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# A GAME THEORETIC EVALUATION OF ENGLISH PREFERENCES IN JAPAN

CLAIRE BRAKEL

## 1.0 Introduction

Despite decades (arguably even centuries) of English learning in Japan, communicative competence in English is rarely the outcome for English learners. Indeed, even with sweeping reform enacted by MEXT (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) and sincere effort by students and teachers alike, there has been little progress in English acquisition in Japan. This paper will present the historical background of English in Japan, the present condition of English in Japan, and then propose a solution for English education in Japan based on game theoretic analysis.

## 2.0 Early History of English in Japan

Hughes (1999), provides a helpful, education-oriented historical discussion of English in Japan. Though the first recorded contact with an English speaker was with the shipwrecked British sailor William Adams in 1600, Japan quickly adopted a national policy of *sakoku*, isolation, (1638-1853) and what little trading contact with England that resulted was quickly stopped. In fact, all international contact ceased with the exception of a small number of Dutch and Chinese trading vessels into Nagasaki. Hughes (1999:559) suggests that it was the Opium War of 1840, and China's defeat at the hands of the British navy, that “shocked Japan out of isolation.” In 1841, the first English text (a grammar book) was translated into Japanese. Ten years later, in 1853, another English-speaking super power flexed its military muscle on the shores of Japan: Commodore Matthew C. Perry and his fleet landed in Japan with a letter from the American president instructing Japan that trade must be opened or it risked military action against it. A treaty was signed and in another decade Japan consolidated politically in what would become known as the Meiji Restoration (1868-1912) to better face the rapidly changing geopolitical context it found itself in.

Shortly after its inauguration, the newly-formed Japanese government established the Ministry of Education and English was elevated as an important foreign language. Hughes (1999) quotes Ike (1995:4) in explaining that the reason for the prominence of American English over British English in education may have been due to the presence of American missionaries. Unfortunately, the technological, societal, and intellectual progress made during the Meiji Restoration also led to rampant nationalism (including the 1923 pronouncement that all foreign

language instruction was to be abolished from the school curriculum) and Japan's eventual entry into WWII (Hughes 1999). Many scholars, including Hughes (1999), claim that English was abolished from the school curriculum and only soldiers learned it. McKenzie (2008: 271), however, suggests that though it was dropped completely from the curriculum for girls, boys still studied English four hours a week at the junior high school level. Following the restoration after Japan's defeat in WWII, English became a mandatory requirement in school curriculum, though oral communication was devalued and even treated suspiciously. English education in Japan was translation-oriented for the pragmatic needs of international business and technological developments. It is from this compartmentalized nature of English education in Japan that the title of Hughes' (1999) article gets its name: a walled garden.

Kubota (1998) identifies two ideologies that can explain the compartmentalization of English in Japan. One ideology is *nihonjinron* which literally means “theories on the Japanese,” but in practice is the framework and research that sets aside Japanese language, culture, and society as unique in the world (Kubota 1998: Ideologies of English section, para. 1). After its boom in the 1960s and 1970s, many critics have characterized this philosophy as reactionary. In fear of losing Japanese cultural identity to English and the West, many Japanese scholars have misrepresented historical and linguistic facts to suit the needs of a *nihonjinron* ideology. Tsuda (1990) is quoted in Kubota (1998, Ideologies of English section, para. 2) with the explanation that because of the increasing global presence and dominance of English, many Japanese have developed an “English allergy” that prevents them from acquiring English or identifying with English speakers successfully. It is important to note here that the English that is being reacted against is Inner Circle<sup>1</sup> (from the West) Englishes. The prominence of Inner Circle Englishes in the debate about English in Japan is seen clearly by the second ideology that explains the compartmentalization of English in Japan: *kokusaika*. Briefly, this ideology is internationalization. However, as Kubota (1998) observes, “most of the budget proposed to cope with *kokusaika* is allocated to projects such as inviting teachers from the United States,” and so internationalization in practice has a strong Inner Circle Englishes bias. These two competing and at times complimentary ideologies contribute to the communication crisis that Japan finds itself in today regarding English education and language.

