

# Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

## Japanese pre-service teachers' attitudes towards ALTs

Miki Shibata

*University of the Ryukyus*

### Reference data:

Shibata, M. (2009). Japanese pre-service teachers' attitudes towards AETs. In A. M. Stoke (Ed.), *JALT2008 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

The present study attempts to investigate whether student-teachers prefer assistant language teachers (ALTs) of English with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use, or those with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language, and to what extent they give priority to native-like pronunciation in their teaching. Using a questionnaire, data were collected from 32 university students on a pre-service teacher training course in Japan. The major finding of the study is that they approved of the ALTs from Europe, but they showed mild disapproval of non-native speakers from Asia, the Middle and Near East, and Africa. Another finding is their strong preference for native varieties of English for their own pronunciation and as a model to be taught in the classroom. Finally, the author suggests that the qualifications of ALTs should take into consideration both the pedagogical and socio-cultural roles of English.

本研究は、英語教員免許取得のため英語科教育法を履修している大学生32名を対象に、英語母語話者並みの発音であるが、文法使用に多少の誤りがある非英語母語話者の補助英語教員(ALT)と、文法使用には問題はないが、発音に母語の影響がある非母語話者ALTに対する容認度をアンケート調査した。7つの国・地域を想定し比較した結果、ヨーロッパからのALTを一番容認する傾向が見られた。結果をもとに、英語が持つ二面性を議論し、これからの日本の英語教育におけるALTの役割を提案する。

### Introduction

The present study attempts to investigate whether Japanese student-teachers of English approve of non-native assistant language teachers of English with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use or those with native-level grammar but whose pronunciation is influenced by their native language, and to what extent they give priority to native-like pronunciation in their teaching.



### **Native speakers of English**

The use of English has spread throughout the world, facilitating international trade, diplomacy, tourism, and advancing science and technology. English has gained global status and has been recognized as an international language. The status of English as a global language has created a dichotomy between native speakers and non-native speakers. Kachru (1985) divided English-speaking countries into three groups with reference to historical, sociolinguistic, and literary contexts: the Inner Circle, where English is spoken as the first language (L1) or native language of the country, such as the USA and the UK; the Outer Circle, where it is spoken as a second language (L2) or additional language in a multilingual country, such as Singapore and India; and the Expanding Circle, where it is studied as a foreign language (FL), such as Japan and Korea. Traditionally, the term *native speaker* has usually referred to a speaker from the Inner Circle group.

Nowadays, however, English is spoken by more L2 speakers as an international language or lingua franca than by L1 speakers in the Inner Circle. This fact has enhanced the development of new varieties of English (Kirkpatrick, 2006). Considering the intricate reality of English use, Kachru (1998) has proposed a distinction between *genetic nativeness* and *functional nativeness* in the use of English. The genetic native speaker is someone from an Inner Circle country, whereas a functional native speaker refers to a person of the Outer Circle group, namely from a region where the English language functionally penetrates daily life. People of this category have identified themselves as native speakers of their own varieties of English and developed

their own linguistic norms (Timmis, 2002). In this sense, a *native speaker* does not refer to those from the Outer Circle countries, such as Singapore, who speak English not only as an official language but also in the home. It is also inappropriate to label as a *non-native speaker* a person who has learned English as a second or foreign language and achieved bilingual status as a fluent, proficient user. The more English has spread, the more difficult it is to categorize speakers of English as either natives or non-natives.

### **Non-native speakers' attitudes to native standard**

The custom of distinguishing between language users has influenced the English Language Teaching (ELT) field; native speakers are considered to be the best model and type of language teacher for non-native speakers to follow. It is a widely accepted assumption that the goal of ESL and EFL is for learners to acquire native speakers' linguistic knowledge and to imitate their pronunciation (McKay, 2002). This nativeness paradigm has affected non-natives' attitudes to the English language, as reported in numerous language attitude studies that have explored non-native speakers' perceptions of native speaker norms (e.g., Chiba, Matsuura, & Yamamoto, 1995; Matsuda, 2003; Timmis, 2002).

