

# What Can “Englishniza- tion” at Rakuten Teach Us? A Case Study

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A program by TV Tokyo, “*Kanzen*” *eigoka iyoiyo* [“*Complete*” *Englishnization at last*], indicated that some success in using English is taking place in Rakuten. One 39-year-old employee was made a model for L2 learners based on his introspection about his last few years of study, his TOEIC score growth, and his L2 business performance. However, such an oversimplified representation, based on a limited amount of information, may require revisiting. I reassess the program and discuss the complexity of judgment criteria about good practice in L2 business. There is a dual focus: to examine to what extent he can be considered a good language learner and to determine what implications differing perceptions of his L2 business performance may have for Englishization at Rakuten and beyond. Subsequently, how perceptual discrepancy between businesspeople and the corporate trainer may lead to problems in implementing corporate English courses is discussed.

2012年6月18日にテレビ東京にて放送された番組『“完全”英語化いよいよ』にて、楽天の社内英語公用語化が成功を収めつつあることが報告された。39歳の社員が英語学習の成功例として登場し、TOEICの伸び、ここ数年の学習の振り返り、そして短い会話例が根拠として挙げられたが、この限定的な評価には疑問が残る。本稿では、この番組を批判的に再評価し、ビジネス現場でのL2運用の判断基準が如何に多角的であるかを論じる。本稿の焦点は、1)彼がどの程度good language learnerであるかを考察し、そして2)彼のL2使用によるビジネスパフォーマンスをめぐる認識の揺らぎが楽天やその他の企業における社内英語公用語化に何を示唆し得るかを論じることの2つである。これらの議論に基づいて、ビジネスマンと企業研修担当者の評価基準の差が企業内英語研修の運営にどのように影響を与えうるかについても論じる。

I HAVE BEEN involved with various Japanese companies as a global business consultant since 2010. Interviews that I have conducted with global businesspeople in several Japanese companies have suggested that the opportunities for them to use English for business purposes have mushroomed recently. An investigation of global management human resources published by Recruit in 2011 also indicated that an increasing number of Japanese companies are positive about introducing language-training courses, English lessons in particular, to raise people’s awareness and catch up with the global competition. It is expected that more English-speaking business discourse in intra-Japan settings will be emerging because of current socio-economic changes, including the burgeoning of neoliberalism ideology in this globalization era (Kubota, 2011; Tanaka, 2006).

One of the companies that are positively addressing this issue is Rakuten. This largest online retailer in Japan determined to make English the in-house official language starting 1 July,

2012, after spending 2 years in a moratorium period maintaining their intra-organizational linguistic infrastructure. Hiroshi Mikitani, the CEO of Rakuten, called this corporate language policy *Englishnization* (2012, p. 3). While *Englishization* is the usual term, in this paper I consistently employ *Englishnization* to refer to the English-speaking policy specific to Rakuten.

Issues of *Englishnizaion* have attracted wide attention, and consequently quite a few researchers have addressed this topic. One well-known paper is Neeley's (2011) case study. Neeley conducted a questionnaire-based awareness survey about how Rakuten insiders see *Englishnization*. This study presented the voices of Rakuten workers, including their expectations and anxiety about the *Englishnization*. On 18 June, 2012, about 1 year after the publication of this case study, TV Tokyo broadcast a relevant program entitled 『ワールドビジネスサテライト“完全”英語化いよ』 [World Business Satellite, “Complete” *Englishnization* at last] (TV Tokyo, 2012). A movie clip of the program is now available for free web access. In it, a 39-year-old office worker of Rakuten, Tetsuya Iida, represented a role-model learner. However, the rationale presented by the program appears to be rather limited, including only: (a) retrospective interviews with Iida himself, (b) Iida's TOEIC score growth from 420 to 785, and (b) Iida's L2 business performance (only about 10 seconds). Such an oversimplified representation may require critical reassessment.

