

# Why We Should Teach the New Englishes of Asia

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The rapid spread and adaptation of English in Asia over the last few decades has rekindled a vibrant debate about whether American and British English are the desired target languages for EFL learners. Our language teaching profession may have grown too comfortable thinking that they are, according to university students in Japan who were surveyed and tested to find out which varieties of English they could best understand, and what variety they hoped one day to be able to speak. This paper shares this research and discusses ways to teach the new Englishes.

アジア圏で英語を学ぶ人々にとって、アメリカ英語とイギリス英語のどちらを教えるべきかという議題は過去十年のアジア圏における急速な英語の普及の中で常に議論されてきた。どのような英語が日本人にとってもっとも理解しやすいか、そしてどのような英語を話すことを望んでいるのか、この2点を日本人学生を対象に調査した。この論文において私は調査結果の開示を行うとともに、新しい英語教育の方法のあり方について明らかにしていきたい。

American English, and to a lesser extent British English, are the two major varieties of English used in internationally marketed foreign language learning textbooks. The rapid development of new Englishes in Asia and elsewhere around the world, however, has focused attention on whether American and British English continue to be global languages

and the desired target languages of EFL learners. The language teaching profession may have grown too comfortable thinking that they are.

### **The Competitive Tug Between Global and Regional Varieties of English**

A growing problem that needs analysis by teachers is the determination of whether or not there has been a shift in the usefulness and desirability of American and British Englishes by EFL speakers in Asia. A sound understanding of the diffusion and adaptation of English is necessary to solve the problem. Proponents of globalization and standard varieties of English promote the assimilation of English, whereas those who favor diversity and locally applicable English prefer integration. Socio-linguists define assimilation as the absorption of speakers of one language or dialect into another. In previous decades immigrants to ESL countries experience varying amounts of pressure to adapt, and different metaphors such as “melting pot” for America, and “mosaic” for Canada’s more pluralistic and integrative policies were coined. Now that the English language and Western culture are prime export commodities to Asia, similar pressures are arising in Asia, and EFL speakers and their teachers are beginning to voice concerns about pressures forcing them to standardize their speech.

### **The Development of Pedagogic Interest in Asian Englishes**

Honna and Takeshita (2000, p. 63) question the conventional objectives of Japan’s English teaching program requiring students to acquire native-like proficiency in English. They believe that goal is unrealistic. They claim that the native-like goal is a major reason for the present low achievement and current passive attitudes of their students.

Similarly, Burns and Candlin (2001, p. 4) challenge the idea that “people who have little contact with the host community will not learn the language successfully” and recall “into question whether the traditional English-speaking countries -the US, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand- can still be regarded as owning English and having the right to set standards... [and raised] the issue of whether the standards of the native speaker (usually interpreted as British or American) can ever be a realistic goal for language learning...”

Consideration of who our students are currently speaking English to also needs analysis. In the past century, most English speech was directed from individual countries in Asia toward centers in America and Britain. Regional communication between Asian countries proceeded through translation of local languages. As inter-Asian economic trade and the use of English grew, these dominant bipolar axes migrated to multi-nodal communication between Asian countries.

Roughly speaking, there are approximately 360 million native speakers of English (summation of the population of countries where English is spoken as a native language). Americans make up the majority of this total. By estimating the number of non-native speakers of English in mainland China and India, one can quickly conclude that non-native speakers far outnumber native speakers of English. Because of geography, and because no language is as widely spoken as English between peoples of different countries, it can be reasoned that non-native speakers come into contact with each other more often than they do with native speakers. This implies that students need to learn skills to help them to communicate with other EFL speakers.

Honna (2000a, p. 9) notes that many EFL speakers are using “English in non-Anglo-American cultural contexts. When Japanese speak English with Singaporeans, there is no room for American or British culture. It would be clumsy if the Japanese had to represent American ways of behavior and the Singaporeans the British version while speaking English to each other.”

Honna et al. (2001, p. 80 - 81) found students today are comfortable with speaking English with a Japanese accent when they asked high school students “whether they wanted to sound like their assistant language teacher (an American) or whether they wanted to sound like their Japanese teacher. I was very surprised when

they all quickly said that they wanted to sound like their Japanese teacher. I should add that there was nothing wrong with this ALT! But the Japanese teacher in this class spoke excellent English and with an unmistakably Japanese accent.”

At the main speaker podium of the Korea Association of Teachers of English international conference on Teaching English as a Global Language in the Asian Context, Kwon (2001) introduced research by Smith and Rafiqzad who had taped the narratives of highly educated English speakers from the US, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. When these tapes were played back to over 1,300 educated listeners from these countries and also from Bangladesh, Thailand, Indonesia, and Taiwan, the most internationally intelligible pronunciations were those of Japan, India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia while the pronunciation of the American was close to being the least intelligible. Somewhat to the chagrin of the American main speakers, and perhaps to the relief of the Japanese main speakers who followed Kwon, his statement highlighted this conference that was entirely conducted in English and was much appreciated by the predominately Korean audience.

