

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads

World Englishes, student projects and attitudes

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Japanese learners of English often feel unwilling to communicate in English because they feel ashamed of their accent's failure to match that of Inner Circle (Kachru, 1985) native speakers, and have also lacked opportunities to use English communicatively with an authentic purpose. This paper reports on some exploratory classroom action research in which exposure to world Englishes was combined with student-generated communicative research projects in a university English communication course. Listening comprehension activities involved recordings of a variety of Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle speakers talking about cultural topics. The researcher administered an attitudes questionnaire at the beginning of the course and again at the end. Findings included positive increases in the students' attitudes towards various speakers recorded on the Speech Accent Archive website, their beliefs and personal preferences concerning specific varieties of English, and their orientations towards gaining ability in authentic English communication.

日本人英語学習者はインナー・サークル(Kachru, 1985)の母語話者の発音と合致しない発音上の誤りを恥ずかしいと感じているので、また本物のコミュニケーションで英語を使用する機会も欠如しているため、英語でのコミュニケーションを図りたがらない。本論文は、大学の英語コミュニケーションの授業において世界諸英語への露出と学生中心コミュニケーション研究プロジェクトとをうまく組み合わせたクラスルーム・アクション・リサーチについて報告する。インナー・サークル、アウター・サークル、イクスパンディング・サークルの話者が文化的話題について話した記録を聴解活動に組み入れ、授業の始めと終わりに態度についてアンケートを行った。調査結果としては、スピーチ・アクセント・アーカイブ・ウェブサイトに記録された様々な英語に対して前向きな態度が増加したこと、特定種類の英語について思い込みや好みが見られたこと、そして本物の英語コミュニケーション能力の獲得に向けて学生をうまく方向付けできたことを述べる。

Any living language encompasses variation, and a number of distinct varieties. Therefore, language learning, especially the institutionalized learning of a second language, usually involves the choice of a particular variety as a model, implicating official policies, sociolinguistic trends and individual orientations and attitudes to varying degrees. This is especially the case with English, as one of the world's major languages which also has perhaps the widest geographical distribution. The matter of



choosing a language variety as a model is a vital issue, not only for curriculum content, but also for the orientations, attitudes and motivation of both teachers and students. Such affective variables are also crucial when teaching large classes of students taking English as a compulsory subject. In light of these inter-related issues, this paper reports on a project-based English communication course recently implemented at a Japanese university, and discusses findings obtained through pre- and post-questionnaires pertaining to students' attitudes, beliefs and orientations with respect to English as an international lingua franca. The approach to measuring these variables through questionnaires is both quantitative and exploratory.

Language-related orientations, attitudes and beliefs

Previous literature on orientations (see Dörnyei, 2001, for a review) has referred mainly to constructs such as integrative orientation (e.g., interest in the culture associated with the L2 and desire to make friends with speakers of the L2) and instrumental orientation (e.g., the goal to use one's proficiency in the L2 as an asset to further one's career). This study focused on orientation to engage in authentic communication, possibly overlapping with both of the former categories. Language attitudes may relate to a learner's attitudes towards the speakers of the target L2, towards the L2 itself, to the use of the L2 in certain contexts, and towards the learning situation. Perceived vitalities refer to perceptions about the relative demographic strengths, status and institutional support for the L1 and L2 and their associated communities. In addition, the style of language learning taking place, especially with regard to authenticity

of materials and task-based language use activities, is reported to affect attitudes and orientations (Dörnyei, 2001; Beglar & Hunt, 2002).

The world Englishes paradigm

Much previous research on orientations and attitudes has assumed that any given language has a defined ethnolinguistic community associated with it. However, such simplistic relationships are often at odds with reality, especially when one of the languages involved is a language with major international status, such as English, and it is being studied as a foreign language (Jenkins, 2003; Kirkpatrick, 2007). The community in question could be any of the nations in Kachru's (1985) three concentric circles model, namely, the Inner Circle (i.e., UK, USA, etc.), the Outer Circle (e.g., India and South Africa) or the exponentially Expanding Circle (e.g., Japan, Korea, and China). In fact, a number of studies on Japanese learner-users of English have revealed quite distinct patterns of dispositions towards English as a lingua franca (ELF) as opposed to specific Inner Circle nations (e.g., Yashima, 2002; Brown & Sachdev, 2009).