In light of this, in this paper I will revisit and critically reassess the contents of the TV program and discuss the complexity of criteria for judging good practice in L2 business. The discussion has a dual focus: (a) to examine to what extent Iida can be considered a *good language learner* (GLL) and (b) to determine what implications differing perceptions of his L2 business performance may have for *Englishization* at Rakuten and beyond. Subsequently, how differences in the assessments given by businesspeople and by a corporate trainer may lead to problems in implementing English courses for corporate clients will be

addressed. To begin with, I will briefly summarize the issues concerning GLLs.

## What are Good Language Learners?

GLL research has been one of the mainstreams of learner-focused L2 studies (e.g., Naiman, Fröhlich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Oxford, 1990; Rubin, 1975). Generally, GLLs are defined as autonomous and self-regulated learners of foreign languages. Rubin categorized some common learning characteristics of successful L2 learners. Oxford, in this light, established a questionnaire-based survey approach called *Strategy Inventory of Language Learning* (SILL). However, earlier studies on GLLs focused heavily on researching strategic language learning through statistical measurement (Johnson & Johnson, 1998, p. 141). In addition, learner characteristics differ from individual to individual, which makes it difficult to achieve a consensus on the definition of GLLs (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 53).

Responding to this, Norton and Toohey (2001) proposed some alternative approaches to GLL studies. They stated that “understanding good language learning requires attention to social practices” (p. 318) where GLLs practically implement their good language use. In addition, Norton and Toohey suggested that further studies should investigate “the ways in which learners exercise their agency in forming and reforming their identities in those contexts” (p. 318). In other words, researchers were advised to focus their research attention on GLLs' L2 performance in a situated context. Based on this proposal, quite a few studies analyzed the discourse of GLL's actual performance both in ESL (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2007; Norton, 2000; Toohey, 2000) and EFL (e.g., Fujio, 2007, 2010; Saito, 2000, 2012; Sato, 2009, 2010; Takeuchi, 2003) contexts. The studies on GLLs, whose origin goes back to as early as the 1960s, continue to grab the attention of quite a few applied linguists.

Although the majority of GLL researchers assess L2 speakers’ performance based on an L1 standard, little has been discussed about how GLLs perform in mutual L2 English-speaking discourse, particularly in intercultural business interaction. Considering that the number of L2 English speakers surpasses that of L1 speakers, interactional discourse where English is spoken as a mutual L2 between communicators is certainly more common. This has led me to the following research questions:

1. In what sense, from whose perspective, and to what extent can the Rakuten successful learner representative, Tetsuya Iida, be considered a *good language learner* (GLL)?
2. What implications do differing perceptions of his L2 business performance have for the English-speaking policy at Rakuten and beyond?

### Data Collection and Analysis

The data from the online video were analyzed from three perspectives. First, I transcribed the movie clip data based on conversation analysis (CA) transcription conventions (see Appendix) to make it available for text-based discourse analysis. In addition, to gain multiple perspectives, I showed this movie clip to 87 Japanese businesspeople to ask for comments on the situations (including three preset questions and free comments) from a business perspective. I also interviewed an experienced Japanese corporate language trainer to ask her impressions about successful performance in L2 business discourse. This procedure enabled me to gain insight and to take a holistic or ecological perspective to understand the complexity of reality in GLLs’ L2 performance in business discourse.

### Conversation Analysis

Tetsuya Iida, a 39-year-old office worker, represents a GLL from Rakuten in the video clip. He has been working in Rakuten

since 2007. According to the source, he used to dislike English. However, the Englishnization policy changed his mindset drastically. When he was informed of the introduction of the Englishnization policy a couple of years ago, he thought, “That was not really a joke. I thought seriously about hunting for a new job,” as he confessed in the movie clip. However, he became a successful language learner during the 2 years of the moratorium period. He spent 5 to 6 hours studying English after work every day. In a retrospect of those 2 years, his wife commented in the same movie clip, “It was nothing but a pain.” As a result of his self-regulation, or autonomous learning, his TOEIC score made huge progress (from 420 to 785) within 2 years. Moreover, he acquired some communicative competence in English through his hard work. Now, he positively thinks, “I want to overcome some linguistic hardship between my foreign guests and me to talk with them freely. I want to expand my possibilities through learning English.”

