

# Obstacles to Japanese membership in the imagined global community of English users

Although Japanese English learners are well aware of the potential of English as a means to communicate with the world, this remains an abstract concept for most, who have limited English interaction outside the classroom and continue to associate the language primarily with the people and cultures of traditionally English-speaking countries. Japanese university students, furthermore, tend to have less experience with international online English communication than their counterparts in many other countries. In this article, the author discusses several factors that contribute to the difficulty many Japanese students have conceptualizing themselves as members of an imagined global community of English users: the Japanese discourses of *Nihonjinron* and *kokusaiika*, the Japanese translation and publishing industries, and a preference for domestic social networking websites. He concludes by advocating increased employment of international Internet exchange projects in Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms as the best hope for facilitating membership in the imagined global community of English users.

日本人の英語学習者たちは、世界中の人々とのコミュニケーションをとる手段としての英語の可能性をよく理解しているが、教室以外で英語を使用することがあまりなく、多くの人々は英語を主に伝統的な英語圏の国の人々や文化に連想づけ、英語は抽象的な概念にとどまっている。さらに、日本の大学生は他の多くの国の大学生より英語による国際的なオンラインコミュニケーションをした経験が少ない傾向にある。本論では、多くの日本人に英語ユーザーとして自分自身を仮想国際社会の一員と見ることを難しくしているいくつかの要因を述べる。(例えば、日本人論と国際化という日本語の言説、日本の翻訳、出版業界、日本国内のソーシャルネットワーキングサイトを好む傾向など。) 国際的なインターネット交流プロジェクトは、日本のEFLクラスで使用することによって日本人の英語ユーザーが仮想国際社会の一員となりうる最善の希望的方法であると締めくくる。

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Gone are the days when it could be assumed that the primary purpose of learning English was to communicate with speakers from Britain, Australasia, and North America (BANA countries). Today the English language functions as the world's lingua franca and belongs to all of its users—not just speakers from a handful of Anglo cultures. English is now a shared resource, and in recent years, several researchers (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Lamb, 2004; Ryan, 2006; Yashima, 2002) have argued that young people are increasingly associating English not with the people and cultures of BANA countries, but instead with an international global culture and community. Attempting to explain what motivates the legion of English learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts who may have no interest in BANA countries and cultures, Ryan (2006) proposes that what compels many to expend considerable efforts learning the language is a sense of membership in an imagined global community of English users—imagined because, like Anderson's (1991) observation about national communities, members of a global community of English users “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p. 6). This imagined global community is one in which, as citizens of the world, Japanese learners of English are already at least legitimate charter members.

Despite Yashima's (2002) observation that "English seems to represent something vaguer and larger than the American community in the minds of young Japanese learners" (p. 57), from my experience as a language teacher in Japan, it seems to me that most Japanese learners of English, like those in Matsuda's (2003) study, continue to associate the language with the people and cultures of BANA countries—an orientation reinforced by Japanese English language teaching (ELT) textbooks (see Matsuda, 2002) and the JET Programme's overwhelming preference for using assistant language teachers (ALTs) from BANA countries. Furthermore, it seems to me that Japanese English learners (with some exceptions, of course) tend to have great difficulty conceptualizing themselves as members of an imagined global community of English users. While they are very much aware of the potential of English as a means to communicate with the world, for most of them, this remains a rather abstract notion. In this article, I will discuss a few reasons for this. I will refrain, however, from discussing the manner in which English is taught and learned in Japanese schools. Although this does undoubtedly play a large role in preventing Japanese students from embracing membership in an imagined global community of English users, ELT literature is filled with exhaustive discussions of how the instruction students typically receive in Japanese schools produces individuals so fearful of making mistakes that they are not capable of functional English communication (e.g., Martin, 2004). Needless to say, if one is petrified of communicating out of a fear of one's English production not being 100% correct, conceptualizing oneself as a member of a community of English users would be very difficult indeed. I will focus my discussion here instead on some factors that have received less attention in the ELT literature: the Japanese discourses of *Nihonjinron* and *kokusaika*, the Japanese translation and publishing industries, and a Japanese preference for domestic social networking services. Each of these, I feel, plays a substantial role in insulating Japanese learners of English from the outside world, reifying in their minds the "us and them" dichotomy that others all non-Japanese and renders Japanese membership in an imagined global community a rather incomprehensible concept.

