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World Englishes in the Japanese Context: An Exploration of Japanese University Students' Perspectives

Louise Ohashi

Keywords

World Englishes English Varieties

Introduction

English education in Japan is well known for its preference for American English, which is the variety that is generally taught in junior high schools and high schools throughout the country. Other varieties that are spoken in countries where English is the main language, such as England and Canada, are also highly valued, as evidenced by the large number of job advertisements by schools that seek 'native speakers' for English teaching positions (Ohayo Sensei, 2012). However, given the fact that there are now more non-native speakers (NNSs) than native speakers (NSs) who use English (Crystal, 1997), one must question whether this preference for NSs fully prepares students for the world that they are going to work and live in upon graduation.

As the government introduced compulsory English education from the fifth year of primary school last year (MEXT, 2012) exposure to English is wider than ever, but the types of English students are exposed to is still limited. Government initiatives such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme aim to address this to some extent by promoting cultural exchange but when it comes to those who are selected to teach in junior high schools and high schools throughout the country, over 95% of this year's participants are from Kachru's (1985) inner circle countries (JET Programme website, 2012). As such, students are mainly exposed to NS varieties of English and may not have the opportunity to learn about many of the different varieties that exist. It is not uncommon for students to understand English at school but to have difficulty communicating in English outside of the classroom. This can be partially explained by the lack of exposure students have to different varieties of English.

Early this year I showed a video of an actress who introduced herself 21 times in English with different accents, both NS and NNS, to a class of university students (Walker, 2008). I was surprised

オオハシ ルイズ：東京女子大学 英語文学文化専攻 准教授

by how much trouble the students had understanding many of the introductions, as very similar information was given in each one. This signaled to me a lack of exposure and made me wonder how well I was preparing my students for the world beyond the university gates. As such, I decided to explore World Englishes with my third year writing class. I chose that group because of all my students they had the longest English education and were closest to entering the business world. Also, there was space within the existing syllabus as students were required to analyse and write about language-based topics as part of the course. The aim of this project was to expose students to different views of World Englishes and have them share their own views. From a research perspective, the goal was to gauge students' views in relation to World Englishes in order to explore ways of better preparing them for the world beyond university.

Participants

This project was conducted with 22 third year English majors at a university in Tokyo. The students were enrolled in a year-long writing course in which they were required to conduct research and write several 700-1000 word essays. All of the students were Japanese women. One student was absent for the latter part of the project and another failed to return the survey, so a total of 20 surveys and essays were collected for analysis.

Method

In this writing course, the students learnt how to research a topic and write about it in English, citing support from sources that they had been provided with by their teacher and found by themselves. There was no set textbook for the course (other than a guide for referencing) so the materials and the subjects for the essays were at the discretion of the teacher and, especially in the latter part of the course, the students. This open syllabus presented the opportunity to incorporate an assignment on World Englishes. In order to prepare students for each assignment, the teacher assigned reading materials for the students to discuss in pairs and small groups before sharing their ideas with the whole class. The same pattern was followed with this project.

Class One

Students spent most of the class working on material unrelated to the project. In the latter part of the class the concept of World Englishes was discussed, with students considering questions such as:

What do you think 'World Englishes' means?

How many types of English can you think of?

Which types of English have you learnt?

2 Do you think you will communicate with more NSs or NNSs after you graduate?

Homework: The students read an article about World Englishes.

Class Two

Students discussed some of the main points in the article and shared their ideas about World Englishes in more detail. Brainstorming was done for the essay and students were asked to choose

one of the following thesis statements:

- 1) It is important to teach students different varieties of English.
- 2) It is not important to teach students different varieties of English.

Homework: Students wrote the first draft of their essay.

Class Three

Students exchanged essays with a partner then used a second article on World Englishes to practice quoting and paraphrasing, which are skills they were required to learn in the course. Key points from the article were highlighted and discussed.

Homework: Students read their partner's essay and wrote comments on a peer review sheet. They also did extra research for their essay.

Class Four

Students returned the essay that they had reviewed to their partner and discussed their essays. The rest of this lesson focused on aspects of essay writing that did not relate to the project.

Homework: Students wrote the second draft of their essay.

Class Five

The teacher collected the essays to give feedback then moved on to unrelated material.

Homework: This was unrelated to the project.

Class Six

The teacher returned the essays and gave students time to ask questions then moved onto unrelated material.

Homework: Students wrote the final draft of the essay.

