Attitudes of Japanese Learners Toward Japanese English and Intelligibility in International Communication

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English teaching in Japan for the most part follows a native speaker model, despite the fact that English has now become an international language. It is not surprising then that listening exercises or pronunciation examples generally follow a single model, and that diversion from that model is often seen as incorrect. This article presents the findings of two different, but interrelated exploratory surveys. First, Japanese speakers of English were interviewed about their feelings toward Japanese-accented English and loanwords, including 18 that appear in the elementary school English textbook Eigo Note 1 as being potentially problematic. The second part describes a small-scale project whereby these 18 loanwords were tested for intelligibility with non-Japanese speakers of English. The results suggest that the intelligibility of loanwords could be less of an issue than previously thought, and that the concepts of World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca may be more appropriate guides.

英語は今や国際語となっているにもかかわらず、日本の英語教育のほとんどはネイティブスピーカーをモデルにすることにとらわれている。そのためリスニングや発音練習がネイティブを目指したものであることや、ネイティブモデルから逸れた場合、誤りであると見なされていることは、驚くべき事ではない。この論文では、二つの密接に関わる試験的調査の結果を報告する。一つ目は、日本人英語話者に対して、小学校で使用されている英語の教科書「英語ノート1」に掲載されている18つの外来語や、日本語訛りの英語についてどう感じているのか、インタビュー調査したものである。二つ目は、日本語話者でない英語話者に、これらの18単語が理解できるかについて、少人数を対象に調査したものである。調査の結果として、外来語は、多くの人が考えるほど理解に問題があるわけではないという事が示唆された。このことから、World EnglishesやEnglish as a Lingua Francaの概念は、学習者と教育者の両方において、より良いモデルを提供できうると考えられる。

As **English** is now an international language "par excellence" (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999; McKay, 2002), native speakers can no longer claim sole ownership of it. The spread of the language has resulted in the concepts of World Englishes (WE) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

WE is generally understood through Kachru's (1985) concentric circle model (Figure 1) of Inner Circle (English is spoken as a native language), Outer Circle (English has official status or is used in some formal situations), and Expanding Circle (English is used by some of the population but it does not hold official status and has limited or no formal uses). While Inner Circle population numbers remain relatively static, the population of other speakers of English is continually growing so that the number of non-native speakers of English now outnumbers native speakers (Hülmbauer, Böhringer, & Seidlhofer, 2008). As the number of native speak-

ers decreases in comparison to other speakers of English, the power that they hold to prescribe a model also decreases and this can have an empowering effect for English speakers even in Expanding Circle countries such as Japan.
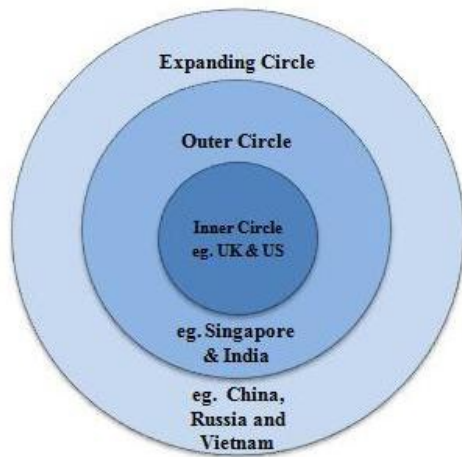

Figure 1. Kachru's Concentric Circle Model of World Englishes

On the other hand, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is a view of English as a common international language that speakers from diverse language and cultural backgrounds come together and use and is thus sometimes seen as being at odds with WE, due to the fact that it seeks a common language and so, some argue, a relatively culture-free version of English (Pölzl, 2003) in contrast to the WE diversity, where different Englishes serve to create group identity and affiliation.

However, the work of ELF theorists and practitioners can also be useful in the Japanese context. Jenkins' (2000) Lingua Franca

Core (LFC), which was the result of extensive empirical research into areas of misunderstanding due to pronunciation "mistakes", suggests that many of the areas traditionally considered vital for intelligibility are perhaps not as important as originally thought. For example, with consonant sounds, the LFC accepts substitutions such as /s/ and /z/ for /θ/ and /ð/, or /ʊ/ for the dark l /ɫ/. It also suggests a general rule that for vowels, quantity is more important than quality, with the exception of the /ɜː/ sound. Particularly pertinent for Japanese speakers, Jenkins also found that addition of vowel sounds between word initial consonants in tricky consonant clusters causes few intelligibility issues (such as a Japanese speaker adding in /u/ after the /s/ in the word *stretch*).

