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The Pursuit of Perfect English: Japanese Ideology Regarding L1-like Pronunciation

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Abstract

The idea of English as an international language has gained a refreshed momentum in the discussions around English education policy in Japan. To detect a shift in learners' attitudes towards Japanese English (JE), and to elucidate the ideology they embrace regarding their motivation for improving their proficiency, a questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 112 advanced-level learners of English from a university in Tokyo. It was revealed that they (1) display a lingering preference for US English, despite increased exposure to World Englishes; (2) evaluate JE less favourably in competence and status dimensions than other Asian Englishes; and (3) are not content with simply achieving a high level of proficiency, but are still dedicated to acquiring L1-like speech as their ultimate goal. This quintessentially Japanese perfectionism is reflected in the word *eigodo,* or 'the way of English', where *do* (/do:/) is a stoic value system in the process of mastering artistic skills. The findings demonstrate how culture-specific ideology serves as an underlying mechanism that ensures a reconciliation between a preference for L1 English and an inferiority to other L2 Englishes.

Keywords: language ideology, language attitudes, Japanese English, English as an international language, Expanding Circle

Introduction

The conceptualisation of English as a lingua franca (ELF) towards the end of the last century (Firth, 1996; Graddol, 1997; House, 1999; Knapp, 1987) gave the idea of English as an international language (EIL) fresh, or rather refreshed, momentum in discussions regarding English as a second language (ESL) education policy and practice in Japan. For example, a government advisory board suggested that 'all Japanese acquire a working knowledge of English—not simply as a foreign language but as the international lingua franca' (Prime Minister's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century, 2000, 'Enhancing global literacy' section).[1] This suggestion derived from the board's prediction that the role of globalisation would continue to develop both internationally and domestically in the coming century. Accordingly, Japan has seen an enormous inflow of workers, students, and holiday makers from overseas in the past decade. The number of inbound visitors grew 4.7 times from 6,789,658 in 2009 to 31,882,049 in 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic erupted (Japan National Tourism Organization [JNTO], 2021). Meanwhile, more than a few foreign-affiliated and internationally minded companies have adopted English as an official corporate language to facilitate their global business expansion and create a working environment open to non-Japanese employees (Ujiie, 2020). Correspondingly, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has highlighted the significance of EIL/ELF acquisition in new teaching strategy proposals and in revised requirements for teacher training programmes (e.g., MEXT, 2003, 2011, 2019). One such initiative is the Top Global University Project 'that aims to enhance the international compatibility and competitiveness of higher education in Japan' (MEXT, 2014, p. 1). The project requires an increase in English Medium Instruction (EMI) courses, where local students with a good command of English study together with international exchange and degree students. In light of these movements, applied linguists and ESL experts have published an increasing number of books to foster public awareness of EIL, ELF, and World Englishes (WEs) (e.g., Honna & Takeshita, 2018; Shibata et al., 2020; Shiozawa et al., 2016), while alternative syllabi based on these concepts have been piloted and reported on in a number of articles (e.g., D'Angelo, 2012; Galloway, 2017).

However, the norm of adherence to L1 English speech is still part of the authorised guidelines for secondary education,[2] where it is highly recommended that 'the cooperation of native speakers of English should be sought' in designing teaching plans (MEXT, 2017, 'Lesson Plan Design and Treatment of the Contents' section).[3] The Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), along with MEXT, administers the Assistant Language

Teacher (ALT) programme, which invites overseas bachelor's degree holders to teach foreign languages in collaboration with certified Japanese teachers in public primary and secondary schools across the country. Of the estimated 5,254 ALTs of English as of July 2022, 88.4% came from North America, the British Isles, and Australasia (with 55.5% from the US in particular) (CLAIR, n.d.). The L1 English norm is also evident in learning materials: according to Kawashima (2018), 66.2% of model readings in authorised upper secondary school textbooks in 2016 were recorded by US English speakers, followed by Canadian (19.2%), UK (7.4%), and Australian / New Zealand (3.3%) citizens. Hence, these two seemingly incompatible tenets, EIL and L1 English orientation, coexist in Japan's present-day ESL teaching environments, with the former becoming progressively prevalent in education policymaking, while the latter is still observable in classrooms. Of course, there may be a time lag between theory and practice, as the EIL paradigm has only been extensively discussed among English language teaching (ELT) practitioners for the last decade or so.

