and English, *kokusaijin* should speak other foreign languages.

The fourth was knowledge about one’s own country. Nowadays, because “American, French, and Spanish people are interested in Japanese culture,” the respondents stated that they have to be able to explain about Japan to foreigners. One student confessed that while she was staying with a

host family in America, she was ashamed of being unable to answer the family's questions such as "How high is Mt. Fuji?" and "How do you make sushi?" Another student noted that Japanese people should be proud of their culture and customs and try to maintain them.

The fifth was an attitude: to be active, outgoing, friendly, confident, passionate, and generous when interacting with foreign people. The respondents stated that they should actively express themselves and have a "friendly attitude that makes people happy," and even though they cannot speak English fluently, they should not remain shy but try to "communicate passionately."

The last quality was to have computer skills. The respondents pointed out that, without them, they cannot chat online with people around the world, or access information to keep up with world happenings.

## Discussion

### *Idealistic and critical views of global English*

The term "global English" may suggest different views of English and its global spread: one is the view of English that unites the linguistically and culturally diverse world (Crystal, 1997) and another is the ideology of World Englishes that allows many local Englishes and different cultures (Kachuru & Nelson, 1996; Phillipson, 1992). When these contrasting roles of English are examined critically, the global spread of English reveals its hegemonic force from the center to the periphery, and the emphasis on local English varieties and cultures poses a potential for the rise of nationalism (Pennycook, 2007).

Such idealistic and critical views of English as a global language were both observed in the student's responses. While many students noted that English makes it possible to communicate with a lot of people, understand different cultures, and cooperatively solve serious world issues, they also referred to the political, economic, and cultural domination of the U.S. The respondents argued that in order for Japan to survive in the international community, Japanese people must learn English, collect the latest information on the Internet, do business in accordance with global standards, and adopt the most advanced Anglo values and lifestyles. They also see many foreign companies and workers in Japan and expect to live and work with these foreign people using English in their future.

Respondents intend this conformity to English as a globally common language to take effect in their individual lives as well as at the national and world level. They feel happy and feel that they are becoming global when they communicate in English with both native and non-native speakers of English and so learn about other countries and cultures. They wish to have high English abilities to get a well-paid job in the competitive global market. They recognize that knowledge of English brings modernization: Those who speak English can advance their views and lifestyles, but those who do not know English fall behind. Computer skills also involve knowledge of English, because English is used in much computer-related discourse, and a great amount of the information on the Internet is provided in English. Many students related learning English to their futures: The global spread of English is viewed on the one hand as offering them chances to connect to the world and



open up their individual lives and, on the other, as forcing them into intensive competition and causing disparities in their local community.

### *Communication skills*

As communication skills are listed in the students' responses as the most important quality in order to be kokusaijin, communication is understood to be essential to unite different people, and good communication skills are considered a key to performing effective communication. The students asserted that because Japanese people cannot express their thoughts and feelings clearly and logically, they need to improve their communication abilities. MEXT is also concerned about Japanese people's deficiency in communication skills and advocates the training of communication skills in L1 and L2. Here, their local way of communication is viewed as different, problematic, and unacceptable in the global community. However, Cameron (2002) points out that the current notion of communication skills is a product of globalization, and the development of communication skills is an imperative task for not only L2 users and learners but anyone who engages in post-industrial labor. According to Cameron, in the age of new capitalism, when the major industrial structure shifts from manufacturing to services and creative industries, workers from top to bottom are required to have high-level interpersonal communication skills, and such linguistic skills are not naturally acquired but have to be practiced and mastered. In fact, many students differentiated between communication skills and English skills, placing more emphasis on communication skills as an important quality

to be kokusaijin. However, the students seem neither aware of the nature of such communication skills that Cameron problematizes nor familiar with the desirable communication skills to effectively communicate with various people in the world, but often have a naive belief in improving their communication abilities through learning English. If so, it needs to be examined what communication skills are considered "good" in the globalized world, how different they are from the students' current communication skills, and how the students can learn the good communication skills for their future use.

### *Cross-cultural understanding*

The students know that there are many different people and cultures in the world. However, in spite of their claim that learning foreign languages is a key to understanding foreign cultures, their interest in foreign cultures seems to be pursued by contacting those foreign people primarily in English. Many students accept that English is the common global language and people use English to communicate with each other around the world. It may be true that English makes it possible to contact various people around the world, but it is not much taken into consideration that English as a global language has its limitations in the extensively diverse world. In addition, parallel to the prevailing Japanese discourse of internationalization (Kubota, 2002), the students' internationalization looks outward to the English-speaking West rather than inward to the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity growing in Japanese society, and even when looking at the diversity in Japanese society, they visualize internationalization and interculturalization

from the viewpoint of the English language and Anglo-culture. Thus, cross-cultural understanding, one of the major purposes of foreign language education, can be realized through learning and using English to some extent, but English as a global language, whether in the globally unifying view or the local variety view, does not always allow us to contact, understand, and accept different people and cultures, nor can English alone bring about the multiculturalism expected in internationalized Japanese society.

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