As regards research conducted with Japanese EFL learners, Chiba, Matsuura, and Yamamoto (1995) explored the relationship between the acceptance of different varieties of English and attitudinal factors of Japanese college students. Listening to a recording of three native speakers and six non-native speakers of English, the students favored the accents of the native speakers because they were familiar with them, while they showed less approval of non-native

accents. Using questionnaires and interviews to examine the perceptions and attitudes of Japanese high school students to English, Matsuda (2003) reported that although the participants stated that English is an international language since it is used internationally, they believed that it still belongs to native speakers of English. Of the students surveyed, 45% believed that foreigners would not understand them if they spoke to them in Japanese-accented English. The results indicated that the Japanese secondary students believed that Japanese should seek a correct model in American or British English. Findings show that the non-native speakers prefer a standard variant of English spoken by native speakers such as British or Americans.

### *Assistant English Teachers in Japan*

Increasing numbers of native speakers of English are present in local Japanese elementary and secondary schools to assist Japanese teachers of English. The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme promotes grass roots internationalization in Japan's local communities by inviting people from abroad and sending them to local communities for international exchange and foreign language education. The JET program has seen significant growth since it started in 1987: from its original 848 participants from 4 countries in 1987 to 5,119 participants from 41 countries in 2007 (JET, 2007). Over 46,000 people from 55 different countries have participated in the program since its inception. The participants are placed mainly in public schools or local boards of education. More than 90% of JET participants are employed as assistant language teachers (ALTs). Their typical duties are assisting with classes taught by Japanese

teachers of English, helping with the preparation of teaching materials, and participating in extra-curricular activities with students.

Although the JET program is not limited to English natives, and speakers of other foreign languages such as Chinese, French, and Spanish are eligible, the vast majority are assistant English teachers (ALTs) and are mainly from the Inner Circle countries: 2,701 from the US, 591 from Canada, 555 from the UK, 281 from Australia, and 228 from New Zealand (JET, 2007). There are only a small number of participants from Outer Circle countries such as Singapore and India.

### **Present study**

Previous studies have reported the Japanese preference for the Inner Circle variety of English. On the other hand, as mentioned above, non-native varieties of English have developed and there are more non-native speakers of English than native-speakers from the Inner Circle. The conflict between Japanese people's Western-oriented perception and the diversity of English will appear in English teaching in Japan. More ALTs from the Outer Circle or even the Expanding Circle may be present in school settings and eventually contribute to English education in Japan. In view of this future movement in Japan's English education, the present study explores Japanese pre-service teachers' attitudes to non-native ALTs of English. Traditionally, grammatical accuracy has been emphasized in the classroom and previous studies have found that Japanese EFL learners prefer native-like pronunciation. Considering these observations, two types of ALTs will be looked at: those with

native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use (hereafter, the Native P and Non-native G ALTs) or those with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language (hereafter, the Native G and Non-native P ALTs).

### Participants

The study was conducted at a university in Okinawa, Japan. The participants in this study included 32 college students who had enrolled in the first teacher training course required for a license as an English teacher in Japan: 25 females and 7 males; 8 from mainland Japan and 24 from Okinawa; 24 second-year, 5 third-year, and 3 fourth-year students. The age of the participants ranged from 19 to 23 years, with an average age of 20.6 years. They were English majors, except for one who was in a Spanish language and culture program.