Iida’s conversational counterpart in the movie clip was James Chen, whom he reported to. Chen represented one of the foreigner managers in Rakuten who celebrated its Englishnization. According to the source, Chen was born in Taiwan. Before coming to Japan, he worked for an American engineering company. After a few years of engagement as an engineering supervisor in his previous organization, he moved to Rakuten to be an executive officer. Regarding the language policy of this Japan-based company, he commented, “Ah, in the beginning, I was able to communicate mostly with section managers. But now, I feel I can talk even to their engineers very well. So, I think it’s great.” Below is the excerpt of an actual situation where Tetsuya Iida (hereinafter Tetsuya) and James Chen (hereinafter James) have a meeting using business English as a lingua franca after Tetsuya’s TOEIC score growth.

*Excerpt 1: English Meeting Between Tetsuya Iida (T) and James Chen (J)*

1. T: I I discuss a:: method o of o organization (0.5) management.
2. with a:: Kawa-san and Ono-san ((looking up)).
3. J: Okay (.) any conclusion?
4. T: ((looking at James))
5. J: (.) Any information?
6. T: hmm:
7. ((putting his fist to his chin))
8. No (.) ah that that meeting is::
9. na nandaro: ko:: [what's that, like] ((rolling his hands))
10. brainstorming?=  
11. J: =Ah okay.
12. Nice ideas.  
((looking at his PC screen, nodding twice))
13. T: Ono-san is ah group manager (...) and one more is (...)

This scene depicts a situation in which Tetsuya managed to mitigate misunderstanding over the use of the word *discuss*. This miscommunication happened while he was having an English meeting with James. On line 1, Tetsuya briefly explained to James that he had a meeting about organization management with two of his colleagues. To that, James asked for more information by saying "any conclusion" (line 3) and "any information" (line 5). To this reaction by James, Tetsuya was confused as to how he should respond, which is indicated in his use of filler ("hmm:") while putting his fist to his chin (line 6). I also counted

the time-length of this course of action by him (from line 6 and 7), and it turned out to be 1.5 seconds. This relatively long pause in the interactional discourse indicates that there was some interactional conflict happening. One possible cause of James' confusion is Tetsuya's inappropriate word choice (i.e., the word *discuss*). James perceived that the word *discuss* should contain a connotation that Tetsuya and his colleagues must have achieved some consensus through negotiation, as is commonly perceived by most L1 English speakers. This perception must have made him want to ask Tetsuya to elaborate.

However, what Tetsuya actually meant by *discuss* was *brainstorming*, which he himself eventually paraphrased on line 10. Tetsuya's linguistic struggle to produce this word is clearly represented in two ways: (a) his sudden insertion of some Japanese filler phrases, *nannndaro ko* [what's that, like], and (b) his use of a rolling-hand gesture (line 9), which is commonly used by Japanese to signal "I'm trying to say something" while speaking English. After Tetsuya managed to make himself understood, James commented, "Ah okay" (line 11). This was followed by his positive evaluation on Tetsuya's business-action-taking, saying "Nice ideas" and nodding twice (line 12).

This series of positive feedback by James helped Tetsuya identify that the miscommunication between them at this point was finally mitigated. Tetsuya's spontaneous continuation of his following utterance (line 13) and James' silence while listening also indicated that they had reached an agreement on what Tetsuya's *discuss* really referred to. As far as this data analysis goes, it can be tentatively concluded that Tetsuya became a GLL through the 2 years moratorium period in terms of not only his learning strategies and the standardized test score growth, but also the development of communicative competence in dealing with actual business interaction in L2-L2 English-speaking discourse.

