

# Issues Related to the Internationalizing of Japanese Universities

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In an era of increased internationalization in tertiary education, the Japan Ministry of Education's Global 30 Project was aimed at rapidly increasing the number of foreign students in Japan. However, there has been little investigation of how these international students are being received by their Japanese peers, and what effect an internationalized study environment has on opinions of both foreign and domestic students with respect to their language study and attitudes towards English use. Utilizing a 2-stage methodology of surveys supported by focus-group interviews, I compared students at a Japanese international university with students at a Global 30 university and a regular private university in Japan. The findings suggest that the increase in international university students could have a positive effect on domestic students in relation to their attitudes towards the study of English. However, there were concerns among international students connected to their experience of localized varieties of English.

国際化が進んでいる日本の高等教育では、文部科学省事業の「グローバル30」などの取り組みは、留学生が増加することを目標にしていた。しかしこれらの留学生が日本人の学生らの中でどのように受け入れられているのか、また、国際化してきた学習環境は、語学の勉強および英語の使用に関して国内外の学生の双方にどのような影響を与えているのかの調査はほとんどなされてこなかった。この研究では、日本の国際的な大学、グローバル30採択大学、および一般的な国内の大学の3つの異なる大学の学生たちの考え方をサーベイ、フォーカスグループインタビューの2段階方法で比較調査した。結果、留学生の増加は、日本人学生の英語の勉強に対する考え方に関連して、プラスの効果を持っていることを示唆している。しかし一方では、留学生のグループでは、英語の局所的な変種を経験することに対する懸念も出ていた。

**J**APANESE UNIVERSITIES face nothing short of an existential crisis in the coming decades. With the domestic birthrate already declining to below a level for a sustainable national population, the number of customers for Japanese higher education will soon be in precipitous decline (Butler & Iino, 2005; Sakai & D'Angelo, 2005). Of the nearly 800 universities in Japan, the majority are private institutions (MEXT, 2013). While all universities face funding difficulties due to declining student intake, private institutions receive Ministry of Education support that totals only a little over 10% of their total costs, whereas the total for public universities is over 50% (Maruyama, 2008). The shortfall in funding for private institutions has always resulted in higher fees for private institutions, currently standing at three times the cost of public university fees (Maruyama, 2008). However, raising student fees cannot be the long-term answer for institutions facing a fall in domestic recruitment.



Wider international recruitment is one solution that is already available, and one that addresses the specific concern of from where the next cohort of students for Japanese universities will come. As Ninomiya, Knight, and Watanabe (2009) stated, “It is not an exaggeration to say that . . . internationalization is a lifeline of the university in Japan in terms of increasing low enrolments and optimizing its research output and competitiveness” (p. 123). One method a university can use to attract international interest is by increasing its standing in internationally recognized rankings. University rankings are undertaken by a number of organizations, but the most often referenced in the Asia Pacific region are the Times Higher Education (THE) and Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) indices. THE and QS rankings reward universities with higher scores based on international recognition, including the number of faculty-produced peer-reviewed articles that are published and how many publications lead to subsequent citations, and on an institution’s international outreach, which is essentially how many international students they have coupled with their global reputation (Times Higher Education, 2013; Quacquarelli Symonds, 2013).

### Japanese Governmental Internationalization Initiatives

Universities in Japan are being incentivized to internationalize by the Japanese Ministry of Education (also known as the *Mombukagakusho* or *MEXT*). The Global 30 Project, begun in 2008, is currently winding down, but will be followed by the Super Global University Project. Both initiatives were aimed at doubling the number of international students entering Japanese universities. A Japan Times interview with the Japanese Minister for Education, Hakubun Shimomura, was instructive about how MEXT views the extension of programs encouraging international students to come to Japanese universities (Shimomura, 2013). The Ministry’s emphasis on both internationalization

and the use of English in this process is demonstrated by the requirements for universities in the new Super Global University Project to be “strongly committed to advancing internationalization by collaborating with overseas universities, hiring more foreign faculty members, increasing the number of degree programs in English, and so on” (p. B1). With these requirements, the ministry is reiterating to all universities what is required for them to receive funding and highlighting the fact that MEXT has English language use at the center of its plans for internationalizing universities. The success of the Super Global University Project could be the above-quoted “lifeline” that Ninomiya et al. (2009) referred to when considering universities’ efforts to remain profitable and competitive in the coming decades.