### Data collection, instrument, and procedure

A questionnaire was utilized for the present study (See Appendix 1). First, the student-teachers were asked to judge imaginary non-native ALTs from seven different areas. In order to give them a clear image of each area, several countries were listed per region: Europe (the Continent or European countries except the British Isles), the Middle & Near East (the area where Arabic is spoken, such as UAE, Qatar, Oman, Egypt, and Syria), East Asia (e.g., China, Korea), Southeast Asia (e.g., Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia), South Asia (e.g., India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan), Africa (except North African countries such as Morocco and the Republic of South

Africa), and South America (e.g., Brazil, Mexico). The participants were required to indicate their attitudes by use of a 5-point Likert scale with choices labeled *agree*, *mildly agree*, *mildly disagree*, *disagree*, and *undecided*. Another two sections were about their attitudes to classroom instruction in general such as English materials, the qualifications of ALTs, and English pronunciation. The questionnaire was written in Japanese. The participants completed it during the first 20 minutes of the first day of the class. The data was analyzed in terms of percentages of responses to the items.

### Results and discussion

#### *ALTs with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use vs. ALTs with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language*

Table 1 and Figure 1 show the descriptive statistics and the comparison of mean scores respectively: both types of ALT from Europe received the highest mean, median, and mode among those from the seven different areas.

According to the results, the participants in the study tended to approve of the ALTs from Europe regardless of the type. No statistical difference was found in the mean scores between the two types of ALTs across the areas. Figures 2 and 3 indicate the response distribution with percentages for each type.

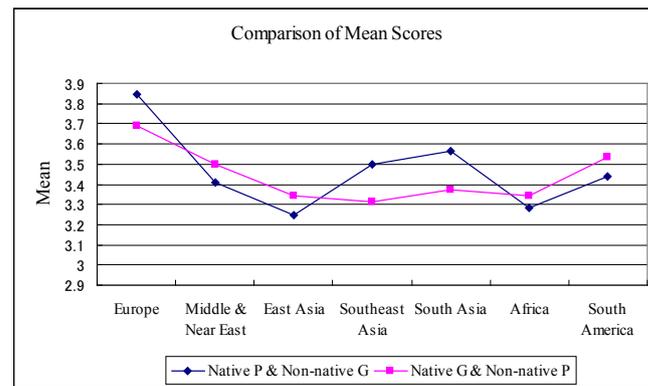
As shown in Figure 2, mild approval was the most frequent response to the European ALTs, whereas mild disapproval was the most frequent response to those from other areas, except for the one from South America, who received modest approval and disapproval to an equal extent.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of responses to the two types of ALTs**

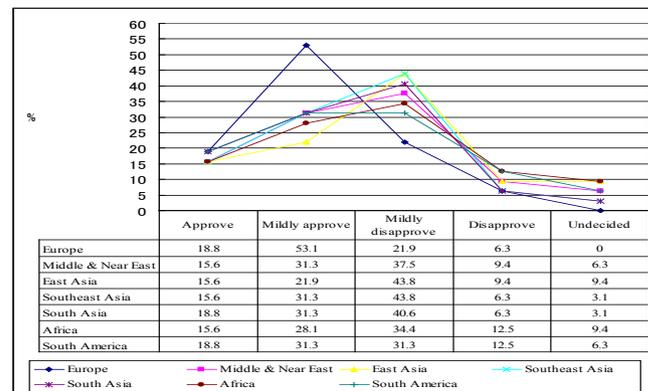
Areas	Conditions	Mean	Median	Mode	SD
Europe	NP & Non-N G	3.84	3.87	4	0.807
	NG & Non-N P	3.68	3.70	4	0.859
Middle & Near East	NP & Non-N G	3.40	3.45	3	1.073
	NG & Non-N P	3.50	3.52	3	0.983
East Asia	NP & Non-N G	3.25	3.28	3	1.135
	NG & Non-N P	3.34	3.38	3	1.095
Southeast Asia	NP & Non-N G	3.50	3.50	3	0.950
	NG & Non-N P	3.31	3.33	3	1.137
South Asia	NP & Non-N G	3.56	3.56	3	0.981
	NG & Non-N P	3.37	3.42	3	1.099
Africa	NP & Non-N G	3.28	3.35	3	1.170
	NG & Non-N P	3.34	3.38	3	1.095
South America	NP & Non-N G	3.43	3.50	3	1.134
	NG & Non-N P	3.53	3.57	4	1.008