Despite the realities of English use around the world today, in many teaching environments in Japan, English is still learnt through a native speaker model, with the General American (GA) or to a lesser extent British Received Pronunciation (RP) standards being the end goal for learners. This goal is so unreasonable that the vast majority of learners are destined to fail, which disadvantages that majority (Honna & Takashita, 1998) and may result in a loss of confidence and motivation, leading some learners to just give up.

The native speaker model affects not only students but also teachers (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Rajagopalan (2004) blames it for creating "an extremely enervating inferiority complex among many a non-native speaker learner/teacher" and for helping to "spawn unfair and discriminatory hiring practices" (p. 114). This inferiority complex can certainly be seen among Japanese elementary school teachers, who from April 2011 have been made to teach English to fifth- and sixth-grade students. Although these teachers are teaching basic English, many of them have little confidence in their abilities to do even that, and one of the areas that they worry about is pronunciation.

While the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) doesn't formally impose any particular model, there is an implicit support of the native speaker model when MEXT-approved textbooks utilise only native speakers for listening activities. For example, the *Eigo Note 1* and *Eigo Note 2* textbooks (MEXT, 1999a/1999b) created for elementary schools are accompanied with audio of GA-speakers. These speakers provide voices even for those characters in the book from countries other than America and there are many occasions where they provide the voices for characters from Japan, Australia, Russia, China, Brazil and more. There are a few exceptions where "foreign" characters appear with non-GA accents, although these are clearly faked. This seems counter to MEXT statements supporting an international language of communication, for instance where they explain that "for children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language" (MEXT, 2003).

A particularly illuminating example of support for the native speaker model can be found in lesson six of *Eigo Note 1*, which is designated for fifth graders. In this unit, students learn that English words they know through loanwords are in fact completely different in "real" English. In Japanese, these words are called *gairaigo* which literally means "word coming from outside" and describes those words of foreign origin that are used within the Japanese language. The suggested goal of this lesson is that students should first recognize this difference and then carefully pronounce the words in the "correct" way. A guide for teachers that turns up in many prefectural board of education guidelines around the country explains the purpose of the lesson as follows:

> 「外来語とそのもととなる語とでは，音が違うことに気付き，英語の音に気を付けて発音しようとする。」(Oita Prefectural Board of Education, 2011)

"gairaigo to sono mototonaru go to deha, oto ga chigau koto ni kitsuduki, eigo no oto ni ki wo tsukete hatsuon shiyou to suru"

[To become aware of the difference between Japanese loanwords and the original English words and to carefully pronounce those words in English.] Author's translation

This simplistic focus on a dichotomous relationship between Japanese English (which according to this approach can be thought to be "wrong") and a single "correct" English does nothing to introduce the reality of English as an international language. It also creates the belief that these words, spoken with a Japanese voice, will be all but impossible for any English speaker outside of Japan to understand.

This attitude appears to be prevalent not just among Japanese learners and teachers, but native speakers as well. A quick Internet search for the term "Japanese English" gives a sense of the weight of negativity toward such a concept. In fact, in a Google search for "Japanese English" done in December 2011, the first positive comment couldn't be found within the results lines until the 15th page of search results.

The studies outlined in this paper aim to address this myth that Japanese English serves no other purpose than to confound, and shows that intelligibility issues of Japanese English may be less pronounced than previously thought.

Method

There are two separate but interrelated strands to this study. The first part surveys the feelings and attitudes of Japanese speakers of English towards *gairaigo*. The second investigates the actual intelligibility of *gairaigo* when heard by non-Japanese speakers of English. Intelligibility in this paper refers to whether or not a listener recognises the word as being the one the speaker intended it to be.

For the first part, several fourth-year students at a university in Western Japan were interviewed about their feelings toward the use or otherwise of *gairaigo* in their study of English, their attitudes toward a Japanese accent, and finally, which words from the *Eigo Note 1* unit on *gairaigo* they would consider to be problematic for intelligibility when communicating with non-Japanese English speakers. The second part of the study involved surveying English speakers from eight different countries. In the survey, participants listened to each English word pronounced by a Japanese speaker and were asked to identify that word. They then listened to a representative English sentence pronounced by the same Japanese speaker to gain some context and were asked to identify the word again.