Another implication of the world Englishes paradigm for ELT is that a Japanese learner of English need not necessarily aim to produce English exactly like that of a native speaker from the Inner Circle, but may retain some "Japanese English" features. Nevertheless, language learning materials such as textbooks, audio CDs, and videos in Japan have most often focused on Standard American English, and only recently have included more varieties from other Inner Circle countries, and exposure to non-Inner-Circle varieties

is still extremely rare, as personally experienced by this author (see also Yamanaka, 2006; Sugimoto, 2008). Given the widely reported difficulties encountered in attaining acceptable communicative competence in public English education in Japan, a more pluralist and tolerant approach to regional variations in English would arguably help to alleviate some of the frustrations experienced by Japanese learners of English, improve their attitudes and motivation towards English, and better prepare them for genuine international communication through ELF (H. Brown, 2008; Sugimoto, 2008).

An exploratory classroom action research project

The participants, their course, the textbook and some characteristics of their projects

The course was a 14-lesson compulsory English communication course for a class of 52 second-year students who were English majors, Japanese majors, and social studies majors at a university of education in Japan. The course was based on Beglar and Hunt's (2002) "student-generated action research" project, in which small groups of students worked through a prescribed sequence of highly communicative research tasks, culminating in formal presentations of their results. In the present study, the project was integrated with the overall theme of the course book, *Identity* (Shaules, Tsujioka, & Iida, 2004). Textbook-based activities involved reading homework; listening to the book's audio-CD recordings of speakers from various countries (Australia, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Greece, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Malaysia,

Mexico, New Zealand, Poland, Portugal, Spain, the UK and the USA); and discussion activities based on simple sentence frames and mini-questionnaires. Table 1 shows the outline of the course.

For the project work, each group was required to formulate a research question based on a topic from the textbook. On this occasion, the groups' research questions included the following: the differences between Japanese and Western consciousness of body language; variation in attitudes to social change according to gender and age; and variation in attitudes towards internationalism according to major and origin. For population samples, some groups chose classmates from within this class, while others chose to ask international exchange students at the university (mainly Chinese, Korean and Turkish), local citizens (mainly Japanese, Chinese and Russians) or local ALTs (various Inner Circle speakers). Appropriate vocabulary and sentence frames were regularly provided as scaffolding for the students' English-based project work; for example: "We found a correlation between the answers for Question 5 ("_____?") and the answers for Question 6 ("_____?"). This suggests that people in our target group who think that _____ also tend to think that _____. This is an interesting result because _____."

Method

The researcher administered a pre-questionnaire in the first lesson and a post-questionnaire in the final lesson, as shown in Table 1. The questionnaire aimed to elicit variables pertaining to ELF-related orientations, attitudes, and beliefs. In Part 1, the students listened to recordings of eight

Table 1. The course outline

Lesson number	Lesson details	Homework, etc. (All submissions by email, 2 days before the following lesson)
1	Author's pre-questionnaire Course orientation Project step 1: Get into 16 groups of 3 or 4 & choose one of the topics from the textbook as a research project.	
2	Unit 1: "Identity" Project step 2: Check group topics.	Each group writes and submits a paragraph (100-125 words) about why they have chosen their topic.
3	Unit 2: "Values" Project step 3: Discuss target groups of people to interview for research.	Each group writes and submits a paragraph about why they have chosen their population sample.
4	Unit 3: "Culture Shock" Project step 4: Discuss research questions	Each group writes and submits 10-12 possible questions for their questionnaires/interviews.
5	Unit 4: "Culture in Language" Project step 5: Practice questionnaires / interviews.	Re-write questionnaires.
6	Unit 5: "Body Language & Customs" Project step 6: Begin collecting data.	