Note. NP & Non-N G = native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use, NG & Non-N P = native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language

Figure 3 indicates an identical distribution for the Native G and Non-native P ALTs from Europe, with modest approval as the most frequent response. Mild disapproval appeared as the most frequent response to the rest, except for the one from South America, where mild approval slightly exceeded mild disapproval. Both types of ALT from Europe got the most approval, and those from South America followed. This tendency will be discussed later.



**Figure 1. Comparison of mean scores**



**Figure 2. Response distribution for the Native P and Non-native G ALTs**

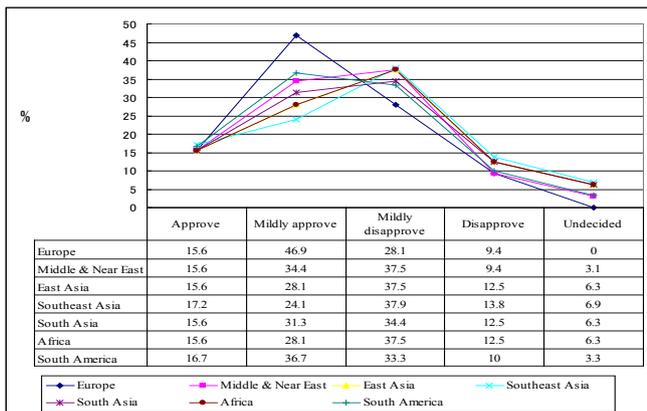


Figure 3. Response distribution for the Native G and Non-native P ALTs

Figure 4 shows their responses to the statement, “ALTs should be limited to native speakers of English.” As can be seen in the figure, 21.9% strongly and 34.4% moderately believed that ALTs must be native speakers of English.

***Necessity of native-like pronunciation***

The study also examined their beliefs about native-like pronunciation. Figure 5 shows their responses to the question of how necessary it is for Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and Japanese junior and senior high school students to have native-like pronunciation. As indicated in the figure, 79.4% of them believed that it was necessary for teachers to have pronunciation like native speakers of English. The majority of participants claimed that as a role

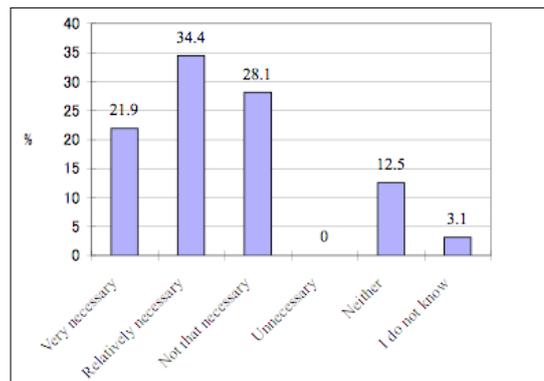
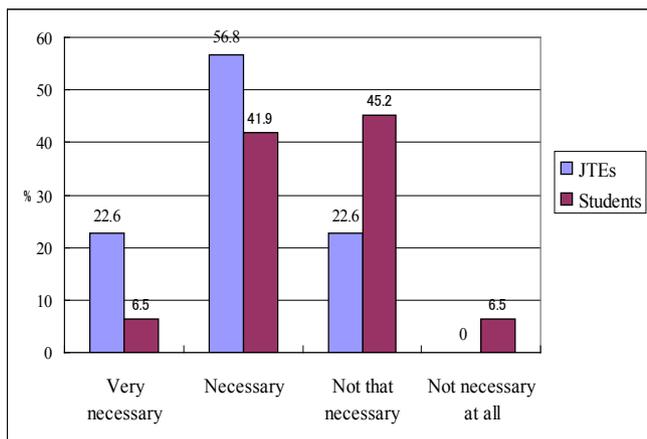


Figure 4. Restriction on qualification of ALTs

model for students, Japanese teachers of English should use English with native-like pronunciation. Another reason is that native-like pronunciation is necessary for other English speakers to understand Japanese English, which should make communication flow. On the other hand, 22.6% did not see much necessity for native pronunciation and most of them claimed that Japanese-accented English should be accepted as one of the English varieties and that there is no correct English pronunciation.