Previous studies

The discussions around EIL/WEs are closely associated with Kachru's (1985, 1992b) three-circle model of English. In this regard, numerous attitudinal studies have already been conducted in Japan at different time periods, though they have tended to focus mainly on Japanese English (JE) among the target varieties. Comparing JE exclusively with Inner Circle English, Matsuda (2003) observed high school students' US/UK-centric views on the ownership of English and their negative perception of JE as an 'incorrect' form of English. Through a verbal guise technique, McKenzie (2008) and Sasayama (2013) consistently found that university students perceived US and UK accents, particularly General American, far more favourably than JE in terms of competence and status traits (including fluency, intelligence, and income), whereas they valued the latter higher in terms of solidarity traits (such as social attractiveness and personal integrity).

As regards to the attitudes towards varieties across the three Circles, Chiba et al. (1995) identified that Japanese learners had a definite preference for US/UK English over JE, while favouring JE slightly over Outer Circle English from other Asian countries (Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia). Two decades later, McKenzie and Gilmore (2017) ascertained a similar tendency: JE was evaluated lower than US and Scottish English, but higher than other Asian varieties of English (Thai, Chinese, and Indian) in the status dimension. By taking an explicit approach through questionnaires and interviews, Galloway (2011) confirmed that university

students found Inner Circle Englishes more attractive than Outer and Expanding Circle Englishes, and wished to imitate US, Canadian, and UK English in order of preference. Furthermore, they 'strongly disagreed' with the recruitment of Japanese or other Asian ESL teachers. An apparently contradictory result was reported by Rivers (2011), where a JE speech sample was appraised higher than a UK English sample, but in fact half of the participants misidentified the JE sample as a US English speaker.

Taken together, these studies suggest that US English is always evaluated highest in the competence and status dimensions as an authentic model for ESL learners and that JE is rated significantly lower than Inner Circle Englishes but still higher than other Asian varieties of English. Arguably, the difference in methodology and in size and makeup of the studied cohorts makes it difficult to compare the results systematically for a fine-grained analysis; some studies did not categorise the traits discretely in terms of solidarity, competence, and status dimensions, and few studies provided detailed information about the test participants' English proficiency or their familiarity with each evaluated target variety.

Research purpose

This research attempts to examine whether and how Japanese university students' attitudes towards JE and other L2 varieties of English have changed over the past decades, during which the EIL concept has become prevalent in ESL education planning. Hereafter, the paper uses the term *Japanese-accented English* (JAE), as it focuses on the ideology associated with the accent with which English is spoken by a majority of Japanese speakers. This study has three research objectives:

(1) To detect any increase in preference for Outer/Expanding Circle English under the expansion of the EIL/WEs concepts;
(2) To observe learners' attitudes towards JAE and other L2-accented varieties of English, and compare the results with those in the previous literature;
(3) To elucidate the ideology that drives students' motivation to improve their English proficiency.

With regards to the L2 varieties for evaluation, JAE, Chinese-accented English (CAE), Korean-accented English (KAE), Philippine-accented English (PAE), and European-accented English (EAE) were chosen for the following reasons. Firstly, the participants were assumed to

be quite familiar with Chinese and Korean Englishes; in addition to South Korea, Chinese-speaking countries/regions, such as China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan have been the largest sources of inbound visitors since 2003 (JNTO, 2021), while online ESL learning has been a thriving business in recent years, with the majority of instructors being from the Philippines (Tajima, 2018). Secondly, as many Japanese universities have traditionally been affiliated with European tertiary institutions, typically in Germany and France, it seems likely that a considerable number of students interested in international studies and/or foreign languages must have interacted with exchange visitors from European countries. Here, EAE is used as a generic term referring to the L2 English spoken anywhere in mainland Europe. The findings about variety preference (i.e., the first research objective) and attitudes towards L2 varieties of English (the second objective) will be interpreted comprehensively through the lens of the identified English-learning ideology in Japan (the third objective).