## Reactions by Ordinary Japanese Businesspeople

To explore the multidimensionality of the judgment criteria regarding this situated GLL, I also solicited comments on this scene from 87 Japanese participants experienced in domestic business affairs but unfamiliar with international business contexts. I showed them the movie clip and asked for comments regarding the following three questions:

1. Do you think Tetsuya is a GLL?
2. If yes, which of these three aspects (i.e., autonomous learning, TOEIC score growth, or L2 business performance) of his GLL features can you positively evaluate? (multiple answers acceptable)
3. If no, then why?

The results of this questionnaire survey are illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

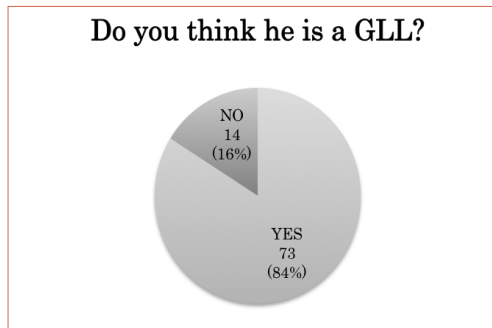


Figure 1. Survey Results: Answers to Question 1 (N = 87)

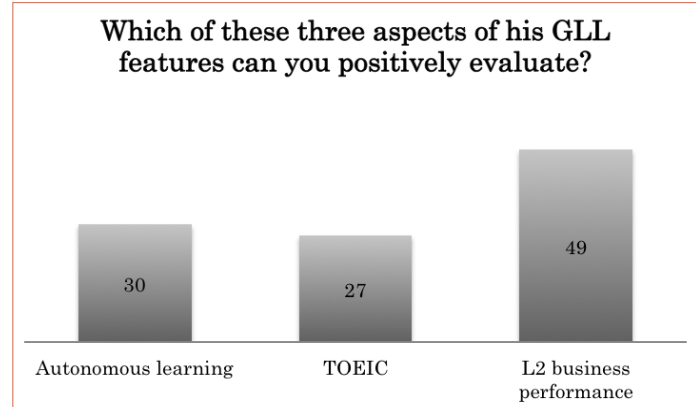


Figure 2. Survey Results: Answers to Question 2 (N = 87)

As can be seen in Figure 1, the majority of those surveyed (84%) agreed that he is a GLL, while 16% disagreed. However, the judgment criteria these businesspeople rely on somewhat deviates, as is illustrated in the Figure 2. It should be noted that his actual use of L2 for business purposes received relatively high evaluation compared with the other two aspects. Nevertheless, the effort he made for his autonomous learning as well as his TOEIC score growth as a result of his 2 years of hard work were relatively equally evaluated. The actual comments from these ordinary Japanese businesspeople will be discussed. The comments were numbered from 1 to 87 for ease of reference. All interviews were in Japanese. I have translated the comments into English.

***Excerpt 2: About His Autonomous Learning (Free Comments)***

(#29) I want to study English, but I know it is tough to spend time studying English while working.

(#54) It is always easy to escape or give up, but tough to continue, I think. This person, in contrast, has not given up learning, and this is worth evaluating.

The above two comments suggest that Tetsuya's effort-making, though he does not like English very much, can be highly evaluated. As Oxford (1990) stated, self-regulation (i.e., making effort, motivation, and affective-control) is a component of being a GLL. The first comment indicates that, from a businessperson's standpoint, Tetsuya's learner autonomy can be considered as a key factor of the success of his L2 learning. The second comment also suggests that his self-regulation to prevent him from escaping or giving up deserves positive evaluation. In addition to his attitude towards autonomous learning, some people also highly evaluated his TOEIC score growth, as is illustrated in Excerpt 3.

***Excerpt 3: About His TOEIC Score Growth (Free Comments)***

(#26) TOEIC does not always correspond to one's proficiency. However, getting a high score on TOEIC is the company's policy, and his score is already higher than the goal, so it is worth evaluating.