7	Unit 6: "Individualism" Project step 7: Review progress.	
8	Unit 7: "Politeness" Project step 8: Analyze data.	
9	Unit 8: "Communication Styles" Project step 9: Discuss presentation skills & evaluation.	Submit presentation materials.
10	Unit 9: "Gender & Culture" Prepare & practice presentations.	
11	Unit 10: "Diversity" Practice presentation with partner group & give each other feedback.	Make adjustments to presentations.
12 & 13	Group presentations (PowerPoint) Groups evaluate each others' presentations.	Each student submits an e-mail with effort scores for self and group members and comments.
14	Announce group evaluations & general feedback Author's post-questionnaire	

different people speaking English with various accents, in an adaptation of guise techniques (see, e.g., Giles & Coupland, 1991; Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006). These recordings were obtained from the Speech Accent Archive (Weinberger, 2008), in which a large number of speakers from all over the world read out exactly the same paragraph, which is a

message containing instructions for shopping and meeting arrangements. While all speakers seemed to be resident in the USA at the time of recording, speakers with more than one year's residence were not selected for this study. A male and a female were each selected from the UK, USA, India (Hindi speakers), and Japan. Thus, all three of Kachru's (1985) concentric circles were represented, but the true origins of the speakers were not revealed to the students. It was not feasible, in this study, to find male-female pairs with matched features; for example, from the author's point of view, the Japanese male had almost native-like American English pronunciation, whereas the Japanese female spoke considerably more slowly with a stronger Japanese accent, and the Indian male had a somewhat stronger Indian accent than the Indian female. While listening, students answered the following six questions, giving ratings from 1 (not/none at all) to 5 (extremely):

- Q1. How intelligible (easy to listen to) is this speaker?
- Q2. How pleasant is this speaker's accent to listen to?
- Q3. According to your impression, how willingly would you have a conversation with this speaker?
- Q4. How much would you like to be able to speak English like this speaker does?
- Q5. According to your impression, how proficient in English is this speaker?
- Q6. Try to guess the country (or at least the region) this speaker comes from. Hint: Two come from North America, two come from Europe, two come from South Asia and two come from East Asia.

Part 2 asked respondents to name up to five "important" varieties of English they knew of. They were also asked which variety of English, if any, they would like to be able to speak. In Part 3, students responded on a Lickert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), to items which elicited beliefs and attitudes about English and Japanese in the world, including the following: the acceptability of speaking English with a Japanese accent, the vitality of Japanese abroad (e.g., "More and more people in other countries are studying the Japanese language"), orientation to change one's self-concept (e.g., "I want to be good at English because communicating in English will make me feel differently about myself"), orientations toward authentic English communication (e.g., "I would like to be able to read English texts to learn about the cultures of English-speaking countries,... I would like to be able to write letters/notes/e-mails to foreigners from countries all over the world,... I would like to be able to understand the English speech of people from countries all over the world,... I would like to be able to speak English to express my personal opinions and experiences to English speakers"), and experience of contact with foreigners and of using the English language (e.g., "Compared with other people of my age, I think I have had more personal contact with non-Japanese people").

Results

Derived variables

Following internal consistency analyses (lowest alpha value = 0.81), mean values were obtained for a number of constructs. In Part 1 of both the pre-questionnaire and the

post-questionnaire, these included mean intelligibility of the Inner Circle speakers (from the UK and USA), mean intelligibility of non-Inner Circle speakers (the Indian and Japanese speakers), mean intelligibility for all speakers, and so on for Questions 1 to 5. Ratings for Questions 1 to 5 were also combined to form an overall attitudes variable for each speaker. In Part 3 of each questionnaire, a global variable was calculated for orientation toward authentic communication (i.e., how much a participant would like to be able to use English in order to engage in a wide variety

of communication with people from other countries) by combining all the variables referring to a desire to be able to communicate with people from Inner Circle and non-Inner Circle countries through reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Means of speaker ratings in the pre-questionnaire

Table 2 shows the mean ratings for attitudes towards the speakers, and the students' most frequent guesses for the origins of each speaker, in terms of region. Only a tiny proportion of students attempted to guess the actual