Methodology

Instruments

The author administered a questionnaire to students and additionally conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 students who agreed to clarify and elaborate on their responses to the questionnaire. Along with questions about participants' English proficiency and educational background, the questionnaire first asked them to choose their favourite variety of English from a list of 20 countries/regions. They then evaluated the selected five varieties of L2 English on a 5-point Likert scale for six traits: *sense of familiarity, pleasantness of accent, proficiency, intelligence/education,* and *affluence*. With respect to the majority of previous accent attitudinal studies worldwide (e.g., Bayard et al., 2001; Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006; McKenzie, 2008; Watanabe, 2008), the first two traits are concerned with the solidarity dimension, *proficiency* with the competence dimension, and the final three traits with the status dimension. The third part of the questionnaire was designed to reveal participants' motivation for further improving their English speaking.

During data collection, the participants were instructed to direct attention to the phonetic rather than lexical/grammatical aspects of each variety of English, and to express their honest feelings and opinions rather than those seen as socially or educationally desirable. The questionnaire survey and interviews were conducted in Japanese, the participants' L1, in an attempt to capture subtle nuances of their ideology. The instructions of the questionnaire and the interviewees' verbatim comments were later translated into English by the author. Appendix A

presents the relevant parts of the questionnaire. In literal translation, the terms *native accent* and *native speaker* were used in the sense of L1 English speech and speaker as described in Note 3; they are the established words for this usage in everyday Japanese language.

Participants

A total of 119 undergraduate students from Hosei University in Tokyo, which is engaged in the Top Global University Project (see Introduction), voluntarily participated in the study from January 2018 to June 2019. After eliminating seven non-Japanese nationals, data collected from 112 participants were retained for analysis. The average age of the participants was 20.1 years (SD = 0.29), and the gender ratio was 67% female and 33% male. The students who participated in the post hoc interviews were anonymously listed as STUDENTS 1–15. All students were from a liberal arts department which offers a wide range of courses in the humanities and social sciences, ranging from literature to sociology to international business. All courses are EMI courses taught by staff from around the world who speak English as an L1 or L2 and have educational and research backgrounds in the international arena. Although the students spoke Japanese as their L1, they were constantly exposed to a range of varieties of accented English from both lecturers and peers. According to the test conversion table provided by MEXT (2018), the English proficiency of 22 participants (19.6%) falls in C1 (advanced level) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), 65 (58.0%) in B2 (upper-intermediate level), and only 5 (4.5%) in B1 (intermediate level), whereas 20 participants (17.9%) did not specify their score in any standardised test. As the average scores/bands of TOEFL iBT and IELTS tests in Japan were reported to be 72 and 5.8 in 2019, respectively (Educational Testing Service, 2020; IELTS, n.d.), both just above the lowest limit of B2, the majority of the participants were judged to be high-level learners of English in the context of L1 Japanese speakers.

Among them, 42 (37.5%) reported having lived overseas for one or more years, with 38 in the Inner Circle (26 in the US, 4 in the UK, 3 in Canada, 3 in New Zealand, and 2 in Australia), 2 in the Outer Circle (1 each in Singapore and Hong Kong), and 2 in the Expanding Circle (1 each in Germany and Indonesia). Additionally, it was inferred that a large number of participants had stayed overseas for short periods of time as tourists, language learners, or volunteers. Table 1 confirms that practically all students were always exposed to their own JAE and that most of them had also heard the other L2 English varieties evaluated in this study, either ‘frequently’ or ‘sometimes’ (from 68.8% for PAE to 92.0% for EAE). This demonstrates that participants’

responses were mostly based on first-hand experience and, presumably, an accurate perception of each variety.