### 3.0 English in Japan Today: Education

Torikai (2005: 250) explains that directly following the end of WWII, there was an overwhelming desire for communicative competence in English, as evidenced by the record-breaking sales of an English-Japanese conversation book barely a month after the surrender.

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1 B. Kachru as quoted in McKenzie (2008: 267-269) describes Inner Circle countries as ones where English is spoken as a native language, Outer Circle ones as where it is spoken as a post-colonial language, and Expanding Circle ones as where English is learned as a foreign language for international communication. This paper will include further discussion of this distinction later.

During the 1960s and 1970s there was increased pressure for more practical, communication-oriented English. In almost any literature about English education in Japan, there will be mention of a 1974 debate between Diet Member Hiraizumi and a university professor named Watanabe. Torikai (2005: 250) and Hughes (1999: 561) paint this picture of the famous stand-off: Hiraizumi argued for practical, non-compulsory English education only when necessary while Watanabe argued that English study as an academic and intellectual pursuit is in and of itself valuable. There is reason why this decades-old debate still holds a prominent place in contemporary literature: there is still no consensus in Japan about what the role and outcome of English education should be in Japan.

Starting in the 1980s, MEXT began shifting English education policy toward communication-oriented learning: high-school study abroad initiatives and foreign teacher exchange programs (most notably, the JET Programme) were aggressively integrated into the curriculum. This spear-headed the need for a new bureaucratic entity, CLAIR (The Council of Local Authorities on International Relations), that was established “in July 1988 in response to rising concerns about local-level internationalization in Japan...[and] was created to promote and provide support for local internationalization” (About CLAIR: Overview, 2003). The JET Programme was started at about the same time as a partnership between local authorities (i.e. school boards/districts) and several governmental agencies. According to the JET Programme website, “it was started with the purpose of increasing mutual understanding between the people of Japan and the people of other nations. It aims to promote internationalisation in Japan’s local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and developing international exchange at the community level” (History of the JET Programme, 2010).

Despite these efforts, the dissatisfaction with educational outcomes as well as the push for communicative competence (which may be a Western-centric, culturally inappropriate standard; see Kumaravadivelu 2001) continues almost three decades after the initial MEXT initiatives. For example, in the 2003 MEXT initiative *Action Plan to Foster Japanese Who Can Use English*, communication is referred to over 40 times (Torikai 2005: 250). Even so, these intentions may be undermined, at least in part, by the system of education in Japan, particularly the nature of high school and especially college entrance examinations. Kikuchi and Browne (2009) describe the readability of college entrance examinations as quite low and resistant to change: within a decade of MEXT-directed educational reform, the examinations themselves changed little. In addition, Kikuchi and Browne (2009: 174-175) describe two other major obstacles to meaningful curricular reform (i.e. higher levels of communicative competence in students): over-reliance on grammar-translation and a massive lack of pre- and in-service teacher training. Indeed, Kikuchi and Browne (2009: 175) mention a 1998 study by Browne and Wada that found that only 3% of all English teachers in Chiba prefecture majored in ESL/EFL teaching (most majored in English literature). Therefore, despite clear goals and directives from MEXT, English education in Japan has been stalled because of too many contradictory interests.

However, while English education falters, the influence of English on the Japanese language is strong and increasing.

#### 4.0 English in Japan Today: Language

McKenzie (2008: 278) paints a dynamic linguistic picture of Japan: almost 10 percent of the words in a standard Japanese dictionary are of foreign (mostly English) origin; nearly 13 percent of the words used in daily conversation are of foreign (mostly English) origin; and more the 60% of new words added to Japanese dictionaries are from English. It is no surprise then that Japanese English, as characterized by Kachru and Nelson (2006), has quite an even balance of Japanese and English language influences.