### *Nihonjinron* and *Kokusaika* discourses

One reason that Japanese learners of English might find it difficult to have a sense of mem-

bership in an imagined global community of English users is the prevalence of two particular discourses in Japanese society—the discourses of *Nihonjinron* (stressing Japanese uniqueness) and *Kokusaika* (internationalization). These discourses, working in tandem, send complementary messages to the Japanese people, causing them to view themselves as possessing a uniqueness that precludes full membership in any non-domestic community.

*Nihonjinron*, which literally translated means *theories about the Japanese*, refers to a vast body of texts and rhetoric, which have been propagated for centuries, but achieved widespread popularity in the 1960s and 70s as the world sought an explanation for Japan's economic growth (Kubota, 1998). Astutely described by Scalise (2003) as a "melding of blissful ignorance, dogmatic arrogance, utopian idealism, and pop psychology" (p. 9), *Nihonjinron* discourse is highly nationalistic, promoting the cultural and genetic distinctiveness of the Japanese people. Despite constant attacks by critics (e.g., Dale, 1986; Lie, 2000, 2001), it continues to be omnipresent and highly influential. As Lie (2000) observes, "In spite of the manifest limitations of *Nihonjinron* writings, many of the books are eagerly read by Japanese seeking knowledge of themselves and their culture . . . *Nihonjinron* provides a ready-made repository of propositions about Japanese society" (pp. 86–87).

Two common *Nihonjinron* themes are the geographical fact that Japan is an island nation and the country's long stretch of isolation, commonly referred to as the *Sakoku* period (1640–1853), during which Japan was closed in an attempt to protect its culture from the threat of Western influence. The extent to which the country's island status and history contributed to the Japanese image of themselves as ever so unique or whether this mindset has come about largely due to incessant exposure to *Nihonjinron* discourse is hotly debated (see Lie, 2000, 2001), but an isolationist mindset has clearly permeated the Japanese psyche. As Sergeant (2005) comments, "Japan perhaps considers itself as an island nation clearly separated from an international mainland" (p. 310).

The term *kokusaika* is generally translated as *internationalization*, but the particular variety of internationalization advocated in Japanese *kokusaika* discourse is by no means a hearty embrace of the outside world. Instead, *kokusaika* policies were grudgingly adopted in the 1980s in an attempt to alleviate tensions with

an international community that was upset over trade imbalances. These policies and the *kokusaika* discourse that accompanied them did indeed promote increased international understanding through English language education and foreign exchange, but amidst expressed commitment to these efforts was an ever-present focus on “adding a Japanese perspective to the international order, spreading Japanese values, culture, and history, and helping people see the world through Japanese eyes” (Burgess, 2004, para. 22). Through *kokusaika* discourse, Japan has thus managed to tinge its internationalization efforts with the *Nihonjinron* discourse of Japanese distinctiveness in a process that Seargeant (2005) describes as “recasting the concept of internationalization according to specific Japanese needs, of presenting an internationalist image to the international community while still managing to adhere to a nationalist or even isolationist agenda” (p. 313).