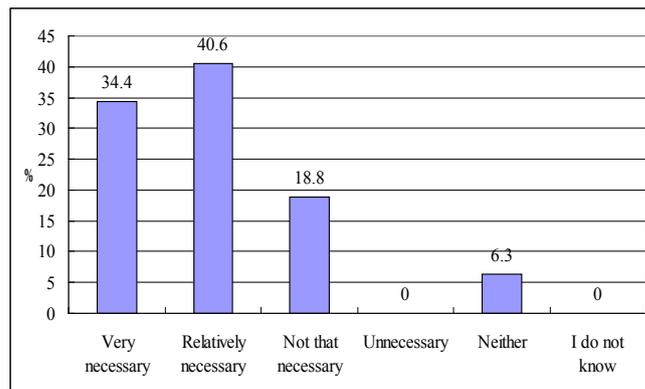
In the case of students, positive and negative responses appeared: 48.4% believed that native-like pronunciation was necessary for students, whereas 51.7% of them did not. Those who did not see the necessity mentioned the following three points: Too much emphasis on pronunciation will discourage students from trying to use English to communicate, it is very difficult for them to acquire native-



**Figure 5. Necessity of native-like pronunciation for JTEs and students**

like pronunciation, and Japanese-accented English should be accepted as a variety of English. One participant stated that, “Japanese teachers of English had no need to speak like native speakers of English because that is why we have ALTs in the classroom. Their job is to demonstrate native-pronunciation to Japanese students.”

Their belief about the necessity of native pronunciation for teachers also appeared in the results shown in Figure 6: 34.4% of student-teachers strongly and 40.6% moderately believed that teachers should consciously imitate native-like pronunciation. This result is consistent with their responses to the previous item: “it is necessary for JTEs to achieve the native-speaker norm in terms of pronunciation.”



**Figure 6. Imitation of native speaker's pronunciation**

For further exploration into their beliefs about native-like pronunciation, three more statements were asked to be judged. For the questionnaire item, “American and British English pronunciation should be taught as a model at junior and senior high schools in Japan,” a total of 87.5% agreed with the statement (See Figure 7).

At the same time, the majority (75%) believed that “students should be exposed to different varieties of English since there are many English speakers who are not necessarily natives,” as can be seen in Figure 8. Apparently, they recognized that there can be distinct varieties of non-native English.

However, this result must be interpreted carefully since student-teachers' interpretation of this item might be

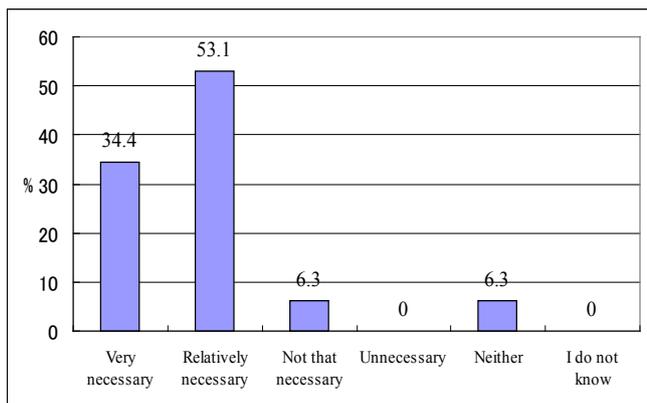


Figure 7. Native pronunciation as model

different from the intended one, where ‘other varieties’ refer to non-native-speaker variants such as Singaporean English and Indian English. Student-teachers might have interpreted ‘other varieties’ as other native-speaker variants such as Australian English and Canadian English since only American and British English were referred to in the questionnaire item discussed above. If this was the case, the statement was not properly judged, and did not reflect my intention, thus leading to an unclear result. It is not certain whether the student-teachers were fully aware of non-native-speaker varieties.