To begin with, loanwords are written in a different alphabet called *katakana*. Loanwords are also adapted for ease of pronunciation, usually by adding vowels to consonant clusters and/or final consonants (Kachru and Nelson, 2006: 172-173). This is because all but one Japanese grapheme includes either one vowel or a consonant-vowel pair (i.e. *a*, *o* and *ka*, *ko*). Japanese verb endings (i.e. *suru* meaning “to do”) are often added to loanword nouns to make a verb phrase. The impact of English can also be seen in the increased use of personal pronouns in loanword environments (an interesting example is *mai hoomu* meaning literally “my home” but pragmatically it is used to describe a person's personal house which means that someone could use the phrase *mai hoomu* when talking about someone else’s house to them, Kachru & Nelson, 2006:173). Loanwords can also have limited semantic meanings (*rikuesto* for “request” only refers to a request for music/songs) or be redefined (*sabisu* for “service” refers to something complimentary or “on the house”).

Though Kachru and Nelson (2006:175) emphasize that it is not clear when, where or how loanwords will be adopted, it is clear that a large degree of linguistic creativity is employed when using loanwords. Indeed, many of the adaptations are so specific to the Japanese context that describing them as “loanwords” can seem to be a misnomer. Japanese modes of communication have also impacted the way English is used in Japan: pragmatic hedges like “I think,” “maybe,” and “perhaps” are very common expressions used to soften statements (Kachru & Nelson, 2006: 176). These pragmatic hedges are used in sentences or statements that many Inner Circle speakers would not deem necessary for softening. From even this limited sample of the characteristics of Japanese English, it is clear that it is not simply in pronunciation that this variety of English differs from Inner Circle Englishes. Despite the history, creativity and diversity of Japanese English, the English education model in Japan still has an Inner Circle bias (McKenzie, 2008: 274). This bias, however, has been detrimental to English acquisition among Japanese speakers of English: McKenzie (2008: 272) references a survey of TOEFL scores across Asia that ranks Japan lowest—tied with North Korea—out of all 26 Asian countries. This juxtaposition of linguistic creativity with language acquisition failure clearly shows that there is

an English communication crisis in Japan and requires a dynamic shift of approach in English education.

### 5.0 Game Theory and Language Planning: A Dynamic Shift of Approach

Koffi (2012) proposes a dynamic approach to language planning: by utilizing game theoretic analysis—specifically De Mesquita's (2009) Predictioneer's Model (Figure 1)—he suggests that language planners can assess the potential success or failure of language planning models *before* they are implemented. The following analysis is based off of Koffi's (2012) approach and assesses the potential success or failure of introducing Outer Circle Englishes into English education in Japan at the junior high school level. The justification for centering the following discussion on junior high school English curriculum is due to the 2003 MEXT policy that requires English as a compulsory part of the junior high school curriculum where previously it was an elective (though according to McKenzie (2008: 272) English has been a *de facto* compulsory subject for decades). In this same 2003 policy, MEXT also provided for many elementary schools to offer English courses. However, these have not been made compulsory as yet and so the focus here remains on junior high school English curriculum. The weighted mean formula below will be used to calculate the type of English curriculum that is likely to work best for Japan:

$$\text{Weighted Mean} = \frac{I \times S \times P}{I \times S}$$

The formula calls for identifying the players in the Japanese English planning game, their influence (I), the salience (S), their position (P) in order to determine the type of English that would work best for Japanese students.

### 6.0 Game Theory and English Education in Japan: The Game and its Players

Based on the preceding research regarding English education and language in Japan—past and present—it is clear that a dynamic change is necessary. Given Japan's geographic location (Asia) and language situation (Outer Circle), it is likely that introducing English varieties into the junior high school curriculum would be successful. However, by utilizing the Predictioneer's Model, this paper seeks to mathematically demonstrate and justify this likelihood. Table 1 provides the positions each player in this language game may have regarding their stance on English varieties in the junior high school English classroom. A note about English varieties is needed here. B. Kachru as quoted in McKenzie (2008: 267-269) describes Inner Circle Englishes as the Englishes used in countries as a native language (usually in a monolingual environment). Examples of these countries are Great Britain, the U.S., and (to a

lesser extent) Australia. Outer Circle Englishes, then, are used in countries that had contact with Inner Circle Englishes (almost always these Englishes exist in post-colonial, multilingual states). Examples of these countries are Singapore, Jamaica, and India. Finally, Expanding Circle Englishes are used in countries as prominent foreign languages, usually for the purpose of “internationalization.” Examples of these countries are Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia.