Table 1: Participants' exposure to five varieties of L2 English (N = 112)

Q. How often have you heard the following accented varieties of English?					
	Japanese	Chinese	Korean	Philippine	European
Frequently	96.4% (108)	33.0% (37)	17.0% (19)	22.3% (25)	53.6% (60)
Sometimes	1.8% (2)	52.7% (59)	52.7% (59)	46.4% (52)	38.4% (43)
Seldom/never	1.8% (2)	14.3% (16)	29.5% (33)	29.5% (33)	7.1% (8)
NA			0.9% (1)	1.8% (2)	0.9% (1)

Note: The numbers of valid responses are shown in parentheses.

Results

Variety preference

Regarding participants' variety preference, Table 2 confirms their L1 orientation; 96.4% favoured English as spoken in the Inner Circle countries, particularly in the US (59.8%). In sharp contrast, only 3.6% listed Expanding Circle English (but not JAE or any other Asian variety) and none expressed a preference for Outer Circle English, although all participants were constantly exposed to some teaching staff's JAE and other varieties of L2-accented English in the EMI context, and at least four students had lived for extended periods in Singapore, Hong Kong, Germany, or Indonesia (see *Participants*).

Table 2: Participants' favourite regional varieties of English (N = 112)

English in		English in	
Inner Circle	96.4% (108)	Expanding Circle	3.6% (4)
United States	59.8% (67)	France	0.9% (1)
United Kingdom	21.4% (24)	Northern Europe	0.9% (1)
Canada	13.4% (15)	Russia	0.9% (1)
Australia	0.9% (1)	Africa	0.9% (1)
New Zealand	0.9% (1)		

Note: The numbers of valid responses are shown in parentheses.

Attitudes towards L2-accented English

Table 3 shows how the five varieties of L2-accented English were evaluated. A one-way ANOVA revealed that the effect of variety was significant for every trait: *sense of familiarity*, $F(4, 551) = 16.990$, $p < .001$; *pleasantness of accent*, $F(4, 551) = 20.980$, $p < .001$; *proficiency*,

$F(4, 550) = 44.634$, $p < .001$; *intelligence/education*, $F(4, 551) = 29.593$, $p < .001$; and *affluence*, $F(4, 550) = 19.056$, $p < .001$. With regards to the familiarity trait, post hoc Tukey's HSD tests showed that JAE was rated significantly higher than all the other varieties of English ($p < .05$), which is in line with the fact that JAE had the highest degree of self-reported exposure (Table 1).

Table 3: The mean evaluations for five varieties of accented English ($N = 112$)
(5 = most positive rating, 1 = least positive rating)

	Accented English				
Trait	Japanese	Chinese	Korean	Philippine	European
Sense of familiarity	3.25^{a}	2.03^{d}	2.28^{cd}	2.50^{bc}	2.73^{b}
	(1.41)	(0.93)	(1.07)	(1.17)	(1.33)
Pleasantness of accent	2.08^{b}	2.02^{b}	2.22^{b}	2.42^{b}	3.18^{a}
	(1.13)	(0.95)	(1.01)	(1.04)	(1.26)
Proficiency	1.78^{c}	2.54^{b}	2.43^{b}	2.78^{b}	3.73^{a}
	(0.99)	(1.13)	(1.15)	(1.13)	(1.18)
Intelligence/education	2.09^{c}	2.60^{b}	2.39^{bc}	2.29^{bc}	3.51^{a}
	(1.06)	(1.10)	(1.09)	(0.96)	(1.16)
Affluence	2.00^{d}	2.75^{ab}	2.43^{bc}	2.12^{cd}	3.12^{a}
	(1.05)	(1.20)	(1.10)	(0.96)	(1.20)

Note: The numbers in parentheses show the standard deviations.
^{abcd} Means with different superscripts in the same row differ significantly ($p < .05$).

On the other hand, JAE was surpassed in proficiency by all others, in intelligence/education by EAE and CAE, and in affluence by EAE, CAE, and KAE ($p < .05$). The interviewees' comments substantiated how these competence and status traits were closely associated with one another in their unfavourable attitudes towards JAE:

STUDENT 1: Wealthy people should not have a thick [Japanese] accent, as they have had access to good English education since childhood or have studied abroad.