### The Japanese translation and publishing industries

In recent years, the declining numbers of Japanese students studying abroad has received a great deal of media attention, with some commentators (e.g., Kakuchi, 2012) contrasting these dwindling numbers with those of South Korea, which has far more students studying overseas than Japan does despite its smaller population, and some (e.g., Whipp, 2011) attributing the decline to a growing reluctance by Japanese youth to venture outside their comfort zone. One particular comfort that I feel contributes to Japanese young people seeming far more content to restrict themselves to domestic interactions than their counterparts in some similar EFL contexts is Japan’s efficient and well-developed translation industry, which enables Japanese students to access almost any piece of reading material they might desire in Japanese, making even interaction with English texts almost never a necessity. As one Japanese blogger (Ezoe, 2011) discussing lack of English ability among Japanese computer programmers explains, “Almost all English programming books are translated to Japanese. It’s not just books. Standards, documents and every interesting text in the internet are translated” (para. 6). Fouser (2011) contrasts the Japanese translation industry with that of Korea, reporting that “Important books, particularly bestsellers, are translated into Japanese very quickly. But more than speed, the number of books translated into Japanese is much greater” (para. 14). While

Korea’s comparative lack of works translated into Korean does not necessarily imply that Koreans read more in English than Japanese do, the study abroad statistics at least do suggest a greater desire to be able to do so.

It is not just Japan’s translation industry, however, that contributes to Japanese youth having no pressing need to obtain information in English. The Japanese publishing industry in general is incredibly comprehensive, offering not only translations of works originating in foreign languages, but also an immense amount of homegrown output. While being able to read *manga* serves as a big motivation for many of its enthusiasts throughout the world to learn Japanese and English, the Japanese, of course, have a constant supply in their own language readily available at any convenience store. And while it’s perhaps the most prominent and profitable segment of the Japanese publishing market, *manga* only represents a fraction of the Japanese that gets published in print and on the Internet. As Guest (2006) points out, “there is copious information available in Japanese about every possible subject. Got a passion for Islamic pottery? A hankering for breeding bloodhounds? Look no further! It’s all available without leaving the mother tongue!” (para. 14).

### The Japanese preference for domestic social networking services

This last obstacle that I will discuss here is one that may well prove to become less of an obstacle in the months and years to come. The world of social networking in Japan and elsewhere, after all, is in continuous flux. When *Facebook* launched its Japanese interface in 2008, it failed to attract many users, largely due to the immense popularity of its already established domestic competitor *Mixi*. According to Tsuchimoto (2012), *Mixi* had 26,230,000 users in December 2011. That’s 20.6% of the Japanese population, far outnumbering *Facebook*’s 4.9% of the population during the same period (socialbakers, 2012).

*Facebook*’s underdog status seemed to change last year with many users abandoning *Mixi*, and by the end of 2012, *Facebook* could boast 17.2 million users in Japan (Stuart, 2013)—almost 13.5% of the population. This newfound popularity, however, may be short-lived, as a new social networking player, *LINE*, recently became the most used social networking site in Japan, with over 41 million Japanese users as of June 2013—many of whom appear to be migrating away from

*Facebook*, which has seen a 19.5% decrease in user numbers in just five months (Stuart, 2013).

Although it is a subsidiary of a South Korean company, *LINE*'s developer, NHN Japan, has created a truly homegrown product tailored to Japanese tastes. In addition to focusing their attention on smartphones (which are the only PCs for many Japanese), *LINE* has capitalized on the popularity of emoticons in Japan, taking the concept one step further by offering a huge array of "stamps"—*LINE*'s own cuddly characters expressing every emotion imaginable. Conversations with my former students in Japan have brought to my attention yet another *LINE* feature that appeals to the Japanese: In contrast to *Facebook*'s focus on self-presentation to a large extended network, *LINE*'s emphasis is on chatting and relationships with individual *LINE* "friends." This, my former students tell me, is far more in line with Japanese societal norms and preferences. NHN Japan's CEO, in fact, admits that it was a closed network that *LINE* developers were striving to create, reporting, "We wanted a more closed private and friendly communication tool" (quoted in Nakata, 2013, para. 6).

It is, of course, completely understandable that the Japanese would want to use services that the majority of their friends are also using and are most in keeping with societal norms. These preferences, however, serve to further insulate them from the outside world. While *Facebook* users are very likely to encounter those of other nationalities, at least through friends of friends, *Mixi* users are almost entirely Japanese, and *LINE*, despite phenomenal growth in other countries besides Japan, utilizes a closed system in which users are unlikely to be exposed to posts or conversations beyond the group of "friends" they already have.