Table 1: *Position scale for English varieties in junior high school curriculum*

Historic Inner Circle English: North American, British English	100
Regional Inner Circle English: Australian and New Zealand English	75
Outer Circle Englishes	50
Expanding Circle Englishes	25
Japanese English	0

Position 0 and 100 represent the most extreme positions any player can have in this game. Position 100 more or less corresponds to the current policy of English education at the junior high school level. Though this policy is not explicit, the previously mentioned 2003 MEXT policy strongly encourages native speaker-like pronunciation (McKenzie, 2008: 274) and one only need look at the JET participant numbers from 2011 to know what variety of native pronunciation is favored: 2,322 participants were from America while the next two highest participant numbers—from Canada and the UK respectively—were less than 500 (JET Programme Participant Numbers, 2011). Position 75 still adheres to the Inner Circle Englishes model while localizing it slightly with emphasis on Australian and New Zealand Englishes as these are the contemporary contact Englishes of the Inner Circle. Position 50 expands the definition of English into the Outer Circle. The five Outer Circle varieties in this proposal are all represented by at least one JET participant (according JET Programme Participant Numbers, 2011): Jamaican, Indian, Filipino, Singapore, and Malaysian Englishes. Position 0 is the other extreme of Position 100 where only an Expanding Circle variety is taught. It is important to note that, as McKenzie (2008: 269) discusses, there is very little known about the Englishes in the Expanding Circle so this position may represent an ideal rather than a practical position for contemporary English education in Japan. In addition to their position, each player will have a certain interest level (described here as “salience”). Table 2 outlines the potential salience of each player.

Table 2: *Saliency (Level of interest in teaching English varieties at junior high school level)*

HIGH	95
MODERATE	75
MILD	50
LOW	25
NO	10

No player can have a score of 100 nor can they have a score of 0 for saliency because, as Koffi (2012: 65) cites De Mesquita (2009), there must be room for individual doubt. Therefore, if a player is judged to have a high saliency in teaching English varieties at junior high school level, they will be given a score of 95. Likewise, if a player is judged to have no interest in teaching English varieties at junior high school level, they will be given a score of 10. Table 3 lists the relevant players of this language game.

Table 3: *List of Players*

1.	MEXT—favor American English
2.	MEXT—favor British English
3.	MEXT—favor Australian English
4.	MEXT—favor World Englishes
5.	CLAIR (Council of International Relations)
6.	JET Programme (teaching exchange program)
7.	Parents—Japanese, urban
8.	Parents—Japanese, rural
9.	Parents—foreign, short-term
10.	Parents—foreign, immigrants/long-term
11.	Politicians—favor American English
12.	Politicians—favor British English
13.	Politicians—favor Australian English

14.	Politicians—favor World Englishes
15.	Linguists—favor World Englishes
16.	Linguists—favor Inner Circle Englishes
17.	Teacher training colleges/programs
18.	JHS teachers—Japanese
19.	Private Tutoring ( <i>juku</i> )—prepares students for exams
20.	JHS teachers—American JETs
21.	JHS teachers—British JETs
22.	JHS teachers—Australian JETs
23.	JHS teachers—other JETs

This list is in order of the players' influence (which is laid out specifically in Table 4). Both MEXT employees and Politicians are separated into four categories, favoring either: American, British, Australian, or World Englishes. As mentioned previously, these three Inner Circle Englishes are the most common English varieties currently used in the junior high school setting. Each step away from American English signals a greater appreciation for English varieties and this is important when considering the player's position. In this scale, politicians' influence is ranked lower than parents. As Koffi (2012: 14-16) pointed out, parents will do what is necessary to give their children the kind of education they think is important, regardless of what lawmakers may say. However, because MEXT, CLAIR and the JET Programme have direct oversight concerning educational policy, their rated influence is higher than parents. CLAIR oversees international relations at the local level and in Japan internationalization usually refers to interactions with English speakers and so they are very involved players in English education. The JET Programme is a partnership of many organizations but since it is directly involved with internationalization via English education in public schools, it is also included as a player.