STUDENT 2: Bad pronunciation [characteristic of JAE speakers] has a lot to do with a poor economic background, because they were unable to get a good education.

STUDENT 3: Japanese people living overseas, such as in the UK, are from wealthy families and their pronunciation is good.

STUDENT 4: People with a strong Japanese accent are not fluent speakers. They are lazy and have low motivation for learning anything. If your pronunciation is bad, you will be considered to be less cultivated.

Meanwhile, the high ratings of CAE in terms of intelligence/education and affluence traits are endorsed by the post hoc comments: 'rich Chinese students studying abroad' (STUDENT 1), 'Chinese business people being intelligent and wealthy' (STUDENT 3), and 'China having exceeded Japan economically' (STUDENT 5). As for the justifications for the high proficiency ratings for PAE and KAE, some interviewees mentioned the status of English as an official language in the Philippines, and others referred to the South Korean enthusiasm for English education, which is often reported in Japanese mass media. EAE had the highest ratings compared to all Asian varieties in all traits other than familiarity. 'Euro-English' has not been commonly perceived as a unified, established L2 variety (e.g., Gerritsen, 2017; Mollin, 2006; Motschenbacher 2016), and when designing the questionnaire, the author assumed that participants would struggle to identify each L2 variety of English for a specific country of Europe. However, a large number of participants associated EAE with northern Europe and/or the Germanic-language-speaking countries. They were well aware of the differences in proficiency and degree of accentedness between the countries, as reflected in the following comments:

STUDENT 1: Proficiency varies from region to region. English is a lingua franca in Germany and Belgium.

STUDENT 6: High proficiency is characteristic of Holland and Denmark. Spaniards and the French speak a heavily-accented English, but with greater fluency than East Asians.

STUDENT 7: Local people are proficient in English, especially those in German-speaking countries and northern Europe.

Ideology regarding JAE

Participants' ideologies regarding JAE are shown in Table 4. Notably, half of the students (48.6%) wished to develop their pronunciation towards L1-likeness by getting rid of their Japanese accent, whereas less than a quarter of them (22.5%) took a positive view of the intelligibility of JAE, stating, 'My Japanese accent has caused no problems in communication

with people speaking varieties of accented English' (STUDENT 7) and 'I learned in linguistics courses that the key in ELF communication is intelligibility rather than [correct] pronunciation or grammar' (STUDENT 8).

Table 4: Ideology towards JAE (*N* = 111)

Which statement below is closest to your view on your pronunciation of English?	
(A) My pronunciation is native or near native.	27.9% (31)
(B) I wish to sound like a native speaker by getting rid of my Japanese accent.	48.6% (54)
(C) I do not see any problem in my Japanese accent, as long as it is intelligible.	22.5% (25)
(D) A Japanese accent in my speech should be respected as a part of my identity.	0.9% (1)

Note: The numbers of valid responses are shown in parentheses.

Table 5: Motivations for improvement of JAE towards L1 English (*N* = 54)

Why do you wish to get rid of the Japanese accent in your speech?	
(1) I wish to hide my Japanese/East Asian background.	3.7% (2)
(2) A non-native accent is associated with lower intelligence and social status.	9.3% (5)
(3) It is important to strive for a set goal such as native accent acquisition.	37.0% (20)
(4) A native accent sounds 'cool', although I cannot explain why.	44.4% (24)
(5) Other reasons.	5.6% (3)

Note: The numbers of valid responses are shown in parentheses.

Next, the 54 participants who wished to speak with an L1-like accent were asked about their motivation for pronunciation improvement (Table 5). An L1 accent sounded attractive to 24 students (44.4%) for no clear reason. This could be a matter of pure preference, probably intrinsic and difficult to define, as expressed in the respondents' comments.

STUDENT 4: Native pronunciation may be easier to hear.

STUDENT 9: I don't associate a foreign accent with low social status, but movie stars [who speak L1-accented English] sound cool.

STUDENT 10: Native speech strikes a chord in my heart.