Lastly, for the questionnaire item, “it is possible for Japanese students to master native-like pronunciation through adequate instruction and practice when starting

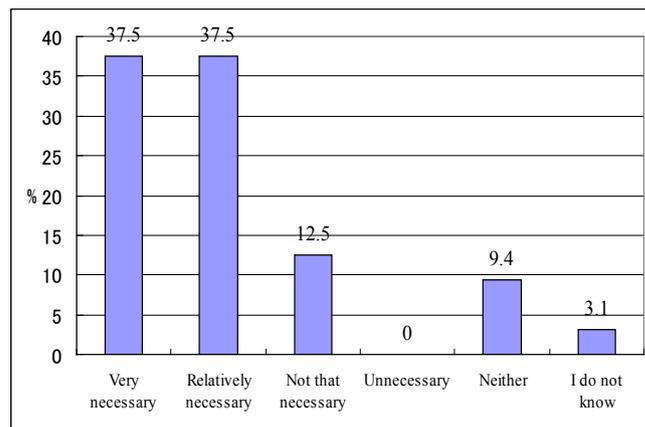
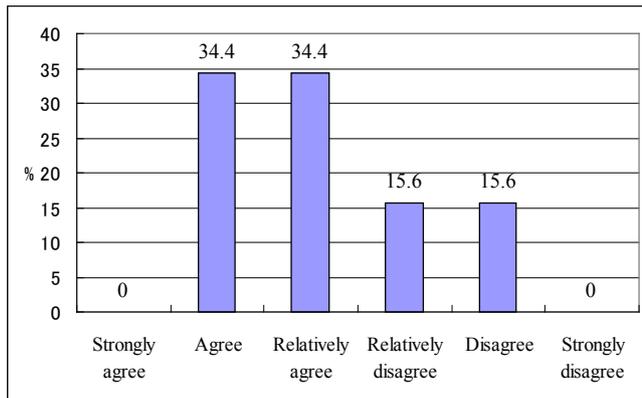


Figure 8. Introducing different varieties of English

English at junior high schools in Japan,” as indicated in Figure 9, 68.8% agreed with the statement. It has been pointed out that pronunciation is not adequately taught in schools in Japan, although, to my knowledge, no empirical studies have been reported. Presumably the participants in this study have received very little instruction on pronunciation so their responses may just be wishful thinking on their part.

The major finding of this study is that the student-teachers approved of the ALTs from Europe first and secondly of those from South America regardless of type. They were rather reluctant to approve of the ALTs from other areas. A possible underlying reason for this could be ascribed to their preconceived image of Europeans and native English speakers. They are presumably under the impression that the predominant



**Figure 9. Possibility for Japanese learners of English to acquire native-like pronunciation**

ethnographic group in Europe is Caucasian and so are the stereotypical native speakers of English. Based on this mindset, Europeans are more easily accepted as ALTs since they have a similar physical appearance to that of stereotypical native speakers of English. The ALTs from South America are in the range of acceptability, whereas those from Asia, Africa, and the Middle and Near East are much less acceptable since they least resemble native English speakers as regards stereotypical physical features. These response patterns indicate the student-teachers' Western-centric perspective. Kachru (2005) calls this view *English Conversation (Eikaiwa) Ideology*, which refers to: "an emotional attachment to Western, primarily American culture; elevation of the 'native speaker' and the 'Caucasian race' in general to a status having 'cultural superiority'" (p. 24).