Table 2. Means of speaker ratings in the pre-questionnaire

	Intelligibility	Pleasantness	Willingness to communicate with this speaker	Desirability of accent as a model	Perceived proficiency of speaker	Overall attitudes towards speaker	Most frequently guessed origins of speaker (in descending order)
UK female	3.7	3.6	3.6	3.9	4.2	3.8	Eur., N. Am.
UK male	3.3	3.1	2.9	3.1	3.5	3.1	E. As., Eur., S. As.
USA female	3.8	3.7	3.7	4.2	4.4	4.0	N.A., Eur.
USA male	3.7	3.6	3.4	3.8	4.1	3.8	N.A., Eur., S. As.
Indian-Hindi female	3.5	3.4	3.2	3.6	3.9	3.5	Eur., S. As., E. As.
Indian-Hindi male	2.3	2.3	2.1	2.6	3.0	2.4	S.As., E.As.
Japanese female	2.8	2.6	2.7	2.4	2.5	2.6	S. As., E. As.
Japanese male	4.1	4.1	3.8	3.9	4.2	4.0	Eur., N. Am.
Mean global values	3.4	3.3	3.2	3.4	3.7	3.4	

Note (origins): Eur. = Europe; N. Am. = North America; E. As. = East Asia; S. As. = South Asia

countries of the speakers. Interestingly, the most positive overall ratings were for the Japanese male speaker and American female speaker, followed by the American male and the British female. The female Indian Hindi speaker was also rated more positively than the male British speaker. As for the speakers' origins, the British male was judged most frequently to be from East Asia, the Indian female was judged most frequently to be from Europe, and almost all students judged the Japanese male to be from Europe or North America.

Changes between the beginning and the end of the course

Responses regarding specific varieties of English

Figures 1 and 2 show the frequencies of students' mentioning of important varieties of English in the pre- and post-questionnaires respectively. Many students failed to mention more than one or two varieties in the pre-questionnaire, so the responses accumulated to a greater total in the post-questionnaire ($T=123$) than in the pre-questionnaire ($T=108$). Somewhat surprisingly, given the dominance of American English in Japan, the most frequently mentioned variety was British English, at both the beginning and end of the course. This could possibly be explained by the fact that the class instructor is British and the only foreign instructor of English in the university. It should be stressed that the instructor makes his nationality known to his students but does not consciously promote British English in any way. It is also noteworthy that while four students mentioned Asian varieties (Singlish, Japanese and Indian) in the pre-

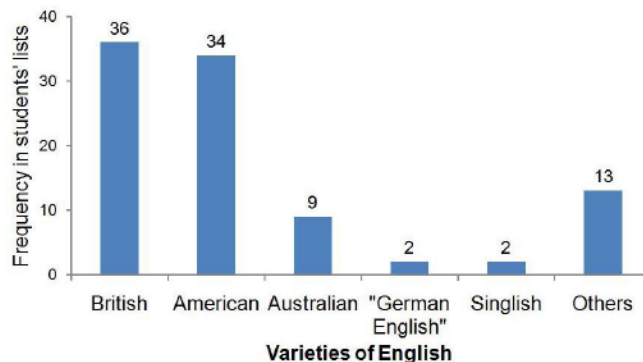


Figure 1. Frequencies for varieties of English believed to be important (pre-questionnaire)

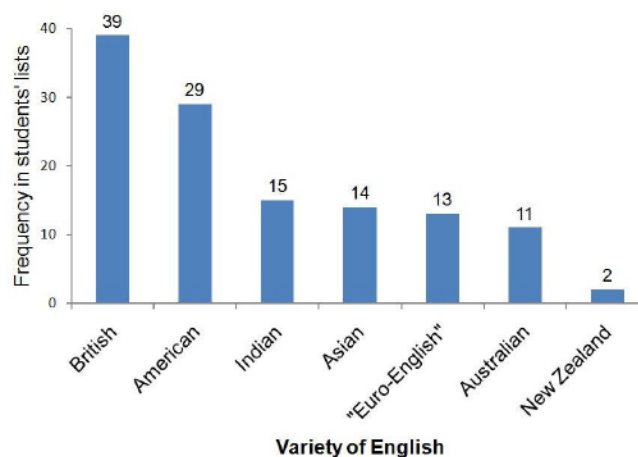


Figure 2. Frequencies for varieties of English believed to be important (post-questionnaire)