The tug of war is still strong in the direction of maintaining American and British English as a learning goal. However, as revealed in Goddard’s (2001, p. 22) survey of how some teachers approach the teaching of

multiple varieties of English in their classrooms which paraphrases the majority of his colleagues as stating “My students struggle with listening comprehension in American English, which they’ve been studying for 5 years now. Why would I confuse them with another variety?”

At present, American English is a more economically useful language than Japanese, and when it comes in contact with other Asian societies that speak a less popular language, bilingualism (the local language plus American English) becomes essential. The strength of the U.S. economy and the tremendous amount of trade between the U.S. and Asian countries is a powerful incentive to learn American English.

Another point in favor of seeking to globalize one variety of English rather than to allow it to regionalize, is because if different groups change a previously unified language in different directions, or if one group alters its speech more radically than another, mutual intelligibility is impaired. In England, the problem with different accents is minimal, but the wider geography and huge population in Asia creates the potential for English in Asia (i.e. Singlish and Taglish) to become incomprehensible outside the region. Differing dialects that cause intelligibility or misunderstandings would negate the benefits of using English as a global language.

## Need for a Balancing Act of English as a Global and as a Regional Language

Aitchison (2001, p. 255) believes “a mild degree of regional variation is probably a mark of individuality to be encouraged rather than stamped out.” Accent differences are not a matter of great concern to her, although she notes that an accent that differs markedly from others could be a disadvantage for the individual speaker in job-hunting situations. Minor variations in word meaning and pronunciation from region to region are unimportant. If change goes so far that it prevents people in a community from talking to each other it can be socially and politically inconvenient. If this happens it may be useful to encourage standardization - the adoption of a standard variety of English. This innovation must be brought about gradually, since a population will only adopt a language or a dialect it wants to speak.

## Research Purpose

As a language teacher I want to understand what students in my classroom are thinking about Asian Englishes. This project is, therefore, intended to survey whether American and British English are the desired target languages for EFL learners in my classes, or if achieving an intelligible level of English currently spoken and written by EFL users from Japan or another Asian country was an appropriate and desired goal.

The undertaking of this project therefore required the recording of samples of English as it is currently spoken, and the obtaining of original written materials by EFL users living in several Asian countries at the turn of this new century. Obtaining data for the year 2001 serves as an opportune benchmark, and the data could be re-used to measure change when compared with recordings and writings on a longitudinal study basis.

Two basic research questions (RQ) and alternative hypotheses (H) were formulated for the pilot study limited to speaking and listening skills.

**RQ1.** Which spoken variety of English do Japanese university students best understand?

**H 1.** Spoken American English is the easiest for Japanese university students to understand.

**RQ2.** Which variety of English do Japanese university students want to speak?

**H 2.** Japanese university students would like to be able to speak American English.

## Methodology of the Study

Current recordings of English as it is spoken in Asian countries at the turn of this century were required. Interviews and reading assignments were recorded by colleagues on location in the Philippines, Korea, Thailand, China, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. Examples of English as it is currently written in local

newspapers, magazines and other materials as well as the Internet were gathered by topic. The materials are to be assembled into a textbook form and used with students. Textbooks on Global Englishes, recently published with real soundtracks, were also used to teach and test students on their understanding and appreciation of several different varieties of English spoken in Asia.

## The Participants

During the final semester of 2000 and the first of 2001, I introduced the recorded sounds of the Asian Englishes to 200 (mainly Japanese, as well as a few Chinese, Thai, Korean) first-year university non-English majors. The 200 students were grouped in 4 classes of varying sizes. 150 students were enrolled in a national university and came from different areas all over Japan. 50 students were enrolled at a private university and came from within the prefecture.

In my classrooms a dramatic shift in demographics has occurred. Where once homogeneous EFL classes composed of Japanese students were the norm, now they are interspersed with students from Asia just like ESL classes in America and Britain have been for years. Borrowing ESL teaching models and textbooks is not an appropriate solution to meet my students needs, however, because when EFL learners leave the classroom they do not come face-to-face with American or British English and culture; rather they are encountering Asian

and English soundscapes (the wide variety of English that can be heard in a particular place or region). Students are more likely to communicate on campus, via e-mail and telephones with other non-speakers of English than to native speakers of English. To bolster falling student enrollments, new universities in Oita, Okinawa, and Tokyo have been approved based upon attracting up to 50% of their capacity with students and faculty from Asia. Other universities attract foreign students by offering one-year exchange programs at sister universities in Asia, and core courses at popular faculties in English. This means student needs have to be re-assessed and syllabi and textbooks redesigned to accommodate the use and learning of new Asian Englishes. Students of language are doing pair work, group work, and other communication exercises with speakers of different English dialects who have different cultural backgrounds.

