

# Japanese students' perception of American English

Tetsuya Fukuda  
Dokkyo University

## Reference data:

Fukuda, T. (2010). Japanese students' perception of American English. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2009 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper describes research which attempted to answer the question of whether Japanese students would like to learn American English. Even though American English is the variety preferred by schools and teachers in Japan, it didn't seem to have been proven whether it was what most students really wanted. A total of 381 Japanese university students were invited to answer questions about their perception of American English and other varieties. It was found that although American English was the most popular, many students answered that they didn't mind what type of English they learned. The results suggest that teachers do not need to make a special effort to use one specific variety.

この論考は、日本人学習者はアメリカ英語を学びたいと思っているかという問いへの解答を企図した調査を記述したものである。アメリカ英語は日本の学校や教師によって好まれてはいるが、それが実際に学生が望んでいるものかどうかは証明されていないように思われた。そこで計381名の日本の大学生に、アメリカ英語やその他の英語についてどのような認識を持っているかという問いに答えてもらった。その結果、アメリカ英語は最も人気があったが、どのような英語かは気にしないという学生も多いことが分かった。この結果は、教師はある一つの英語を使う特段の努力の必要はないことを示唆している。

It is not rare to hear that American English is preferable for Japanese English learners because it is the kind of English most widely used. An American newspaper columnist once wrote about schools in Japan, "I would be hard pressed to try and count the number of times I have seen advertisements for English conversation schools that say they teach American English" (Gathright, 2002). The writer even called some of those schools to ask why American English was preferred, and one of them answered that it was because American English is more international. I have heard, both as a teacher and a learner of English in Japan, similar comments, and sometimes I even encounter a similar argument made by those in academic fields. For example, an American professor in Japan once commented on the entrance examination of Tokyo University as follows.

One thing to be changed about our entrance examination is that we use both British English and American English. It may pose an unnecessary burden to the examinees, so we have to be consistent in using American English, which is the mainstream variety in English education in Japan. (Geller, 2007)



It is questionable whether the future Japanese elite are confused just because they have to read both American English and British English, and even if they are, it should at least be questioned whether it is appropriate to be consistent in using American English, not British, Canadian, Australian, or any other variety. It appears that American English is the mainstream variety in our English education. Because of the strong cultural, economic, and political relationship between the United States and Japan, it is natural that the English used in Japan has been more influenced by Americans than by any other people. Most assistant language teachers (ALTs) currently working in Japan are from the United States. Statistics show that as of July 1, 2008, about 60% of JET Programme ALTs are from the United States (JET Programme Participant Numbers). Since most native English teachers are from the United States, it is natural that American English is dominant in the English education in Japan. I am not arguing that our current situation is inherently good or bad. It should be questioned, however, whether it is justifiable if we intentionally stick to only one variety of English just because it is used most widely.

The view that only one variety of English is superior to others has been severely criticized by several researchers. As early as 1976, for example, Smith wrote that non-native English speakers have no need to imitate one English variety, saying, "No one needs to become more like Americans, the British, the Australians, the Canadians or any other English speaker in order to lay claim on the language" (Smith, 1976, p. 39). A more recent comment has been made by Matsuda, who pointed out that the notion that "nonnative English speakers learn English in order to communicate with native English speakers and learn about their culture does not reflect the reality of the English language these days" (Matsuda, 2003, p. 483). Considering these discussions, it cannot be justified to say just one type of English should be used in our education.

In addition to the discussions above, a question that naturally arises is what type of English Japanese students would like to learn, or whether Japanese students would like to learn a certain variety of English at all. Admitting that American English is the dominant type of English in our education system, do Japanese English learners want to learn American English in the first place? Over the years, researchers have investigated the perception of various Englishes among Japanese students (e.g., Chiba, Matsuura, & Yamamoto, 1995; Matsuda, 2003; Kubota, 2004). These studies are summarized in Table 1.

Chiba, Matsuura, and Yamamoto (1995) conducted a study with about 170 Japanese university students majoring in English or international business. The students listened to a recording of several speakers of English. The results of their study show that native accents were perceived more positively than non-native accents. Interestingly, though many students recognized which speakers were native speakers of English, they had difficulty identifying whether the speakers were American or British.

Matsuda (2003) asked 33 Japanese high school students for their perceptions about varieties of English. Their high school has an international exchange program and most of them have traveled abroad or lived abroad. With the statement, *I want to pronounce English as American or British people do*, 84% of the students agreed. Again, participants reported that they were unsure about the difference between American English and British English.