Based on the results, it is plausible that physical appearance is one of the crucial features for approval of non-native ALTs as well as native-like pronunciation and grammar. The results also indicate that the participants are conscious of native-like pronunciation: In particular they believed that Japanese teachers of English should use English with native-like pronunciation. These findings provide further support for the idea that Japanese learners prefer native English speakers, in particular Caucasians.

It might be suggested that a possible limitation of the current study is that a European category might have led to different interpretations among the participants since Europe is a vast continent with a variety of ethnic groups and languages. However, as argued above, participants might be thinking of Europeans as Caucasians in view of their stereotypical image of the European. The standard deviations obtained for the European ALTs, 0.807 for the Native P and Non-native G and 0.859 for the Native G and Non-native P respectively, imply that participants did have a consistent interpretation of the term.

### Implications for English education in Japan

This study has examined the student-teachers' perception of non-native ALTs and native-like pronunciation. The results have indicated their criteria for judging the non-native ALTs, namely Caucasian appearance, and a strong belief about native-like norm in terms of pronunciation. It should be noticed that their positive attitude has led to their uncritical and unconscious acceptance of English dominance and of the social, political, and linguistic inequality brought about by the Westerner vs. other (i.e., non-Westerner) dichotomy. As long as the Japanese have this biased view of language, race,

and culture, they may have difficulty in accepting their own variety and other varieties of English. From the pedagogical point of view, it is necessary and urgent to promote equality in international communication through English education in order for the Japanese to recognize that the use of English can be a tool for social transformation.

It has been claimed that the English language has two roles: a pedagogical role as a school subject and a social role in the international community (Kuo, 2006; Sifakis, 2006). In order to learn English as a foreign language in the Expanding Circle including Japan, accurate grammar and standard pronunciation have been and will be taught based on native-likeness as a model in the classroom. More importantly, since the primary reason for learning English is presumably to use it as a lingua franca to communicate with other English speakers worldwide, the socio-cultural aspect of English should be introduced into English learning contexts.

In this sense, both native and non-native ALTs are expected to play crucial, yet different roles in teaching English in Japan to promote the dual view of English. If ALTs play a part as a pedagogical role model, native speakers of English are the most suitable; if internationalization is emphasized, non-native ALTs should be present in the classroom. Interaction with native speaker ALTs will increase the students' English language production and lead to valuable feedback from their native speaker counterparts, which should improve their interlanguage and enhance L2 learning. On the other hand, interaction between students and non-native ALTs will provide more opportunities for them to negotiate for intelligibility due

to differences in pronunciation and grammar in their respective varieties of English. These meaning-negotiation opportunities will help Japanese EFL learners to become aware of the socio-cultural role of English and the equal value of unique varieties of English. Language policy makers, including the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, are urged to outline and clarify the roles and qualifications of ALTs in order to accommodate and cultivate a positive outlook on World Englishes.

Acceptance of non-native ALTs, however, might be challenging for the Japanese because of their preference for stereotypical native speakers of English. Previous studies have pointed out that white middle-class North American and British varieties of English and culture are preferred to other varieties and cultures, which should have led to the invitation of a large number of native speakers of English from the Inner Circle countries as ALTs (Kubota, 2002; Matsuda, 2003; Matsuura, Chiba, & Yamamoto, 1994). In order to change their attitude about the distinction between native and non-native speakers, the concept of World Englishes should be emphasized in the pre-service teacher training programs along with reformation of the ALT system. Presumably the pre-service teachers' awareness should help their prospective students to recognize the diverse contexts and proficiencies of World Englishes and to realize that not all English speakers, native or non-native, will judge other varieties of English based on the native-speaker model.

## Conclusion

To conclude, pre-service teacher training programs need to be designed to promote student-teachers' awareness of

the localized varieties of English and their roles in society. This will lead to a reconsideration of the qualifications and roles of ALTs in English teaching in Japan, which should take into consideration both the pedagogical and socio-cultural roles of English. This approach should help change the preconceived beliefs held by the Japanese about native speakers of English and their preference for Western teachers and culture. Once this occurs, the Japanese will change their attitude to non-native varieties of English. They will realize that all the different variants of English are 生きた英語 or "live English". Eventually, this multi-faceted approach will cultivate a more positive attitude in Japanese EFL learners and increase their confidence in their own variety of English.