questionnaire, 29 students mentioned Asian varieties in the post-questionnaire. However, the proportions of Inner Circle varieties and non-Inner Circle varieties did not change significantly.

Figures 3 and 4 show the frequencies for students' preferred varieties as a model for learning English in the pre- ($T=44$) and post-questionnaires ($T=40$) respectively. Intriguingly, the proportions of Inner Circle varieties mentioned increased from 66% to 85%. On the other hand, 10% of students mentioned highly proficient Japanese speakers of English as their preferred model in the post-questionnaire, whereas none had mentioned such a model in the pre-questionnaire.

Comparisons of means for attitude ratings

Table 3 shows data for variables for which a significant change during the course was revealed. Interestingly, all the changes were positive increases in attitudes. Although attitudes to one of the most positively rated speakers in the pre-questionnaire, the American female, increased significantly, more pronounced positive increases were revealed for the two speakers least positively rated in the pre-questionnaire, namely the male Indian Hindi speaker and the female Japanese speaker. In fact, although there were no significant increases in proficiency ratings, ratings for the other four aspects of the speakers' accents all increased significantly, especially the students' hypothetical willingness to communicate with the non-Inner Circle speakers as well as their overall attitudes towards them. Significant positive increases were also revealed for various orientations and beliefs. The component related to authentic

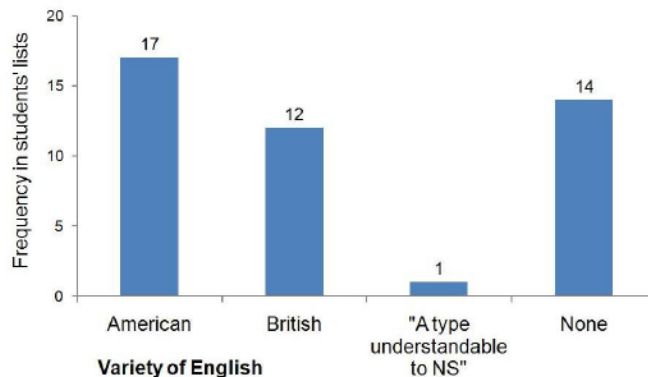


Figure 3. Frequencies for preferred models of English (pre-questionnaire)

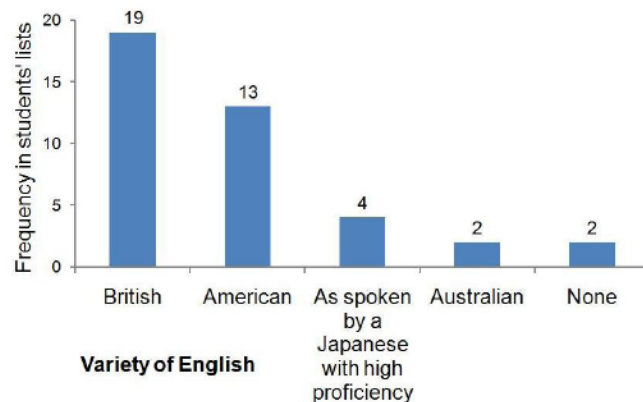


Figure 4. Frequencies for preferred models of English (post-questionnaire)

communication that increased the most significantly was orientation to speak English to explain aspects of Japan to foreigners, as shown.