### Asian Performance Varieties of English

English language varieties from countries where English is considered to be a native language (known as *ENL* varieties of English), such as those varieties from Britain and America, are generally referred to as *standards*. Research into English use outside ENL contexts is called *World Englishes* research. The intent of academics focused on the study of World Englishes is “inculcating recognition of the systematicity, creativity, and legitimacy of new forms of English that emerged in the post-colonial and globalizing world” (Park & Wee, 2011, p. 360). Embedded in this statement are suggestions that there is a lack of recognition of such aspects of non-ENL English, and that some intervention on the part of teachers or institutions is required to make all users of English aware of the value of non-ENL varieties. Several prominent World Englishes researchers (D’Angelo, 2012; Matsuda, 2003; Matsuda & Friedrich, 2012; Yoshikawa, 2005) advocate for direct instruction about the existence of localized varieties of English in their attempts to generate positive student attitudes towards these non-ENL varieties.

Methods for this inculcation into World Englishes involve increasing EFL student exposure to non-ENL varieties of English. This can be achieved through the explicit inclusion of non-ENL varieties of EFL in classrooms for the purposes of engendering more positive opinions of non-ENL varieties of English among EFL students. Research on noninternational campuses in Japan and China concluded that exposure to varieties of English through teaching has a short-term effect of making student perceptions of the value of different non-ENL varieties of English in Asia more positive (Jin, 2005; Yoshikawa, 2005). This appreciation came in the form of an interest in the local variety of English in the case of *China English*, a local performance variety of English (Jin, 2005), and lower negative opinions of varieties of English from Asian countries (Yoshikawa, 2005). However, investigation of students' opinions in the later years of their university education by Yoshikawa found a continued interest in ENL varieties of English over localized Asian varieties despite language courses having been oriented towards engendering more positive attitudes towards non-ENL varieties of English.

Another method of widening students' experience of non-ENL varieties of English is through direct contact with non-ENL users of English. Students at the Beppu campus of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University are assigned language classes based on their first language of study, meaning that all the students who come to the university to take their major course subject classes in Japanese must study English in the same classes as regular Japanese domestic students. My interest was whether a university campus with a large number of international students, with whom interaction in EFL classes is part of the students' mandated study, would have an effect on domestic and international students' opinions with regard to the further study of World Englishes, specifically Asian varieties of English.

## The Study

The research presented in this report investigated the opinions of students from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) in Beppu, Japan's most highly internationalized university. Opened in 2000, APU accepts around 45% of its intake from outside Japan. International universities are neither a recent innovation nor particularly rare in Japan. Tokyo International University opened in 1965, Akita International University opened in 2004, and there are several smaller international colleges throughout the country, but the breadth of APU's foreign student population is unrivalled in Japan.

Reported here are findings of Japanese APU students' opinions compared with those of students from Tsukuba University and Tokyo Keizai University. These universities were selected because of characteristics that make them interesting counterpoints to APU, the main study site. Tsukuba University was a member of the Global 30 Project and has an international student population that is around 10% of its total student numbers. Tokyo Keizai University is of a similar size to APU and is also a private university, but its cohort of international students is much smaller, standing at around 2% of its total student body. In fact, Tokyo Keizai's international student population is smaller than the national average of around 7% (MEXT, 2013).

Also included in this report are data from two different populations of international students from APU, specifically Chinese and Korean students. Their responses and comments are offered as a counterpoint to Japanese students' opinions and provide a perspective from international student respondents studying in the same classes as Japanese APU students.

## Methodology

Students were surveyed using a 29-item online survey, followed by focus group interviews for those respondents who volun-

teered contact details in their initial, otherwise anonymous, survey responses. In total, 376 Japanese APU students, 216 Tsukuba University students, and 31 Tokyo Keizai University students responded to the survey, plus 20 Chinese and 20 Korean APU students. All students were surveyed in compulsory language classes, and none of them were language majors.

APU students who volunteered their email addresses in their responses to the survey were contacted and invited to join focus groups. The groups covered several items from the original survey, and in total, 22 Japanese, 6 Chinese, and 9 Korean APU students participated in the focus groups. At Tsukuba University, I used a Computer Mediated Interaction (CMI) survey with text boxes that matched items discussed in the APU focus groups. Nine Tsukuba University students responded to the CMI survey. All data collection was undertaken adhering to the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University research ethics guidelines.