At the same time, as many as 20 'would-be accent improvers' (37.0%) placed value on training themselves to achieve perfection. They regarded efforts to master an L1-like accent as

part of a more general process of reaching a higher degree of development, with some comparing themselves to dedicated performers or athletes:

> STUDENT 11: Training yourself hard [towards a goal] is indispensable in life.

> STUDENT 12: Acquisition of a native-like accent is the goal of my efforts. I am not satisfied with a daily-conversation level of proficiency. [In reference to baseball] you must polish your skills to play in the Major League. Just winning a Japanese high school baseball championship is not a goal.

> STUDENT 13: There are late-blooming athletes. They say that an accent can change only in early childhood, but a few late learners succeed by making a huge effort. If I endeavour from now on, perhaps I will succeed.

Discussion

In answering the first research objective, the results showed the participants' overwhelming preference for US English, in conformity with previous studies on Japanese learners' attitudes. However, this L1 English orientation does not seem to have been forged simply by 'the native-speakerism within ELT' (Holliday, 2006), given that the participants were exposed to diverse varieties of L2-accented English in EMI class activities and through their overseas experiences. Furthermore, according to course enrolment records, at least 36 students (32.1%) were well acquainted with the tenets of EIL, ELF, and WEs in linguistics and related courses. In fact, a considerable number of participants (22.5%) acknowledged the intelligibility of JAE, as reported in Table 4, and very few (9.3%) associated JAE with lower intelligence and social status or ethnic stigma (Table 5). Ho (2008) characterised East Asians' attitudes toward L1 English by their motivation to master it as a tool for communication, as English is 'the gateway to international business, technological, and scientific knowledge' (p. 41). Nevertheless, this instrumental impetus does not readily explain participants' deep desire for L1-like accent acquisition, considering that their proficiency had already reached a fairly advanced level (B2 or C1 on the CEFR scale).

Regarding the second research objective, previous literature has consistently indicated that ESL learners in the Expanding Circle evaluate their own L2 English more negatively in the competence and status dimensions than L1 English (e.g., Jenkins, 2007; McKenzie, 2008;

Sasayama, 2013; Xu et al., 2010; Yook & Lindemann, 2013). Within Expanding Circle countries, Korean and Thai evaluators rated their own speech highest of all Asian varieties (Ahn & Kang, 2017; McKenzie et al., 2016), and a similar tendency was observed among Japanese ESL learners, who perceived JAE speakers more positively than other Asian L2 English speakers (e.g., Chiba et al., 1995; McKenzie & Gilmore, 2017). However, the present study's participants stand in sharp contrast, in that they deprecated their compatriots' speech to a much greater degree than L2 varieties from neighbouring countries. This directly contradictory result between current and past Japanese studies might be attributable to differences in the English varieties compared; the evaluators' sociocultural backgrounds may have also affected assessments of their own speech. Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) found that Japanese students were less confident in their pronunciation than Malaysian and Korean respondents were in their own accents. Similarly, Chien (2014) noted that Taiwanese English was rated lowest in the status dimension of all L2 varieties by local respondents.

How can the findings of the two research objectives be reconciled – the preference for L1 English and the sense of self-inferiority with respect to other L2 varieties in terms of competence? The third objective, which aimed to elucidate the ideology of English acquisition, sheds light on the underlying mechanism for the accommodation of these seemingly disparate ideas. The participants were not content with their achieved proficiency and wanted to further improve their speech to an L1 level, despite their awareness of the extreme difficulty of this endeavour. Their passion and dedication to the mastery of English is reflected in the view of continued effort as an indispensable virtue in mastering anything (STUDENT 11) and in the use of athletic metaphors (STUDENTS 12 & 13). Where does this self-abasement and stoic perfectionism in learning come from? One clue may lie in the fact that English in Japan has been a typical example of 'performance varieties' (Kachru, 1992a, p. 55); at least until the turn of the century, the use of English remained restricted to specific contexts such as diplomacy and international business negotiations, and to a limited number (relative to the size of the national population) of 'elite' individuals working in the international arena. Even the young participants of the study, once they leave the EMI environment, will rarely need to speak English as an intranational lingua franca. Therefore, high competence in ESL is not an essential everyday practical skill, but rather assumes the position of a refined skill, similar to the performance of a first-rate artist or athlete, which is evident in the interviewees' comparison of English with sports.