Following these major organizations are the parents. They are first categorized as either Japanese or foreign. Tett (2004:260), in a comparative study of Scottish and Japanese parents involvement in their children's education found that, unlike in Scotland, "there is a strong expectation that all [Japanese] parents will help their children to study." Based on this, it is expected that although all Japanese parents will have high interest in what happens in schools, urban parents will prefer Inner Circle Englishes while rural parents will be indifferent to English education in general. Foreign parents are split between short vs. long-term ones. This distinction is important because most short-term parents will be more interested in Inner Circle Englishes

being taught while long-term foreign parents are often immigrants who are invested in Japan and therefore less interested in Inner Circle Englishes. According to The Ministry of Justice, Immigration Bureau in Japan, the following groups make up the highest percentages of foreign national residents: Chinese, Koreans, Brazilians, Filipinos, Peruvians, and Americans (Immigration Bureau: Registration of Foreign Residents, 2006). Except Americans (who probably fall under “short-term”) all these groups have a long history of interaction with Japan and therefore it can be assumed that their interest is either education in Japanese or their first language.

Linguists have historically engaged in debates about English education in Japan (see Torikai, 2005: 250; Hughes, 1999: 561), but their influence is less than politicians since they are not involved in policy-making. Teacher-training programs are more influential than actual teachers since what teachers learn impacts how they run their classes. Interestingly, however, teacher training programs often include courses in World Englishes but these courses do not influence teaching practices as much as might be expected (see Suzuki 2011; Yoshikawa 2005). Japanese junior high school teachers’ influence is just under the teacher training programs and their position has historically been conservative. Kikuchi and Browne (2009: 189) characterize Japanese teachers of English as “either unwilling or unable to teach English in a communicative manner.” More importantly, Yoshikawa (2005: 352) mentions a presentation conducted by Sasaki (2004) who found that almost 80 percent of Japanese teacher surveyed did not teach English varieties in their classroom even though they were aware of varieties. Moreover, the teachers who did teach varieties only included Inner Circle Englishes in their classes. Finally, because *juku* is most often run by Japanese tutors and companies, their influence is slightly higher than JET participants. Table 4 is the final calculations including the weighted mean.

Table 4: *Weighted mean calculation*

Players	I	S	P	ISP	IS
MEXT (AmE)	100	10	0	0	1000
MEXT (BrE)	100	50	25	125000	5000
MEXT (AusE)	100	75	75	562500	7500
MEXT (WE)	100	95	100	950000	9500
CLAIR	90	50	50	225000	4500
JET Programme	80	25	0	0	2000
Parents (JpUrban)	70	25	0	0	1750
Parents (JpRural)	70	50	50	175000	3500
Parents (FornShortT)	70	25	0	0	1750
Parents (FornLongT)	70	95	50	332500	6650
Politicians (AmE)	60	10	0	0	600
Politicians (BrE)	60	50	25	75000	3000
Politicians (AusE)	60	75	75	337500	4500
Politicians (WE)	60	95	100	570000	5700
Linguists (WorldE)	50	95	100	475000	4750

Linguists (StandardE)	50	25	0	0	1250
Teacher Training Progs.	40	50	50	100000	2000
JHS Teacher (Jp)	30	25	0	0	750
Private Tutoring (“Juku”)	20	25	0	0	500
JHS Teachers (AmJET)	10	10	0	0	100
JHS Teachers (BrJET)	10	50	25	12500	500
JHS Teachers (AusJET)	10	75	50	37500	750
JHS Teachers (otherJET)	10	95	100	95000	950
Subtotals				4072500	68500
Weighted mean					59.45255474

## 7.0 Game Theory: Results and Implementation

A score of 59.45% does not correspond perfectly with any of the positions in Table 1. However, it is closer to the third position than it is to the second position. Koffi (2012:170) in quoting De Mesquita (2009), however, explains that whatever position is closest to the weighted mean is the one most agreeable to all players. Since 59.45 is closer to Outer Circle Englishes (10 points away from 50) than it is to Regional Inner Circle Englishes (15 points away from 75), it means that teaching Outer Circle Englishes to Japanese students is most likely to yield better results than trying to teaching Inner Circle Englishes. This also means that Japanese educational authorities should focus less on having their students acquire a native speaker accent and more on intelligibility.