Class Seven

The essays were collected and the survey was administered. Students who finished early discussed the topics in the survey in groups then the lesson moved onto unrelated material.

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Results

As mentioned above, 20 surveys and essays were collected from a class of students who did a writing project on World Englishes. An overview of the essay thesis statement choices and survey responses follows.

The Essay

Students were asked to write a five-paragraph essay based on one of two thesis statements. 14 of the students chose to write about the importance of being taught different varieties of English, with the remaining 6 writing about why it was not important. The reasons students gave in support of learning multiple varieties centred around the idea that there are many people who use different types of English and understanding different varieties would aid communication abroad and in Japan, for both business and pleasure. Some students focused on the importance of gaining a certain ability of 'Standard English' first, while others made no reference to it. Of the 6 students who chose the second topic, 5 focused on the difficulty of learning different varieties of English, believing that it would be too confusing. Only 1 student differed, choosing the second topic because she believed speaking the English of one's own country, in this case Japanese English, was sufficient.

The Survey

A survey was administered at the end of the project to further capture students' views on World Englishes. First, students were asked to choose the places that they thought NSs were from. 15 places were listed, with 5 from each of Kachru's (1985) inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle. The percentage of students who identified each place as being somewhere NSs are from is listed below.

Table 1. *Places that Students Think NSs Are From*

Inner Circle
The USA, the UK and Canada 100%, Australia 90%, New Zealand 60%
Outer Circle
Singapore 25%, India 20%, The Philippines 15%, Malaysia 5%, Pakistan 0%
Expanding Circle
China, Russia, Spain, Korea and Egypt 0%

Students were asked if they would prefer to be taught by a NS, NNS or either as long as the teacher had a high level of English (NS/NNS). The majority (60%) would prefer a NS, 35% would be happy with either and 5% would prefer a NNS. The main reasons for choosing a NS were a desire to hear correct pronunciation (or 'real' pronunciation as one student put it) and learn 'Standard English'. The student who would prefer a NNS and one of those who would be happy with either defined a NNS as someone who could explain the lesson to them in Japanese, which may limit NNSs to Japanese people.

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Students were also asked where they would like to go to study English if they studied abroad. The results, which will be looked at in detail in the discussion section, are shown below.

Table 2. *Places Students Would Like to Go to Study English*

Inner Circle
The USA and the UK 95%, Canada 90%, Australia 85%, New Zealand 80%
Outer Circle
Singapore 55%, India, the Philippines and Malaysia 5%, Pakistan 0%
Expanding Circle
Spain 45%, Korea 25%, China and Russia 20%, Egypt 10%

In addition, students were asked if they thought they needed to learn about more than one variety of English. The vast majority, 90%, believed they did, with only 10% believing otherwise. Reasons given for needing different varieties centred on English being a common language, wanting to use it for business and travel and because of experiences with NNSs in the past. The two students who disagreed with their classmates on this matter felt that they would “have an unfinished ability of each variety of English” through learning multiple varieties and that “first, it’s important to learn ‘Standard English’.”

Students were also asked if they thought they would have more trouble communicating with NSs, NNSs or both. Many students (65%) felt that they would have more trouble with NNSs, 20% believed it would be about the same with both groups and 15% thought NSs would be harder to communicate with.

In addition, the survey sought out students’ views of their own variety of English, Japanese English, through the following question: Do you think Japanese English is a variety of English that people from other countries should learn about? Almost three quarters of the students (70%) thought it was unnecessary, with 10% of the remaining 30% saying it was only necessary for foreigners who come to Japan.

Finally, the survey sought to assess the impact the World Englishes assignment had upon the students through the following question: Did the assignment you did on World Englishes change your views of English? 80% of students said this assignment changed the way they thought about English. Of the 20% that said their views remained the same, 10% had had experiences with World Englishes (a trip to the Philippines and a lesson in high school) that had already shaped their views. The main changes students reported were finding out that there were more types of English than they had imagined, realising that access to different varieties would aid communication, particularly in business, and coming to the conclusion that learning other varieties was important.