## Findings

The data in this paper include the mean scores from 7-point Likert scale survey items, the number of respondents, and the standard deviation in scores. The higher the mean score, the more strongly respondents agreed with the proposition in the survey item.

### *Proposition 1: In My Experience, People from Different Places Speak Different Varieties of English.*

This proposition was included to give an impression of the difference between students' experiences by demonstrating their perceptions of their university environments. Although such information could be gathered from the demographic statistics of the universities themselves, as this study was based on students' opinions, I felt it necessary to establish students' personal

recognition of their circumstances.

Students from APU had higher levels of agreement than students from noninternationalized universities (see Table 1), and the more international students that were present at a university, the more the proposition was agreed with. This demonstrated that not only did students from APU have more exposure to different performance varieties of English than students from Tsukuba and Tokyo Keizai, but that they also recognized this difference.

**Table 1. Response Data for the Survey Proposition: In My Experience, People from Different Places Speak Different Varieties of English**

University (nationality)	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
APU (Japanese)	382	5.60	1.46
Tsukuba University	216	5.12	1.15
Tokyo Keizai University	31	4.74	1.50
APU (Chinese)	20	5.90	0.91
APU (Korean)	20	5.40	1.19

*Note.* Responses were on a 7-point Likert scale: 1 = very strongly disagree to 7 = very strongly agree; 4 = no opinion.

### *Proposition 2: I Think Studying English Is a Good Idea.*

Table 2 shows that students from APU all had higher agreement scores than those from Tsukuba or Tokyo Keizai. Japanese and Korean respondents at APU had a very similar level of agreement, with responses from Japanese respondents at APU being slightly higher. Of the five populations, Chinese APU students agreed most strongly with this proposition.

**Table 2. Response Data for the Survey Proposition:  
I Think Studying English Is a Good Idea**

University (nationality)	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
APU (Japanese)	381	5.97	1.45
Tsukuba University	216	5.53	1.18
Tokyo Keizai University	31	5.45	1.59
APU (Chinese)	20	6.50	0.69
APU (Korean)	20	5.75	1.48

*Note.* Responses were on a 7-point Likert scale.

When this proposition was given to Japanese APU students in focus groups, all participants agreed, with most saying that English was an “international” language, related to “globalization,” or that they thought English would give them an “opportunity” for “communication.” Students from Tsukuba University also all agreed with the proposition for broadly similar reasons, as they used “communicate” or “communication” in their responses. While these may appear objectively obvious statements, it was helpful in interpreting the survey data to know that Japanese students from both universities had broadly similar reasons for supporting the proposition, and that their reasons for agreement were also the opinions held by MEXT in relation to the mandatory study of English.

Responses to this proposition suggest that there is little difference between the basis of the opinions held by the different groups of students, but the levels of agreement with the proposition from APU students, and particularly international students from China, demonstrated that these students have a stronger personal belief that studying English is a necessary and helpful skill for their future. When the proposition, “I think studying English is a good idea,” was put to Chinese and Ko-

rean APU focus group students, the Chinese students all agreed, and only one Korean student disagreed, with both groups referring to English as a “global” or “world” language and saying that the study of English would help them in their current and future studies and professions. The majority of students believed that studying English is a good idea, but students at APU held this belief more strongly than their counterparts in other universities.

### *Proposition 3: If I Have To Speak English, I Feel Weak.*

This proposition provided respondents with an opportunity to express negative opinions about using English. English is a language that university students in Japan are mandated to study, and one that students at APU may also find themselves required to use in out-of-class language contact situations on campus. Similar propositions were used in Koizumi and Matsuo’s study of Japanese elementary school students (1993) and Yihong, Ying, Yuan, and Yan’s study of Chinese university students (2005) into language identity in an attempt to isolate occasions when students felt that the need for communication in English disadvantaged them. Although *weak* may be a polysemous word, the inclusion of this item in post-survey focus groups and CMI surveys gave me the opportunity to interpret the survey responses.

Korean APU students registered higher levels of agreement with this proposition relative to their counterparts from APU (see Table 3), suggesting that they felt more personal difficulty in situations when they had to use English than Japanese and Chinese students from the same university. However, levels of agreement from Korean APU students were not as high as those from Tsukuba or Tokyo Keizai.