## Conclusion

The factors discussed here are, of course, inter-related. Clear distinctions of "us and them" promoted by *Nihonjinron* and *kokusaika* discourses encourage reliance on the Japanese translation/publishing industries and a preference for *LINE* over *Facebook*. Young people in Japan need to start conceptualizing themselves as members of an imagined global community of English users, for co-membership with non-Japanese in any community—even an imagined one—will help to eradicate the boundaries that *Nihonjinron* and *kokusaika* discourses induce between individuals. Language teachers, I believe, have a role to

play in helping students embrace international community membership. In my opinion, online exchange projects between Japanese students and groups of English learners in other countries offer the best hope for the sort of self-conceptualization transformations I have in mind, for it is through the personal connections such projects facilitate that the "us and them" divisions can potentially be shattered.

In 2011, students in my writing classes at a Japanese university participated in such a project with a group of English learners at a Taiwanese university, and although many of my students still did seem to regard themselves as the ever so unique Japanese interacting *with* an international community rather than *in* the community as part of it, they nevertheless gained valuable English as a lingua franca communication experience and friendships that, in many cases, will likely endure. Quite a few of my students did not have *Facebook* accounts prior to their participation in this project (which used a *Moodle* platform), but at the urging of their Taiwanese forum-mates, some of them opened *Facebook* accounts and took their communication private. In an end of the semester survey, one student reported, "Actually, we contacted by *Facebook*, and now we still contact by it . . . She became my important friend." This is the sort of personal connection that is at least a good first step toward this student conceptualizing herself as a member of the imagined global community of English users, which could in turn bring about feelings of English ownership, a sense of agency in her use of English, and ultimately (perhaps) a decline in the privilege granted to BANA Englishes.

Japan can ill afford maintaining the wall separating it from the rest of the world, and in recent months, Japanese politicians seem to be going out of their way to actively reinforce this wall with inflammatory rhetoric. For the sake of peace and prosperity, it is now all the more crucial that Japanese learners/users of English, the segment of the population for whom engagement with the outside world is most feasible, counter such rhetoric by forming bonds of solidarity with the international community. For this to happen on a large scale requires changes in how they conceptualize themselves, Japan, and the world.

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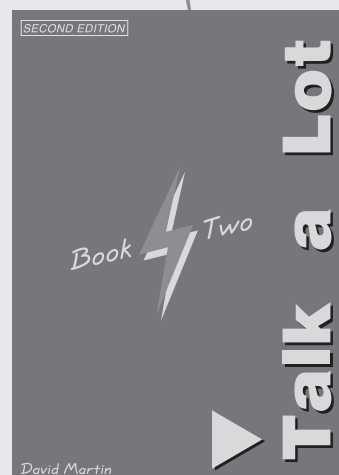
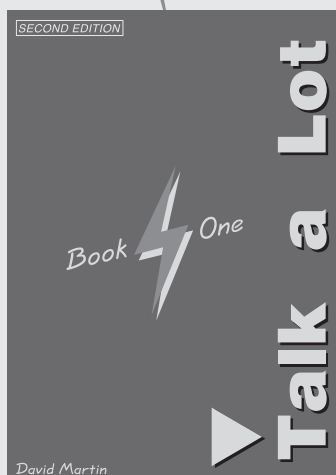
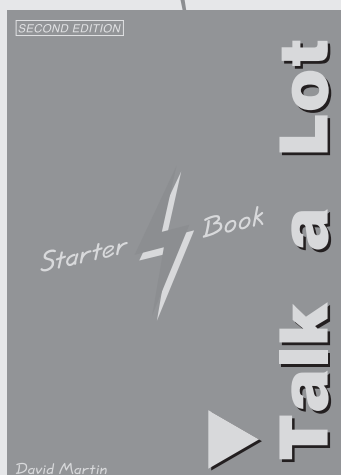
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