Though casual observers of the language situation in Japan may be skeptical of this outcome, a game theoretic analysis aims to predict what the best solution is, not a chimerical native speaker accent that learners fantasize about. Many Japanese learners of English aspire to speak an Inner Circle variety. However, for the majority of learners this aspiration is attainable, which leads to the aforementioned dissatisfaction with English education in Japan. Therefore, this game theoretic analysis suggests a move away from the idealization of Inner Circle Englishes in junior high school education, and realistic steps towards Outer Circle Englishes. Can an Outer Circle Englishes curriculum be acceptable in Japan? Does such a proposal stand a chance? The answers to these questions are a resounding “yes” for the following reasons.

Japan has a very strong theoretical foundation in World Englishes. B. Kachru (2005: 90) explains that although there is very little global awareness of World Englishes, Japan has provided a leadership role by publishing books in Japanese on the subject, forming associations, and creating journals. However, a game theoretic analysis would not be complete with only

theoretical foundations. Economic considerations need to be addressed. Here, too, the economic situation is promising: B. Kachru (2005: 92) cites statistics from *Asiaweek*, *Japan Almanac*, and *Statistical Handbook of Japan* that show Japan's economic interests being centered in Asia, not the West, based on export and import percentages. This means that familiarity with Outer Circle Englishes is actually more of a capital for learners in Japan than Inner Circle Englishes. In addition, teacher training programs, like the one described by Suzuki (2001), typically include at least one course on World Englishes. In this way, unlike their counterparts in the U.S., most Japanese teachers on English are familiar with the concept as well as certain World English varieties. Current studies explain that many English learners in Japan have a negative assessment of their own accented-English (Tokumoto and Shibata 2011) as well as other Outer Circle accented-Englishes (Yoshikawa 2005). However, because of the theoretical foundation, strong economic incentive, and teacher training it is clear that Outer Circle English education in Japan would be successful and perceptual changes would also result. Unfortunately, there are not many practical models for teaching English varieties.

Kachru and Nelson (2006: 127) explain a model in Pakistan described by Baumgardner (1987) where Pakistani and British newspapers were analyzed and compared, with attention paid especially to syntactical and lexical variations. Though promising, this model is unlikely to work in present-day Japan because while English newspapers exist, McKenzie (2008:277) explains that Inner Circle Englishes are the language models used. However, there is something just as accessible and inexpensive as newspapers: the internet. Baik and Shim (2002) describe a course offered at Open Cyber University of Korea whereby students watch news clips online from broadcasters who speak Outer Circle varieties of English. Even this can be difficult to ensure authentic samples since, for example, NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai “Japan Broadcasting Corporation”) will often employ foreign correspondents to deliver broadcasts about international events. Therefore, teachers will have to use judgment about what clips to show in class and at least in the case of NHK it is very common for Japanese broadcasters to speak about domestic topics. Even so, this is the most promising way to introduce English varieties into the junior high school curriculum in Japan because it is accessible and of no cost.

## 8.0 Conclusion

English is an important part of Japanese history and has impacted almost all areas of Japanese society. However, there have been few inroads to improving communication in English among Japanese learners despite targeted efforts in past decades. It is clear from a game theoretic analysis that the way to solve this communication crisis is to teach Outer Circle Englishes. Not only is there strong theoretic foundation for World Englishes in Japan, there is also economic incentive for familiarity with Outer Circle Englishes. By introducing Outer Circle Englishes in the junior high school curriculum, many doors open up for expanding the definition of Japanese English, communicative competence, and English education in Japan.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I am a TESL MA student at SCSU, completing my degree (hopefully!) May 2013. After graduating from Illinois College (Jacksonville, IL) with a BA in English I spent two years teaching English in Japan with the JET Programme. I taught in a junior high school of over 500 students and more than 20 teachers and administrators. I was the only one speaking an American variety of English and yet it was my job to correct the English variety spoken by this community. Although I loved living and teaching in Japan, I became dissatisfied with this role. I was the accent police! It was this experience that sparked my interest in TESL, especially in the EFL context, and in World Englishes. After graduating from SCSU, I hope to teach abroad or continue my studies in a PhD program.

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