**Table 3. Response Data for the Survey Proposition:  
If I Have To Speak English, I Feel Weak**

University (nationality)	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
APU (Japanese)	384	3.98	1.67
Tsukuba University	213	4.81	1.50
Tokyo Keizai University	31	4.32	1.68
APU (Chinese)	20	3.65	1.66
APU (Korean)	20	4.30	1.38

*Note.* Responses were on a 7-point Likert scale.

When this proposition was put to students in the focus groups, responses from APU students, whether Japanese, Chinese, or Korean, provided personal testimony of just how different the study and university environment at APU is from other universities. Japanese APU students were split fairly evenly between agreement and disagreement, much like the Korean APU students, whereas the majority of Chinese APU students disagreed with the proposition. Japanese students who agreed with the proposition used their experiences at APU as examples in their responses, saying, for example, “People who speaks English (sic) better than me makes me scared,” and “I have to use English and I can’t become active because of using English,” meaning they felt their lack of confidence in using English restricted their communicative opportunities. Japanese APU students also related stories of their performance of English at APU. For example, one student said, “Even though we practice English every day we don’t have 100% confidence.” Another Japanese student, speaking about classes, said, “We couldn’t comment because our skill is weak.” These students responded to the proposition by referring to their personal abilities.

Korean students who agreed with the proposition all used

APU, their “class,” or meeting “international people” as the basis for their opinions. However, those who disagreed with the proposition said that APU had given them an opportunity, such as being a Residence Assistant in a university dormitory, to use English regularly, even though they claimed they “cannot speak well.” Chinese students who agreed that they felt weak said that they “can’t speak English very well” or their “English is very bad,” whereas those who disagreed said, “If you don’t practice you don’t improve,” “If I use some easy words it is okay,” and at APU they “speak well because they tried a lot,” making them feel “more confident.” That all three APU populations used similar words and phrases for their responses again suggests that students were using similar reasons for their responses to the survey. The higher levels of agreement from Korean students is a cause for concern, as Korean APU students all used their study circumstances at APU as the reason for their agreement with the proposition. From this, it can be surmised that APU students who agreed with the proposition were referring to occasions at APU, in class or on campus, where they had to use English, occasions that were more likely to occur at APU than at other universities.

When the proposition was put to Tsukuba University students, all but one of the respondents agreed, with all those who agreed using some variant of “I don’t have enough confidence” or “I am not good at speaking English.” The difference between APU students and Tsukuba University students was that students from Tsukuba University considered themselves weak in relation to their own skills in English, whereas APU students also had occasion to consider themselves weak in relation to the abilities of other students they saw around them in their learning environment. Much like responses to Proposition 1, the data from Proposition 3 leaves one with the impression that APU students recognized how different their learning environment was and also how it shaped their opinions related to using English, both positively and negatively.



*Proposition 4: I Think Studying About Asian Varieties of English Is a Good Idea.*

This proposition was given to students to gauge their interest in studying alternative varieties of English that they may have experienced. I was interested to know if increased experience of language varieties would lead to an interest in studying these varieties, or if the utility value of ENL varieties of English would still be of greater importance. Much like in the case of Proposition 3, the qualitative stage of my study gave me the opportunity to investigate what these students' opinions of Asian varieties of English were whilst also gauging their interest in studying them.

Considering their self-reported experience of different English varieties expressed in their responses to Proposition 1, the levels of agreement with this proposition did not show that greater exposure to varieties of English improved students' interest in studying Asian varieties of English. There is a marked difference in the responses of the five student populations to this proposition when compared to their responses to Proposition 2, for which all but one population had a mean score over 5.5 and the Chinese APU students registered a mean score of over 6 (maximum score was 7). From patterns of responses to Proposition 4 (see Table 4), one can state that although an interest in studying English is clearly present in APU students, an interest in studying Asian varieties of English as opposed to ENL varieties is not necessarily present. These responses, therefore, do not suggest that direct exposure to non-ENL varieties of English, and specifically localized performance varieties, will lead to EFL students having an interest in studying these localized varieties of English.

**Table 4. Response Data for the Survey Proposition: I Think Studying About Asian Varieties of English Is a Good Idea**

University (nationality)	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
APU (Japanese)	385	4.68	1.39
Tsukuba University	215	4.30	1.12
Tokyo Keizai University	31	4.68	1.60
APU (Chinese)	20	3.80	1.61
APU (Korean)	20	4.35	1.09

*Note.* Responses were on a 7-point Likert scale.