(#36) His TOEIC score growth is astonishing. It tells us how much effort he made.

It should be noted that these businesspeople identify a TOEIC score as a tangible judgment criterion of one's English study. Both of these two comments indicate that, although they realize

one's TOEIC score and proficiency in English do not necessarily correspond, they still perceived that his TOEIC score growth could be a visible indication of how much effort he made within these few years.

Lastly, the number of people who highly evaluated his actual L2 business performance was the largest. Three of their comments are in Excerpt 4.

***Excerpt 4: About His L2 Business Performance (Free Comments)***

(#12) I can state an opinion in English, but when people ask questions about it, I think I may fail in answering. So, I think Iida-san is great.

(#19) He used to be poor at English, but now he can do business in English. I want to learn to be like him.

(#31) He tried hard to elicit what he wanted to say. His attitude could be appreciated even in foreign business contexts.

In the first comment, the interviewee acknowledged that, although he or she might be able to handle one-way output of English to some extent, dealing with questions and answers in a foreign language and realizing mutual engagement in interaction are quite difficult. The second and third comments also indicate that Tetsuya's efforts to overcome his linguistic deficiencies and willingness to communicate in business can be highly evaluated.

However, it should also be noted that 16% of those surveyed concluded that Tetsuya is not a GLL yet. Some of their comments negatively evaluating Tetsuya's achievement are in Excerpt 5.

**Excerpt 5: Free Comments (Negative Evaluation)**

(#8) The language shift makes it difficult for them to communicate, so it could put a negative effect on business performance, I felt.

(#16) Speaking good English does not necessarily lead to providing good customer service.

None of these comments suggests that these ordinary Japanese businesspeople have placed a negative value on Tetsuya's efforts, proficiency growth, or performance. Rather, what they are critical about is the corporate global language policy itself.

In sum, the majority of these ordinary Japanese businesspeople identified Tetsuya to be a GLL. The above comments indicate these businesspeople tended to judge Tetsuya a GLL on the basis of how much effort he made, not how well he could make himself function while using his L2. Meanwhile, although some people questioned this judgment, their negative evaluations mainly came as a result of their being critical about the company's policy rather than about his language learning itself.

**A Reaction from an Experienced Corporate Trainer**

I also showed this TV program to Satoko (pseudonym), a 45-year-old experienced corporate trainer, and asked for her opinion about Tetsuya's autonomous learning, TOEIC score growth, and L2 business performance (personal communication, 7 Nov 2012). Satoko has had experience working for a foreign-affiliated company for several years. Besides, she has been working as a hired consultant as well as a corporate trainer since 1994, and quite a few companies have consulted her. This experience has enabled her to gain insight on how Japanese businesspeople should effectively communicate by utilizing

their L2. Satoko interpreted the information provided based on her experience (see Excerpt 6).

**Excerpt 6: Comment from a Corporate Trainer**

Although his TOEIC score grew steadily and his English skills improved a lot, Iida-san's ways of speaking still remain somewhat Japanese. James, meanwhile, looks pretty used to communicating with Japanese in English, I think. He must have experienced English teaching somewhere. If he were a normal foreign worker who does not know about Japanese, things would not end up like this.

In Satoko's opinion, it is not only Tetsuya's efforts, but also James's familiarity with communicating with Japanese in English that made Tetsuya's performance *look* better to most Japanese viewers. To explain this interpretation, she mentioned that the speech structures used by James in this interaction were equivalent to a prototypical classroom discourse pattern. In other words, without James's communicative facilitation, Tetsuya's L2 performance in this business interaction would not have gone that smoothly, in her interpretation. Hence, she estimated that, at his current level, how well Tetsuya succeeds in dealing with other English-speaking business discourse could greatly depend on his counterpart's familiarity with Japanese communication styles. As Handford (2010) stated, "the most important issue in business is not language ability, but the experience and ability to dynamically maneuver within the communities of practice which business people inhabit" (p. 145). In this light, Satoko concluded that Tetsuya could not be a good L2 user in business yet.