When Kubota (2004) asked 260 Japanese university sophomores majoring in English what kind of English native English speakers used as models should speak, 30% of the participants answered British or American, 40% answered Inner Circle, 12% answered Inner Circle or Outer Circle, and 18% answered not relevant. To the question of whether they preferred the absence of a foreign accent for their model for learning English, only 11% answered it does not matter. The terms Inner Circle and Outer

Table 1. Previous studies on the perception of Englishes among Japanese students

Research	Participants	Results																
Chiba, Matsuura, and Yamamoto (1995)	170 university English and international business majors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Native accents were perceived more positively than non-native accents.</li> <li>Many participants could identify whether the speakers were native speakers or not.</li> <li>Participants couldn't identify whether native English speakers were American or British.</li> </ul>																
Matsuda (2003)	33 high school students, mostly with international experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>84% of the students agreed with the statement: <i>I want to pronounce English as American or British people do.</i></li> <li>The students were unsure about the difference between American English and British English.</li> </ul>																
Kubota (2004)	260 university sophomores majoring in English	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The English a native English speaker speaks should be:               <table border="0" style="margin-left: 20px;"> <tr> <td>British or American</td> <td>30%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Inner Circle</td> <td>40%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Inner &amp; Outer Circle</td> <td>12%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Not relevant</td> <td>18%</td> </tr> </table> </li> <li>A foreign accent should be absent in their model for learning English.               <table border="0" style="margin-left: 20px;"> <tr> <td>Required</td> <td>33%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Important</td> <td>30%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Desirable</td> <td>26%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Not relevant</td> <td>11%</td> </tr> </table> </li> </ul>	British or American	30%	Inner Circle	40%	Inner & Outer Circle	12%	Not relevant	18%	Required	33%	Important	30%	Desirable	26%	Not relevant	11%
British or American	30%																	
Inner Circle	40%																	
Inner & Outer Circle	12%																	
Not relevant	18%																	
Required	33%																	
Important	30%																	
Desirable	26%																	
Not relevant	11%																	

Circle were coined by Kachru. Inner Circle means countries where English is the dominant language, such as the United States, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. Outer Circle refers to countries where English plays wide and important roles in education and governance, such as India, Singapore and South Africa (Kachru, 1992). The term "Inner Circle" was also used in my own survey and was explained in the question sheet.

In the previous surveys, it is evident that the American or British variety of English is preferred among English learners in Japan, though learners are unsure about the difference between

the two. However, the question of whether American English is preferred to British English or other varieties seemed yet to be answered. And even if learners prefer to speak American English, this does not necessarily mean that they want their teachers to speak American English. Besides, in the studies above, mainly students with a strong interest in English were surveyed. The results may have been influenced by the fact that they are interested in English. For that reason, their preferences may not reflect the general perception among all Japanese students. After all, very few students major in English or international business, even though almost all students in Japan study English.

## Survey

### Questions and participants

According to the previous studies, many Japanese students majoring in English like American or British varieties of English. The limitations of these studies, however, were that it was yet to be explored whether there is any significant difference in preference between American English and other varieties, and whether students in non-English majors have different preferences. In order to explore these questions, a survey was conducted in six universities in the Tokyo area from May to November, 2009. In total, 381 students participated. Of them, 155 (41%) were majoring in languages, with 111 (29%) in English and 44 (12%) in other related fields, including German, French and International Business. The remaining 226 (59%) were majoring in other fields, including economics, law, science, and engineering. The participants were asked to answer the multiple choice questions below, with each followed by a space in which they could write their comments freely. The questionnaire was provided in a bilingual version so that low proficiency students could participate (Appendix).

### Questionnaire Item 1

Which kind of English would you like to speak in the future?

- American English
- British English
- Any kind of English in the Inner Circle
- I don't care.

### Questionnaire Item 2

Which kind of English would you like your teacher to use?

- American English
- British English
- Any kind of English in the Inner Circle
- I don't care.

## Results and discussion

The overall results of Questions 1 and 2 in Tables 2 and 3 support the findings in the previous studies. It was shown that American English and British English were preferred to other varieties. When you look at the difference in preference between American English and British, it can be seen that American English was preferred to British English or other varieties, but not significantly fewer students answered that they did not mind what type they learned.

**Table 2. Overall result: Question 1: Which English would you like to speak in the future?**

	American	British	Inner Circle	Don't Care
Number (percentage)	162 (42%)	56 (15%)	65 (17%)	100 (26%)

**Table 3. Overall result: Question 2: Which English would you like your teacher to use?**

	American	British	Inner Circle	Don't Care
Number (percentage)	138 (36%)	41 (11%)	59 (16%)	139 (37%)

One interesting finding is that there is a noticeable difference between the results of Question 1 and Question 2. The results show that fewer students would like their teachers to use American English when compared to the number of students who would like to speak American English in the future. What is

more significant, only 26% of them answered they did not mind what type of English they would speak in the future, while 37% answered that it didn't matter what variety of English their teacher used. This suggests that English teachers don't have to be overly concerned about using an American accent.

It is hard to find a perfect answer to the question of why there is such a difference in preferences, but some of the comments made by the students may be helpful. Some students would like to speak the American variety in the future, but didn't mind what kind of English their teacher speaks, because, as one student wrote, they "would like to get used to different types of English." Another student wrote, "In TOEIC, American, British, Australian, and Canadian Englishes are used equally." Those students want to be exposed to varieties of English.

Another finding is the difference in preference between language majors and non-language majors. Tables 4 and 5 show that 48% of the language majors answered that they want to speak American English, while 39% of the non-language majors answered similarly.