Attitudes to *Gairaigo* and *Katakana* Accents.

In short interviews at a large university in Western Japan, five fourth-year students with intermediate to advanced levels of English were asked about their feelings toward their own accent and a Japanese accented English in general. Although there were mixed feelings, with some wishing to be able to emulate native speakers and others content with speaking in their own accent, students were generally united in their belief that a non-Japanese accent should provide the model for which they strive, and all were sure that a *katakana* accent would result in misunderstandings in international communication. This is not surprising for at least two reasons.

First, many students in this study cited personal experience of people not understanding them, although the reasons were not always specified or specifiable. In fact, when asked about real-life examples of misunderstandings due to pronunciation, it became clear that in some cases students might not be aware of the underlying causes of the problem. For example, one student exasperatedly discussed her problems of trying to get her home-stay mother to understand the word *bath* as opposed to *bus*.

When asked what she thought the problem was, she identified her inability to correctly use the /θ/, and /ð/ sounds (see above for discussion of consonant sounds), and when I pointed out to her that the vowel lengths in each are different (and arguably the main cause of the misunderstanding) she was surprised and explained that she hadn't realised this. This suggests that it may be useful for teachers to reinvest some of the time spent on pronunciation into advising students of potential problem areas and how to avoid them, while allowing them to practice strategies for overcoming such misunderstanding, for example rewording and using gestures.

Second, students' attitudes to a Japanese accent cannot be easily divorced from the attitudes of society: teachers, parents, the media and other students around them. With such negative beliefs about a Japanese English accent, it is not hard to see why Japanese learners would be fighting conventional wisdom in expressing a positive view of their own accent. This general view was apparent among some of the students when questioning them about the pronunciation of the *Eigo Note* words. They identified many of these words as being unintelligible to non-Japanese speakers if spoken with a Japanese accent.

These students were shown a list of eighteen loanwords from lesson 6 of *Eigo Note 1* and two other words, *first* and *word* which I added to this list. This was because none of the words used in *Eigo Note 1* contain the vowel /ɜː/,which is a vowel singled out in Jenkin's (2000) LFC as being potentially important for intelligibility in International English. The full list of twenty words appears in Appendix 1. Interviewees were shown these words and were asked to identify those words which they considered to be intelligible if not pronounced in the "correct" (i.e. native) way when speaking with a non-Japanese English speaker. Results showed that these students had a reasonably intuitive sense of some words which would be understood and some of which might cause problems. For example the students

unanimously thought that *piano* and *lemon* would cause no major issues, whereas all realized that *terebi* would be problematic (although in this case the word is contracted as well as pronounced differently and so it is not just a case of pronunciation difference). However, they were divided on others. Some thought that *guitar* and *calendar* would be unintelligible and yet as will be seen in the discussion below these words caused few or no problems for non-Japanese English speakers. Conversely all of the students thought that the word *first*, spoken with a Japanese accent would be fully understandable to anyone, and yet it proved to be one of the hardest of all 20 words for listeners. This suggests that students could benefit from learning which areas of pronunciation do actually cause problems of intelligibility. In table 1, the right hand column shows the number of students who thought each of the 20 words would be intelligible to a non-Japanese speaker of English.

Intelligibility of *Gairaigo* Words with Non-Japanese English Speakers

Method

The second part of this project involved recording a Japanese speaker saying each of the 20 words in a heavy *katakana* accent. Recordings were made for each individual word as well as embedded within a representative sentence, which was also spoken in a Japanese *katakana* accent. These sentences were constructed so as to be reasonably typical examples, which gave some context, but did not point to the word exactly and still left some room for doubt. For example, the sentence example for the word *camera* was "I lost my camera while I was on holiday" (see Appendix 1 for full details of the word and sentence list).