**Miki Shibata**, PhD, is an associate professor in the Faculty of Law and Letters at the University of the Ryukyus, where she teaches various EFL courses and applied linguistics. She also conducts pre-service and in-service teacher training and research in the area of second language acquisition and language learning and teaching. Her current research interest is World Englishes in English education. <mshibata@ll.u-ryukyu.ac.jp>

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- 2 ALT from the Middle & Near East (the area where Arabic is spoken, such as UAE, Qatar, Oman, Egypt, and Syria) with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use
  - 3 ALT from East Asia (e.g., China, Korea) with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use
  - 4 ALT from Southeast Asia (e.g., Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia) with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use
  - 5 ALT from South Asia (e.g., India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use
  - 6 ALT from Africa (except North African countries such as Morocco and the Republic of South Africa) with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use
  - 7 ALT from South America (e.g., Brazil, Mexico) with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use

## Appendix 1

### *The questionnaire survey instrument*

**1-1.** How much do you approve of the following ALT who is not a native speaker of English? Please indicate your opinion by choosing the most appropriate category from the 6-point scale: *agree, mildly agree, mildly disagree, disagree, and undecided.*

- 1 ALT from Europe (the Continent or European countries except the British Isles) with native-like pronunciation yet minor inappropriate grammar use

**1-2.** How much do you approve of the following ALT who is not a native speaker of English? Please indicate your opinion by choosing the most appropriate category from the 6-point scale: *agree, mildly agree, mildly disagree, disagree, and undecided.*

- 1 ALT from Europe (the Continent or European countries except the British Isles) with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language

- 2 ALT from the Middle & Near East (the area where Arabic is spoken, such as UAE, Qatar, Oman, Egypt, and Syria) with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language
- 3 ALT from East Asia (e.g., China, Korea) with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language
- 4 ALT from Southeast Asia (e.g., Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Cambodia) with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language
- 5 ALT from South Asia (e.g., India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language
- 6 ALT from Africa (except North African countries such as Morocco and the Republic of South Africa) with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language
- 7 ALT from South America (e.g., Brazil, Mexico) with native-level grammar yet English recognizably accented by their native language

**2-1.** How necessary is it for Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) to have native-like pronunciation?

- Very necessary   
  Necessary   
  Not that necessary   
  Not necessary at all

Please write the reasons.

**2-2.** How necessary is it for Japanese junior and senior high school students to have native-like pronunciation?

- Very necessary   
  Necessary   
  Not that necessary   
  Not necessary at all

Please write the reasons.

**3.** Read the statement and choose one which indicates your opinion most appropriately.

1 American and British English pronunciation should be taught as a model at junior and senior high schools in Japan.

- Very necessary   
  Relatively necessary   
  Not that necessary  
 Unnecessary   
  Neither   
  I do not know

2 Students should be exposed to different varieties of English since there are many English speakers who are not necessarily natives.

- Very necessary   
  Relatively necessary   
  Not that necessary  
 Unnecessary   
  Neither   
  I do not know

3 ALTs should be limited to native speakers of English.

- Very necessary   
  Relatively necessary   
  Not that necessary  
 Unnecessary   
  Neither   
  I do not know

4 It is possible for Japanese students to master native-like pronunciation through adequate instruction and practice when starting English at junior high schools in Japan.

- Very necessary   
  Relatively necessary   
  Not that necessary  
 Unnecessary   
  Neither   
  I do not know

- 5 It is necessary for Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) to consciously imitate native-like pronunciation.
- Very necessary     Relatively necessary     Not that necessary
- Unnecessary     Neither     I do not know