In this connection, one participant agreed that *eigodo*, or 'the way of English', could be felt while on the path to perfecting her English:

> STUDENT 14: Although I am aware of my English being highly developed, I will get a sense of fulfilment from the process of further perfecting it. I feel something like *eigodo* there.

There has been a long history of *do* (/do:/), or 'the way', in Japanese culture. *Do* is interpreted as a principle underlying a system of thought or belief, and is included as part of the names of traditional skills or codes of behaviour (Kodansha, 1993), such as *judo* (literally, the gentle way) and *bushido* (the way of samurai). In the same spirit, the word *eigodo* was coined and popularised by Michihiro Matsumoto (1940–), a professional interpreter, who compared English learning to *judo* and *bushido* (Matsumoto, 1981, 2006). Since then, the term has been widely used as a common noun in the titles of books and articles on English learning, such as *Eigodo* (manga), *EIGODO* (online English language school), and *Eigodo for High School Students* (English reference book), among others. The goal of *eigodo* is to attain complete proficiency in English through dedicated practice. To the best of the author's knowledge, no previous literature has referred to the sociolinguistic meaning of *eigodo* in applied linguistics or ELT discourse.

The English-as-a-performance norm still prevails in Japanese society, and participants not only prefer Inner Circle English as an ideal model, typically US English, because of its common use in learning materials and in worldwide entertainment media, but also tend to appraise the English of their peers in terms of how close it sounds to the L1 model. Furthermore, they are concerned with absolute proficiency, regardless of whether a person is an L1 or L2 speaker of English or whether he/she is a monolingual or plurilingual speaker. That is why EAE was highly evaluated in competence, as it was perceived as an L2 variant 'close to native English in terms of phonological similarity' (STUDENT 6), although regarded as 'one stage lower than native English' (STUDENT 15). High-performing users of EIL and (monolingual) L1 speakers were measured using the same yardstick, and JAE was denigrated as an example of imperfect acquisition. Adherence to L1 norms in language performance may frustrate or discourage ESL learners, since few can practically achieve the goal of passing for an L1 speaker (e.g., Cook, 1999; Kirkpatrick, 2007). Nevertheless, under the *eigodo* principle, the current participants firmly believed in the possibility, however slight, of being able to attain L1-like competence, like 'late-blooming athletes' (STUDENT 13), and wished to become one of the 'selected few' as a result of their self-disciplined efforts. In this way, self-deprecation and striving for perfection are two sides of the same coin.

Conclusion and limitations

The recent discussions about ESL education in Japan have been characterised by applied linguists' strenuous efforts to challenge the entrenched belief in Inner Circle English as the norm for ESL learners, but the participants in this research still greatly favour US English, regardless of their first-hand awareness of the diversity of English due to their EMI and overseas experiences. However, they differ from participants in past attitudinal studies conducted in Japan, inasmuch as they disparaged JAE more than the other L2 varieties of English in the proficiency and status dimensions. These Japanese self-deprecating attitudes may stem from a perfectionism embedded in the national culture, which is also prevalent in the context of mastering other artistic skills. The traditional philosophy of *do*, a stoic value system and code of behaviour, is reflected in the term *eigodo*, or the pursuit of English. Dissatisfied with their current level of proficiency, they still strive for L1-like competence as the ultimate goal of an EIL user. Bruthiaux (2003, p. 159) warned that 'broad-brush descriptions' of Kachru's three-circle model overlook different sociolinguistic grounds within each circle. The preference for L1 English has been commonly observed in the Expanding Circle, and indeed every ESL learner around the world should wish to improve their English skills in one sense or another, but their motivation needs to be re-examined according to each country's sociocultural context. This study confirms how the culturally specific ideology of perfectionism serves as an underlying framework explaining both the overall L1 English orientation and the widespread abasement of JAE.