In the focus groups the Japanese APU students were evenly split between those who agreed and those who disagreed. Those who agreed said that it would be a "good idea" if they wanted to "get a job" using English internationally, or communicate with "Asian friends," referring to their friends or classmates on campus. Those who agreed did so because they foresaw some personal or professional utility in having knowledge of Asian varieties of English. Japanese APU students who disagreed said, "If I study [varieties of English] I will be confused" or "disagree . . . this means pronunciation." Another student who disagreed said, "In APU it is good for me . . . I can't find a reason in the world except in APU" meaning that those who disagreed could not find utility value in studying non-ENL varieties of English or felt that using non-ENL varieties of English would cause them communicative difficulty.

Korean and Chinese APU students in the focus groups mostly disagreed with the proposition. The few who agreed said, "I am interested in other English and their culture," "I prepare myself in APU and can understand, I want to prepare myself

to understand all styles,” and “We can try other ways to speak English we can improve.” In total, only three of the 15 Korean and Chinese students interviewed in this study agreed with the proposition, and their reasons were tied to personal utility with regard to English as a developing international language. Korean and Chinese students who disagreed said that Asian varieties were “not good” or gave a version of, “It will make me confused,” with one Chinese student referencing “Chinglish” as an example of an “unhelpful” Asian variety of English. Korean students were the most negative in their comments, saying, “[Asian speakers of English’s] pronunciation is so different and difficult” and “We should not learn some freaky pronunciation.” Students who disagreed also used the examples of Japanese English, Chinese English, Indian English, Philippine English, and Singapore English as examples of varieties they had had experience of during their time at APU that caused them difficulties. The wider experience APU students had of Asian varieties of English was demonstrated by their responses to this problem, giving a clear indication of where these students believed their linguistic stresses were coming from in relation to the use of English on the APU campus.

When the proposition was given to Tsukuba University students, the majority agreed, giving reasons such as “It’s very interesting” and “Just knowing how they pronounce is helpful to understand them easily and correctly.” Those who disagreed said, “We should learn correct English” and “I can’t imagine the importance of it.”

Compared with Tsukuba and Tokyo Keizai students, APU students were less interested in the study of Asian varieties. All five populations of students exhibited a precipitous decline in interest when compared with their responses to Proposition 2, and comments by APU students seemed to reflect some difficulties in dealing with Asian performance varieties in the more internationalized university environment of APU.

## Discussion

The finding of pejorative opinions towards Asian varieties of English among APU students, and particularly from Korean students, should raise concern for administrators of international universities. Future focus should be on how to deal with potential problems related to the integration of international students into a university’s student population, and the commensurate linguistic difficulties that may be caused. Such a problem is inherent in MEXT’s plans, in which the use of English in classes and on campus is an integral part of their projects to further internationalize Japanese universities. At APU, where EFL classes are mixed and students from Japan, Korea, China, and other countries, study together, the issue of pejorative views of non-ENL varieties of English among classmates is a potentially serious problem in relation to in-class and on-campus student communication. Even in universities where the populations remain unmixed for English language education, there exists the possibility for interactions in English between students on campus to lead to pejorative opinions of each other’s performance.

With regard to the academic attitudes of APU students, the positive responses in relation to studying English are a positive finding from this study, and should be encouraging to both APU administrators and those who are interested in following APU’s model of recruiting students from abroad. When compared to the interest of their counterparts in Tsukuba and Tokyo Keizai, Japanese APU students reported a much greater interest in studying English. Even if it could be said that APU students were predisposed to studying the language before attending university, there had clearly been nothing in their university experiences to dissuade these students from having a positive attitude towards studying English, and in fact a positive orientation towards EFL study would appear to have been reaffirmed by their time at APU.



## Conclusion

My conclusion is “Be careful what you wish for.” The project to internationalize Japanese universities is far from over, and in fact is likely to accelerate as more universities actively recruit international students. Introduction of the Super Global University Project will likely bring more international students into Japan and by doing so internationalize more campuses throughout the country.

In presenting this short introduction to my research, I hope I have given some insight into issues that stem from an increase in the number of international university students in Japan, and I invite you to contact me if you would like further information. It is my belief that continued research, with teacher–researchers investigating their students’ opinions for the purpose of tracking the ever-evolving use of English in Japanese universities, will assist in achieving a goal that is common for all those committed to university education: the best university experience for all students, both foreign and domestic.

## Bio Data

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