These sound files were incorporated into an online survey using *www.surveygizmo.com* and this survey was then sent to na-tive or near-native English speakers in eight different countries. While these countries included both Inner Circle and Expanding Circle countries (but unfortunately none from the Outer Circle) this was a sample of convenience, in that respondents were people known to the researcher or acquaintances of those people. It was requested in the introduction to the survey that people with any experience of learning Japanese or those who had spent more than two weeks in Japan refrain from completing the survey. The rationale behind this was to try to avoid having respondents with exposure to Japan and therefore potential knowledge or experience of Japanese English and a Japanese accent. In total, 30 people responded from New Zealand, USA, Ireland, Australia, England, Scotland, Turkey and France. From these, three responses were rejected as those respondents had spent more than two weeks in Japan and one due to experience studying Japanese. Thus, the results of 26 responses will be discussed.

The format of the survey was simple. Respondents were instructed to listen to a single word once by pressing a play button. In a text box they then typed what English word they thought it was, and were advised to write something even if they were not completely sure of the correct word. An ideal approach would see respondents noting the certainty of their answer on a scale, but that was beyond the scope of this small-scale exploratory study. If respondents had no idea, they were asked to write "no idea". Following this, they were asked to listen to a sentence containing the word. They then typed what word they thought it was in another text box. They were asked to leave their original answer as it was, even if it was different from their subsequent answer at sentence level. This format was the same for each of the 20 words. Finally, there were some basic questions to ascertain nationality, native language, age and time spent in Japan or studying Japanese.

Results

Of the 20 words investigated, four presented no problems to any of the 26 listeners even at word-only level. Three of these words, *banana*, *guitar* and *piano,* were also identified by most of the Japanese speaker interviewees as being unproblematic, so this could be seen as evidence of a certain implicit understanding among learners of which areas of pronunciation will cause intelligibility issues (however, the fourth word, *tomato* was chosen by three of the five students as being difficult to understand by non-Japanese listeners).

For a further four words, *camera*, *koala*, *calendar*, and *donut*, all 26 listeners could comprehend the word at sentence level (with most already understanding at word level). This is despite a feeling among some Japanese interviewees that these words would be impossible for non-Japanese to understand if pronounced with a Japanese accent. For example *calendar* was elected by four of the interviewees as a word that could be not be understood by non-Japanese English speakers. The words *kangaroo* and *basketball* were understood at sentence level by 25 and 24 listeners respectively, with most also understanding at word level.

The above results suggest that over half of the 18 words that *Eigo Note* highlights as being problematic would cause no major communication problems for non-Japanese English speakers listening to Japanese speakers (and of course in a real communicative encounter, speakers could repeat and use body gestures, of which listeners in this survey did not have the luxury).

With regard to the remaining eight words from *Eigo Note*, two words, *gorilla* and *lemon* could be understood by all but one listener at sentence level, and the words *cabbage* and *soccer ball* were understood by all but five and seven listeners respectively at sentence level. The words *cake* and *milk* were very hard for respondents to understand at word level, but context helped them to be understood by all but two people at sentence level.

Interestingly all of the student interviewees thought that *cake* would be unintelligible, while most thought that *milk* would be understood.

This then leaves only two words from the list of words in *Eigo Note* that are potentially problematic for comprehension. It is probably not surprising that the word *television* (which in *gairaigo* is rendered *terebi*), because of its difference from the original word, was unintelligible even at sentence level to 21 of the respondents. The most difficult word to understand proved to be *glove* which only two people surveyed could understand even at sentence level, and this is probably due to the fact that it has entered into the Japanese use with a different vowel sound and also confounding the problem is that Japanese speakers maybe pronounce the /l/ as an /r/ approximant or the /v/ as /b/.

As for the two extra words featuring the problematic /ɜː/ sound, unsurprisingly, neither word was easy for the survey respondents, with *word* being understood by only one person at word level (although context helped it to be understood at sentence level by all but one person), and *first*, which was not understood by 11 people even at sentence level. Table 1 provides an overview of the results.

Discussion

The results outlined above suggest that while indeed there will be some areas of intelligibility with English words used in Japanese, the issue may be less of a problem than many teachers, students and the general public presently believe. On the contrary, *gairaigo* should perhaps be seen in a much more positive light, and as an excellent learning tool (as suggested by Daulton, 2011) especially when English is being taught as an international English.