### Procedure

I tried to capture the sights and sounds of the way English is being used in Asia at the turn of the 21st century and bring them to my students. To obtain original spoken sources of language, recordings were made on site with the help of coordinators based in the Philippines, Thailand, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore (for Malaysian), Japan, and China. At least six, and often over ten people, were interviewed in each country.

Original sources of written English were collected through e-mail. Current articles about international news and local news events or activities that represent the characteristics of the country were collected from locally published newspapers, magazines, newsletters, or other publications. After the interviews, each respondent was asked to read aloud at least six of the selected e-mails and articles from their country and their voices were recorded onto cassette tapes. The massive amounts of source data were then edited into the form of lesson notes plus cassette-recordings for use in the classroom, whereupon the challenge lay in helping the students to understand and to use the various varieties of English that are currently being used in Asia.

The collected listening materials were drafted into lesson notes and introduced along with a supporting textbook and tapes of world Englishes (Arimoto & Yoneoka, 2000) to the 200 participants in four, 13-week courses entitled *Foreign Affairs* or *Open English Communication*. After the halfway mark in the term, all students were polled using a written survey. At the end of term, to check the reliability of the survey answers, the same students were re-tested using the same survey questions, although the questions were arranged in a different order. As an additional classroom activity, groups of students also conducted similar polls and translated the questions into Japanese.

Two of the four classes of students were given a

choice of answers that included American, Australian, British, Canadian, Philippine, Korean, Thai, Malaysian, Chinese and Japanese Englishes. The other two classes were able to re-listen to a short sequence of all the tapes that they had heard during the course, and to select them on that basis. Student comprehension of different varieties of English was also tested with a multi-question examination that included cloze exercises, dictation, and short answers. As a counter-check I also tested their ability to comprehend written materials and recordings of different varieties of English.

21 randomly selected students were asked several open-ended, qualitative questions including: What was it about the variety of English that was difficult for you to understand? Six students were hired and asked to listen to and transcribe the taped messages thus furthering their motivation and improving their listening ability.

## Results

*Table 1. Mean frequencies of answers reported by the learners*

Whose English speech were you best able to understand?

A 1. American	48	(24)
A 2. British	3	(1)
A 3. Canadian	8	(4)
A 4. Australian	2	(1)
A 5. Japanese	108	(54)
A 6. Korean	0	
A 7. Chinese	0	
A 8. Filipino	0	
A 9. Thai	0	
A10. Malaysian	31	(16)
<b>Total Frequency</b>	<b>200</b>	

*Table 2. Mean frequencies of answers reported by the learners*

Which English would you most like to speak?

A 1. American	82	(41)
A 2. British	13	(7)
A 3. Canadian	14	(7)
A 4. Australian	8	(4)
A 5. Japanese	79	(39)
A 6. Korean	0	
A 7. Chinese	2	(1)
A 8. Filipino	0	
A 9. Thai	1	(.5)
A10. Malaysian	1	(0.5)
<b>Total Frequency</b>	<b>200</b>	

*Table 3. Students were asked to evaluate how useful the learning of Asian Englishes would be to their future compared to their other studies (students could select answers using a Likert scale: 5=Strongly agree; 4=Agree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 2=Disagree; 1=Strongly disagree). They were asked how much they agree with the following statement.*

Is the study of Asian Englishes more important than other courses to my future career?

The mean answer was 3 for a sample size of 150 students (n=150).

*Table 4. Students were asked to explain why some Englishes are difficult*

What was it about the variety of English that was difficult for you to understand?

The students (n=21) came up with the following list of answers.

- Pronunciation of words
- Understanding the main idea
- Speed
- Relating topic to my own experience
- Imagining the setting for each conversation
- Understanding the meaning of each word
- Sounds
- Speed of conversation
- Combination
- Vocabulary
- Hearing the conversation only once
- People's names
- Everything

*Table 5. Students were asked the variety of English they preferred teachers to speak.*

Would you rather have a native speaker of English (i.e. American, Briton, Australian, Canadian, etc) or a non-native speaker of English (i.e. Japanese, Korean, Chinese, etc. teach you English?

The students (n=21) responded as follows:

20	Native Speaker of English Teacher
1	Non-Native Speaker of English

Analysis showed 54 percent of the university students (n=200) said English spoken by Japanese was the easiest language to listen to, followed by English spoken by Americans (Table 1). The reasons for this were the pronunciation of words, understanding the main idea of the speaker, the vocabulary, the slower speed, and what the speaker said related to the students own experience.