The author acknowledges some methodological limitations of the study. First, the author chose advanced learners of English as participants, as they were most sensitive to the diversity of English from their first-hand experience. Thus, the current findings may not be generalisable to all ESL learners in Japan, who show wide variety in terms of proficiency and learning environments. In this respect, it is unclear whether participants' negative comments on the JAE of 'Japanese speakers' were also directed at themselves. For example, an interviewee remembered someone in East Asia saying to her, 'Japanese people are poor at English, but you are more fluent than I had expected you to be' (STUDENT 3). A follow-up question could have eliminated the ambiguity on whether she was 'one of them' or 'an independent evaluator of JAE as distinguished from the others'. Second, the questionnaire and post hoc interviews were purposefully implemented in this research, but a cultural belief or creed, including language ideology, presents itself in complex and multifarious ways. To attest to the spirit of perfectionism as a part of Japanese motivation for L1-like accent acquisition, additional measures should have been taken, such as the detection and analysis of other salient manifestations of that belief in ESL

learning contexts. Finally, as this study focused on learners' attitudes and ideology related to the phonological aspects of L2 varieties, future research should explore whether and how they react to L2 varieties differentiated in terms of lexico-grammatical and pragmatic features.

Notes

1. The idea of EIL had been recognised half a century earlier in the 1951 national guidelines for English education, which stated that that 'English is not only the speech of English-speaking peoples but is an international language as well' (Ministry of Education, 1951, 'Nature of English to Be Taught' section). However, this reference to EIL was removed in the 1958 guidelines.
2. Until March 2020, almost all students in Japan started to receive formal ESL education through the secondary school curriculum from Grade 7 (age 12–13); since then, English has become a required subject from Grade 3 (age 8–9) of primary education.
3. Given the difficulty in defining the term *native (speaker)* adequately (Cook 1999; Davies, 2003; Dewaele, 2018), the author uses the alternative word *L1 (speaker)* in this paper 'in the sense of the language that the speaker is most proficient in' (Kirkpatrick, 2007, p. 10), except in direct quotations from other scholars.

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Appendix A: Relevant items extracted from the questionnaire (originally in Japanese)

1. Have you been educated in a local or international school in a foreign country/region?
For ( ) years since the age of ( ): Country/countries ( )

2. Please indicate the result(s) of your English proficiency test(s) taken in the past two years (e.g., TOEFL 90, IELTS 6.5, etc.). _____

3. Which varieties of English do you like? Choose (up to five) favourite varieties from the list in order of preference. (1)_____, (2)_____, (3)_____, (4)_____, (5)_____.

List: (A) United States, (B) Canada, (C) United Kingdom, (E) Australia, (F) New Zealand, (G) India, (H) Singapore, (I) Philippines, (J) Japan, (K) South Korea, (L) China, (M) Russia, (N) Germany, (O) France, (P) Northern Europe, (Q) Eastern Europe, (R) Southern Europe, (S) Caribbean countries, (T) Africa (excluding South Africa), (X) Other country/region:_____.

*The item (D) was not used, as the upper-case letters *D* and *O* may look similar when written.

4. Refer to Table 4.

5. Refer to Table 5.

6. How often do you hear the following varieties of accented English?

Variety	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom/never
Japanese-accented English			
Chinese-accented English			
Korean-accented English			
Philippine-accented English			
European-accented English (excluding the UK and Ireland)			
English in India/Pakistan/Bangladesh			
English in Central or South America			

7.1 Please tick the cells which most closely correspond to your impression of Japanese-accented English.

Trait	Strongly agree ⟷ disagree				
I am familiar with this accent.					
This accent sounds pleasant to me.					
Speakers seem highly proficient.					
Speakers seem intelligent and cultivated.					
Speakers seem to be high-income earners.					

7.2–7.4 Please tick the cells which most closely correspond to your impression of Chinese-/ Korean-/Philippine-accented English.

7.5 Please tick the cells which most closely correspond to your impression of European-accented English spoken by non-native speakers.