The present study has a number of limitations. It is limited in scope, investigating only 20 gairaigo words as listened to

Table 1. Results of Intelligibility of *Gairaigo* Words by Non-Japanese Native and Near-Native English Speakers

Word	Understood at word level (out of 26 people)	Understood at sentence level (out of 26 people)	Indicated as intelligible to non-Japanese speakers by Japanese students (out of 5 people)
tomato	26	26	2
banana	26	26	4
guitar	26	26	4
piano	26	26	5
koala	25	26	4
basketball	24	24	4
donut	23	26	2
calendar	21	26	1
camera	21	26	2
kangaroo	20	25	4
cabbage	17	20	1
lemon	10	25	5
cake	6	24	0
milk	2	24	4
gorilla	2	25	3
soccer ball	2	18	4
terebi	2	4	0
glove	1	3	1
word	1	25	1
first	1	15	4

by 26 native or near-native speakers. The example sentences also were not pre-tested to avoid overly helpful context, and it may be possible that some of the sentences were more helpful than others for the survey respondents. Also, only five Japanese

students were interviewed for their beliefs about accent and which words and sounds might cause problems. Finally, both the word survey participants and students who participated in the interviews were from samples of convenience. However, as an exploratory study, it highlights some areas that certainly warrant further inquiry.

Future research looking at (a) what phonetic features of Japanese English cause intelligibility issues for non-Japanese speakers, and (b) whether or not these features are understood by Japanese learners and teachers to be problematic, could provide a valuable resource for both language teachers and learners in Japan when focusing on pronunciation of English as an international language. A knowledge of which words or word features are likely to cause problems of comprehension would be valuable for students, as would be communication strategies to overcome such issues.

Conclusion

A new approach to the teaching of English in Japan can be found in the theories of WE and ELF, which directly oppose the native speaker model. An understanding of the true nature of English as it is used as an international language and the realities of intelligibility, which can be discovered through empirical studies rather than personal opinion, should do much to dispel some of the myths presently held by many educationalists, language students and the general public. The present study provides a glimpse of how these beliefs can be completely unfounded, in that over half of the words presented in the MEXT-sanctioned *Eigo Note* textbook as examples of problematic *gairaigo* are in fact for the most part easily understood by non-Japanese speakers. This fact alone should go some way to giving greater confidence and perhaps even motivation to Japanese teachers and learners of English. Although preliminary and exploratory in nature, it suggests that a more positive

view of *gairaigo* would not be misplaced and this could have a motivating and empowering effect on Japanese learners and even some Japanese teachers of English, for example those Japanese elementary school teachers who have been made to teach English from 2011.

Bio Data

Justin Harris works at Kyoto Sangyo University teaching undergraduate students. He is also involved in a program at Osaka Shoin Women's University training elementary school teachers in the basics of teaching English to children.

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Appendix 1
List of Loanwords and Representative Sentences

1.	Word	tomato
1a.	Sentence	Do you like *tomato*?
2.	Word	banana
2a	Sentence	I had a *banana* for breakfast.
3.	Word	kangaroo
3a.	Sentence	When I went to Australia I saw many *kangaroo*.
4.	Word	guitar
4a.	Sentence	I started playing the *guitar* when I was 18 years old.
5.	Word	camera
5a.	Sentence	I lost my *camera* while I was on holiday

6.	Word	cake
6a.	Sentence	Would you like to try some of this *cake*?
7.	Word	koala
7a.	Sentence	*Koala* are very cute animals
8.	Word	calendar
8a.	Sentence	I'd like to buy a 2012 *calendar*.
9.	Word	piano
9a.	Sentence	I take *piano* lessons once a week.
10.	Word	milk
10a.	Sentence	Would you like *milk* in your coffee
11.	Word	soccer ball
11a.	Sentence	I bought a *soccer ball* for my son for his birthday.
12.	Word	cabbage
12a.	Sentence	I think there is a *cabbage* in the fridge.
13.	Word	glove
13a.	Sentence	I need to buy some *glove*.
14.	Word	gorilla
14a.	Sentence	He is as hairy as a *gorilla*.
15.	Word	donut
15a.	Sentence	I'm getting so fat! I should stop eating so many *donuts*.
16.	Word	basketball
16a.	Sentence	Have you seen a *basketball* around here anywhere?
17.	Word	lemon
17a.	Sentence	I got a bag of *lemon* from my neighbor.
18.	Word	terebi
18a.	Sentence	He bought a big *terebi*.
19.	Word	word
19a.	Sentence	What does that *word* mean?
20.	Word	first
20a.	Sentence	That was the *first* car I bought.