**Table 4. Language majors: Question 1: Which English would you like to speak? (n=155)**

	American	British	Inner Circle	Don't Care
Number (percentage)	76 (48%)	19 (12%)	17 (11%)	45 (29%)

**Table 5. Non-language majors: Question 1: Which English would you like to speak? (n=226)**

	American	British	Inner Circle	Don't Care
Number (percentage)	86 (39%)	37 (16%)	48 (21%)	55 (24%)

There is also a large difference between language majors and non-language majors who want to speak Inner Circle English. The tables show that 21% of the non-language majors chose this, while only 11% of the language majors answered similarly. In total, 71% of language majors want to speak like native English speakers, while 76% of non-language majors do. Although more non-language majors than language majors want to speak English like native English speakers, a smaller percentage of non-language majors than language majors want to speak American English. This difference was, at least partly, due to a lack of knowledge of the difference between types of Englishes, as was shown in the comments made by the language majors and non-language majors. One English major commented that she has been learning American English since she was small, and wants to continue to learn that variety. Another student, who majors in German, wrote that she wanted to learn American English because "I have heard that American English is most widely used." Both these students have some knowledge about American English. On the other hand, many non-language majors wrote that they didn't know the difference. One science student commented, "I don't think I can distinguish American English and British English." Therefore, it is natural that non-language majors, fewer of whom are interested in English, know less about the difference, leading to their weaker preference for American English.

One comment made by a law major is significant in understanding how those with no particular preference for a certain type of English feel. He wrote about his teacher's accent, "If the teacher is a good teacher, I don't care about the accent. English is English, and caring about my teacher's accent makes no sense when I try to become able to use English." He puts priority on a number of factors when evaluating how good a teacher is, and obviously, a certain accent of English does not come first. His comment suggests that when English teachers try to make their lessons more attractive to their students, there are other factors they should consider before what accent they should use.

## Conclusion

In spite of the widespread belief that English teachers in Japan should teach American English, non-American English teachers have no need to try to imitate speakers of American English. This survey shows that students who want to speak American English in the future are not in the majority, and the percentage of students who want their teachers to speak in the American way is even smaller. This is at least partly because many students, especially non-language majors, do not know the difference among several varieties of English. It is also important to remember that using one variety of English should not be first on the priority list of a good teacher.

**Tetsuya Fukuda** teaches at Dokkyo University in Saitama and at Waseda University in Tokyo. He is interested in English learning culture in the context of Japanese society. <f-tetsu@wd5.so-net.ne.jp>

## References

Chiba, R., Matsuura, H., & Yamamoto, A. (1995). Japanese attitudes toward English accents. *World Englishes*, 14(1), 77-86.

- Gathright, J. (2002, August 9). Do you speak American English? *Weekly Student Times*. Available from <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/shukan-st/>
- Geller, R. (2007, September 11). 東大教員によるオススメ学習法 [How to study English to prepare for the entrance exam for Tokyo University]. *Tokyo University Times*, p. 3.
- JET Programme Participant Numbers. (n.d.). Retrieved November 18, 2009, from <http://www.jetprogramme.org/e/introduction/statistics.html>
- Kachru, B. B. (1992). Teaching World Englishes. In B. B. Kachru (Ed.), *The other tongue: English across cultures* (2nd ed., pp. 355-365). Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Kubota, M. (2004). Native speaker: A unitary fantasy of a diverse reality. *The Language Teacher*, 28(1), 3-10.
- Matsuda, A. (2003). The ownership of English in Japanese secondary schools. *World Englishes*, 22(4), 483-496.
- Smith, L. (1976). English as an international auxiliary language. *RELJ Journal*, 7(2), 38-42.

## Appendix

### Survey: Type of English Preference (英語の種類好み調査)

- Name(名前): \_\_\_\_\_
- Year(学年): \_\_\_\_\_
- Major(専攻): \_\_\_\_\_

Your answers and information will be used only for academic purposes and be kept private. None of your answers will affect your grade.

(回答と情報は学術目的にのみ使い、厳重に管理します。回答は一切成績に影響を及ぼしません)

(注) Inner Circle(第一言語圏)とは主としてアメリカ、イギリス、カナダ、オーストラリア、ニュージーランド、アイルランドを指します。

**Question 1. Which kind of English would you like to speak in the future?** (将来自分が話したい種類の英語はどれですか)

- a. American English (アメリカ英語)
- b. British English (イギリス英語)
- c. Any kind of English in the Inner Circle (第一言語圏ならどれでもよい)
- d. I don't care. (種類は気にしない)

Additional Comments? (コメント)

[ ]

**Question 2. Which kind of English would you like your teacher to use?** (英語の先生に使って欲しい種類の英語はどれですか)

- a. American English (アメリカ英語)
- b. British English (イギリス英語)
- c. Any kind of English in the Inner Circle (第一言語圏ならどれでもよい)
- d. I don't care. (種類は気にしない)

Additional Comments? (コメント)

[ ]