**Discussion**

In this media discourse, Tetsuya represented a GLL because of his autonomous learning, TOEIC score growth, and actual L2

business performance. Most of the businesspeople surveyed responded that they believed Tetsuya really is a GLL. However, it was also found that their judgment was based on his efforts, rather than his business contribution. Although some people questioned his good L2 practice, their negative evaluations were based on Rakuten's Englishnization policy itself. In contrast, an experienced corporate trainer argued that Tetsuya might not be a GLL yet, though his TOEIC score growth and efforts were quite admirable. She also suspects that Tetsuya might not be able to function in discourse in which his counterpart's familiarity with Japanese communication styles is relatively low. While his TOEIC score growth as a result of his efforts was highly evaluated by all, they did not agree on their judgment of his L2 business interactional performance. There remained quite a few disagreements between the businesspeople and the experienced corporate trainer. This gap is representative of a common perceptual gap and could potentially result in a negative effect in corporate training curriculum as it represents a mismatch between trainees' needs and trainers' wants.

In running corporate language training courses, it is common that human resource development (HRD) people outsource language instructors from *haken* (派遣, dispatch) companies (i.e., mostly language schools) rather than hire them directly. Responding to that demand, most *haken* companies usually provide corporate language training service with preset curricula and dispatch contracted instructors to their customer companies to run the training courses. To maintain flexibility to meet trainees' individual needs, some adjustment of the contents of instruction are also allowed at the instructor's discretion. My previous study (Sato, 2012) indicated that this multilayered contract system in educational business could potentially create business conflict for dispatched instructors. In future research, business researchers should address how this multilayered contract system could potentially lead to perceptual discrepancy between trainers and trainees.

Lastly, the limitations of this study should be mentioned. First, this study focused its attention on a limited data set: (a) conversational data retrieved from a TV program, and (b) interview data based on the program. However, it could still be questioned how prototypical of English-speaking business discourse in Japan this interactional pattern actually is. In addition, due to its nature as a case study, generalizability and replicability of this discussion cannot be guaranteed. Readers are advised to carefully consider their own research context when applying this discussion. Second, this study hypothesized that perceptual discrepancies regarding GLLs between the needs of trainees and the wants of trainers might make it more challenging to realize effective implementation of corporate language training program. Discussing in what way and to what extent this discrepancy (which occurs as a result of a multilayered contract system) does actually affect the efficacy of corporate language training courses, however, goes beyond the scope of this paper. To mitigate this conflict and improve the corporate language training curricula, not only corporate language instructors and *haken* companies, but also HRD managers as well as academics need to look at this issue from multidimensional perspectives.

## Conclusion

Judgment criteria of good practice in L2 use, particularly in L2 business performance, are so multidimensional. In this paper I questioned the oversimplified representation of a GLL on a TV program and addressed the significance of employing a holistic or ecological perspective when analyzing actual L2 business discourse, including Rakuten Englishnization discourse. It is expected that more interest in English-speaking business discourse in such a non-English speaking country as Japan will be shown by L2 researchers. Researchers are advised to address this issue more subjectively to better understand the complex reality of actual L2 business performance by situated GLLs.



## Bio Data

**Yoichi Sato** is a PhD student at the University of Tokyo. He also teaches English at Meisei University as well as business English, TOEIC test preparation, and cross-cultural communication courses in various Japanese corporations. His research interests include discourse analysis on the use of communication strategies in business interaction by nonnative English speakers.

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## Appendix

### Transcription Conventions

- (.) short pause less than 0.2 seconds
- (1.0) pause longer than 0.2 seconds with its length indicated in the parenthesis
- ((noise)) paralinguistic elements
- = latches
- . falling intonation
- ? rising intonation
- : stretched vowel
- (...) inaudible