Table 3. Increases in means between the pre-questionnaire and the post-questionnaire

Variable	Mean: Pre-	Mean: Post-	<i>t</i>
Attitudes to USA female	4.0	4.3	3.35**
Attitudes to Indian-Hindi male	2.4	2.9	4.26***
Attitudes to Japanese female	2.6	3.1	3.57***
Intelligibility of Inner Circle speakers	3.6	3.8	2.29*
Intelligibility of non-Inner Circle speakers	3.2	3.4	3.00**
Pleasantness of Inner Circle speakers	3.5	3.7	2.62**
Pleasantness of non-Inner Circle speakers	3.1	3.3	2.63*
Willingness to communicate with Inner Circle speakers	3.4	3.7	3.16**
Willingness to communicate with non-Inner Circle speakers	2.9	3.3	3.76***
Inner Circle speakers desirable as model	3.7	3.9	2.42*
Non-Inner Circle speakers desirable as model	3.1	3.4	3.08**

Positive attitudes to Inner Circle speakers	3.7	3.9	3.11**
Positive attitudes to non-Inner Circle speakers	3.1	3.4	3.79***
Orientation to learn English for authentic communication	3.4	3.7	2.11*
Goal to speak English to explain aspects of Japan to foreigners	3.3	4.0	3.89***
Acceptability of speaking English with a Japanese accent	3.0	3.7	3.32**
Perceived vitality of the Japanese language abroad	3.0	3.5	2.80**
Orientation to learn English in order to change self-concept	2.8	3.3	2.59*
Experience of contact with foreigners compared with other people of the same age	2.5	2.9	2.07*
Feel experienced in using English compared with other people of the same age	2.6	2.9	2.08*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

These changes cannot easily be attributed to the content of the course since there was no control group. Nevertheless, some extra questions in the post-questionnaire revealed the following: On average, students moderately agreed that their attitudes and beliefs about English had changed during the course ($m=3.4$). As to their perceived causes of this, only 36 students responded. Of these, five indicated that changes in their beliefs were due to this course, 26 thought it was due to a combination of this course and various other things occurring during this time, three indicated that it was due to

another English course or activity within the university, and two felt that it was due to some influence from outside the university.

Discussion

The students' guesses of the speakers' origins and the overall attitude ratings for each speaker show that most students unsurprisingly associated high proficiency with regions containing at least one Inner Circle country, but also that they found the origins of at least five out of the eight speakers difficult to guess. The attitude ratings show that while these students tended to have less positive attitudes to accents they were less familiar with, they will not always necessarily have the most positive attitudes when they happen to hear Inner Circle accents. The increased positive attitudes to the obvious non-Inner Circle accents at the end of the course suggest that exposure to a wider range of accents during a course may trigger slow but steady changes in their attitudes to such accents. However, the students' perceptions of importance given to certain English varieties and their personally preferred models at the beginning and end of the course indicate that the relative dominance of Inner Circle Englishes will be slow to change. These figures also seem to demonstrate the dominating influence of the regular, immediate and real presence of a foreign instructor and his or her own variety of English.

Arguably related to the increase in orientation towards authentic English communication were the students' increased willingness to communicate with the recorded speakers, their increased acceptance of speaking English with a Japanese accent and their increased orientation to speak English as a vehicle for feeling differently about themselves. A plausible interpretation for these increases would be that the exposure to recordings of speakers from various countries talking about their personal experiences of the topics at hand, the personalization of these topics through the students' self-expressions in the discussion activities, and the communicative nature of the students' research tasks strengthened their awareness of the potential for self-fulfillment through the authentic communicative use of English, especially ELF. However, the absence of parallel data from a control group who would not have had this treatment during the course means that it is impossible to make substantial claims about this in terms of cause and effect. Nevertheless, the data obtained through the final questions in the post-questionnaire tentatively suggests that a significant number of students felt that their attitudes and beliefs concerning English had changed during the course, and that some of this change was at least partly due to this course, albeit in combination with external factors in most cases.

In conclusion, this action research has provided insights into how Japanese university students may perceive a range of accents of English speakers from around the world, to what extent their attitudes and orientations may potentially change over a semester, and what constructs may be worth incorporating into more narrowly defined studies with

specific hypotheses to test the influence of certain aspects of course content on particular affective variables and possibly even course achievement scores.

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