41 percent of respondents wanted to be able to speak an American variety of English, while 39 percent of the students said they most wanted to speak English like the Japanese speakers they heard on the recorded tape (Table 2). Other choices were the Canadian, British and Chinese voices on the tapes. There did seem to be some correlation between the desires of my Chinese students to speak English like the Chinese speakers. I am a Canadian, which also may have affected the answers.

Motivation to study is a major factor in learning. The students however enrolled in the study of fisheries and water did not show any particular leaning to or away from the study of Asian Englishes as being more important than other courses to their future careers (Table 3).

Among the answers given to the question, “What was it about the variety of English that was difficult for you to understand?” the students (n=21) came up with the following reasons: pronunciation of words, understanding the main idea, speed, relating topic to my own experience, imagining the setting for each conversation, understanding the meaning of each word, sounds, speed of conversation, combination, vocabulary, hearing the conversation only once when played on a tape, people’s names (common names in the countries that were listed as answers), and most discouragingly some replied everything was difficult (table 4).

Despite finding the Englishes spoken by Americans and other native speakers of English to be the most difficult to follow and understand, and despite the desire of many students to target a goal of being able to speak English like their Japanese teacher of English, the university students surveyed replied that they most wanted teachers of that group to teach them English (table 5).

## Next Step in Assisting the Integration of New Englishes

There is much that English teachers can do to support the development and the integration of the New Englishes of Asia. Using textbooks and courses that introduce the new Englishes is a first step. Some of these new English and culture textbooks proposed for students in the 2002 curriculum in Japan are hard-hitting in the Chomskyan school of thought. The cultural notes written in the very first chapter for students by Chiba et al. (2002, p. 8) begins: "There aren't many English teachers who are black or Asian American in Japan. The majority of native-English teachers in Japan are Caucasian... Have you ever thought about why? Probably one of the reasons is that some owners of those language schools are concerned about profits... The people going to language schools may also prefer to be taught by Caucasian teachers. Do you think you will have more fun if you have a Caucasian teacher? What is your idea of a good English teacher?"

Teachers in Asia also have to be open to the idea of teaching the new Englishes. Gusdorf (1965, p. 125) wrote "To be open to the speech of others is to grasp it in its best sense, continually striving not to reduce it to the common denominator of banality, but to find it is something original. By doing this, moreover, by helping the other to use his own voice, one will stimulate him

to discover his innermost need. Such is the task of the teacher, if going beyond the monologue of instruction; he knows how to carry the pedagogical task into authentic dialogue where personality is developed. The great educator is he who spreads around himself the meaning of the honor of language as a concern for integrity in the relations with others and oneself.

Most university English programs use American English textbooks, tapes and videos. The objective is to encourage students to aim for fluency in American English. If programs were to instead set a goal of intelligible Japanese English, students might be more motivated to achieve their goals (Table 6). Introducing world Englishes in a positive manner could lead to students taking more pride in their own accents, vocabulary and pronunciation. Further across the region, teaching students Asian Englishes could improve their mutual intelligibility. Students seeking to be at ease anywhere in the world with English would have to invest considerable time in a program introducing many varieties of English.

*Table 6. Suggested variety of English for EFL programs*

<i>Input</i>	<i>Program Output Expectation</i>
Japanese students	US English US English speakers
<i>Input</i>	<i>Program Achievable Output</i>
Japanese students	World Englishes Japanese-English speakers
Asian students	Asian Englishes Regional-English speakers
Asian students	World Englishes International speakers

The development of the new Englishes, the creative use of English by EFL users, and the enrichment of English for both native and non-native speakers also need to be encouraged. Chomsky (1965) has long held the opinion that language use is essential to the creative development of human personality. Through language we are thought to seek ourselves.

In order for a language policy (such as the report to make English a second official language in Japan proposed by an advisory panel to the late prime minister Obuchi entitled “Frontier Within: Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium) to achieve acceptance, a population must want to speak a particular language or particular

variety of it. Once variegation has occurred, and a whole population has accepted one particular variety as standard, it becomes a strong unifying force and often a source of national pride and symbol of independence.

### **Conclusion**

The English language has divided into many Englishes—American English, British English, Australian English, Indian English, Singlish, Taglish, and so on. This has created a new diversity in the world’s languages. I posit that more course and lesson plans are needed to teach reading and listening skills geared to the understanding of these new Englishes. Understanding them all will strengthen our students as international speakers of English. Where 5 years ago I tried to determine how to emphasize the interconnectedness, the varieties, and the richness of several foreign languages being used by peoples of the world, the realities of the new century also means considering how to emphasize the interconnectedness, the varieties, the richness of several varieties of Englishes.

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