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Discussion

It is clear from the results that while students favoured inner circle varieties of English, the project opened them up to other varieties. However, while students were aware that there were more varieties of English than they had thought at the beginning, they still lacked awareness of the extent to which English is spoken. While all of the students identified people from the USA, the UK

and Canada as NSs, 10% did not realize Australians use English as their mother tongue (despite having an Australian teacher) and 40% did not know that English is the native language in New Zealand. When it comes to the outer circle, very few students (0-25% depending on the country) recognized people from those countries as NSs, despite the fact that it is the national language and many people in these regions grow up speaking English. None of the countries in the expanding circle were listed as places NSs come from. During the project, students shared their ideas in groups and were not explicitly told where NSs are from. The results suggest that they should have been told directly as some lacked knowledge in this area. That said, it is possible that after checking the boxes for the top three countries some students skipped over the remaining boxes, passing over some countries through carelessness.

Given the fact that most students identified the inner circle countries as NS countries and had a preference for NS teachers, it is not surprising that these five countries were the most popular choices for studying English abroad. Interestingly, New Zealand, which was only recognized by 60% of the class as a NS country, was chosen by 80% as a place they would like to study English. This may support the idea that some students were hasty in their selection of NS countries, skipping over places that they know English is used as the mother tongue. However, countries were not only chosen for their NSs, as shown by the fact that the expanding circle, not the outer circle, claimed second place. Singapore was very popular, with 55% of students choosing it as a study location, but India, the Philippines and Malaysia only had support from 5% of the class, with Pakistan not chosen by anyone. In contrast, in expanding circle countries, those that students unanimously identified as NNS countries, popularity ranged from 10-45%. This suggests that students are not only interested in learning from and communicating with NSs. However, the fact remains that the majority of the class (60%) would still prefer to learn from a NS, which to this class meant people from the USA, the UK and Canada (the only places unanimously recognized as having NSs) and perhaps Australia and New Zealand (given the discussion above).

Although many of the students would prefer to be taught by NSs, 90% of them believed they needed to learn more than one variety of English. The survey did not ask the students how they hoped to learn other varieties but from these results, it seems that either they expected to be taught other varieties by a NS teacher or, as some students indicated, to study them after they had made sufficient progress in 'Standard English'. Perhaps the reluctance to be taught by NNSs stemmed from fears of difficulty communicating as 65% believed they would have more trouble communicating with NNSs than NSs upon graduation. Only 20% believed they would have just as much trouble with both groups and 15% thought it would be harder to communicate with NSs. This suggests that the students identified a difficulty they may face after graduation, yet were reluctant to address it. Perhaps this is because they did not see the true value of NNS varieties. When evaluating the importance of other varieties it is possible that they viewed them in the same way as they viewed their own variety of English, which does not appear to be positive as very few students believed that other people should learn about Japanese English. Finally, although 90% of students agreed on the importance of learning more than one variety of English, it is possible that they meant

more than one dominant NS variety, such as learning both American English and British English. The data collected would have been more useful if students had been asked to indicate the varieties they felt they should learn. Despite this limitation, it is clear the project created an awareness of the importance of learning *Englishes*.

Recommendations

Although this project was done with a very small sample and therefore does not represent all Japanese university students, several recommendations can be offered. First, if students are to understand different varieties of English, they need exposure. The Internet offers learners a gateway to World Englishes, with materials that can be used in class or assigned as homework. It is possible to find written materials and audio and video clips made by English speakers from many different backgrounds. Textbooks that include different varieties can also be used, either as a main or supplementary text. Furthermore, teachers who know NNSs can invite them as guests and schools can select NNS staff. If teachers and schools incorporate different varieties of English into their syllabuses and programmes, students will slowly gain knowledge of the full range of Englishes that are used and be better prepared for the multi-layered English-speaking world that they will be confronted with when they leave the confines of the classroom.

Conclusion

This project aimed to gauge students' views on World Englishes and open them to varieties that are not generally represented in the Japanese educational system. As there was a very limited sample the results cannot be generalized, but they provide some interesting insights and a base for further research to build on. Most of the students in this small project seemed to realize there are many varieties of English and recognize the importance of understanding more than one variety, but there was a strong preference for NS varieties, or at least the preference to learn a NS variety before moving on to learn others. The students in this project had all studied English for at least 9 years, yet some still did not feel they had learnt enough 'Standard English' to consider studying other varieties. Perhaps if they had been exposed to more varieties earlier in their education they would not be so fearful and would possibly value their own variety, Japanese English, more. If teachers ignore World Englishes from the start of their students' English education to the end, when will students learn? Teachers have a responsibility to prepare their students for life beyond the classroom, so individual teachers need to ask themselves if that includes World Englishes, and if they agree it does, appropriate steps should be taken.

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