

An interview study:

the perception of English as a lingua franca in the Japanese teaching context

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1. Introduction

Teaching English at a Japanese university as a non-native ELT professional without any background knowledge of the characteristics of the Asian teaching context raises numerous questions on an everyday basis from practicalities to more abstract, teaching principle-type of issues. However, there are some seemingly obvious reference points that provide guidance on the way of teaching and meeting the expectations. Such a cornerstone is the realisation that students must be prepared to function and communicate in the context of using English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), i.e. most probably they will use English as the shared language of communication with other non-native speakers, mainly from other Asian countries. Even if this fact is considered as one of the most crucial factors when English curricula are designed, it is a highly complex issue of what language models and norms to represent for students; what skills and competences should be prioritised over others and, on the whole, what goals are to be set to achieve.

The main focus of this paper is, therefore, to investigate foreign guest lecturers' as well as Japanese English teachers' perception of ELF at an institutional level at Meisei University in Tokyo, Japan. The teachers' beliefs and views with reference to the English language and language models they want to represent for their students are under scrutiny along with their understanding of their students' needs and the teaching context they all are working in. It is strongly believed that gaining an insight into their views and the norms they follow might initiate a constructive professional discussion in order to identify students' needs in the context of ELF more precisely and, as a result, develop up-to-date curricula, which attempt to respond to the challenges of ELF in English language teaching.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 English as a Lingua Franca and teaching English as a Foreign Language

The fact that non-native speakers of English (NNS) with various multilingual backgrounds have outnumbered native English speakers (NS) in Kachru's (1992) inner circle model by a ratio of four to one (Graddol, 1997) challenges the standard views regarding the ownership of English and the matter of correct or appropriate English in general (Illés, 2011; Seidlhofer, 1999; Widdowson, 2012).

It is quite a striking figure that only in China, there are more language learners and users of English than there are native speakers of English in the world (Xu, 2010). Additionally, as a result of international political and economic decisions, several organisations have been established, agreeing on the use of English as the sole language of communication among the participating countries. For instance, the Charter of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2009 decided on English as the official language of communication between parties from Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and later, the extended version of ASEAN with three additional countries including China, Japan and Korea also did so (Kirkpatrick, 2012). Another example of such a group is BRICS, which comprises of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South-Africa. As Kirkpatrick (2012) claims, the vast majority of people in both groups are multilingual who learnt English as an additional language, and they represent more than half of the world population.

These dramatic changes raised research interest first in the field of applied linguistics (Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2004; Widdowson, 2012), then ELF gradually found its way to ELT research (Illés, 2014; Jenkins, 2007; Kirkpatrick, Patkin and Wu, 2013), as well. The early definitions of ELF, such as the one constructed by Firth (1996), highlights that "it is a 'contact language' between persons who share neither a common native tongue, nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication" (p.240). On the basis of this definition, NS of English would be excluded from ELF communication settings. However, other approaches argue for the inclusion of NSs

provided that they are not the ones creating the standards of the ongoing communication situations and the other parties in the conversation do not have to adhere to NS English (Seidlhofer, 2005; VOICE, 2013).

As Seidlhofer (2011, p.7) claims, ELF involves “any use of English among speakers of different first languages for whom English is the communicative medium of choice, and often the only option.” The more and more prevalent perception of ELF views the notion as a context in which mainly NNSs of English shape the language; therefore, the language produced in these communicative situations should not be compared to or assessed on a continuum with the idealised native speaker norms at the end, as this will always remain unattainable for users of ELF.

These concepts aforementioned determine the guidelines of several projects aimed at collecting an extensive corpus of English words of spoken ELF interactions for research purposes, mainly for pedagogic ones. English as a Lingua Franca in Academic Settings (ELFA, 2008), the Vienna Oxford Corpus of International English (VOICE, 2013), and the Asian Corpus of English (ACE, 2014) are among the most recent projects worldwide.

The pioneering academic venture of VOICE (2013) collected a more than a million-word corpus in professional, educational and leisure fields, providing researchers with a vast amount of data for in-depth descriptive studies on ELF, mainly for pedagogic purposes (VOICE, 2013). Applying the same coding procedures and structure, the ACE (2014) project compiled a similar-size corpus recorded in naturally-occurring ELF interactions in Asia. Among their multiple objectives, they intended to describe the “common features” of Asian ELF use, and identify the competences, strategies and linguistic features that lead to success in negotiating meaning and communication in general, while avoiding misunderstandings and communication breakdown (ACE, 2014).

The findings of ELF research need to be incorporated into ELT (Seidlhofer, 2012) and the content and focus of teaching English should be changed accordingly since various features of ELF use identified do not influence intelligibility (Jenkins, Cogo and Dewey, 2011; VOICE, 2013; ACE, 2014). Hence, they are unnecessarily viewed as incorrect or inappropriate in comparison with NS language use. As Illés

(2014) sums up, the reconsideration of the objectives of ELT is inevitable in order to set more realistic goals for language learners in an ELF context; consequently, the process of learning should be in the focus, instead of the product defined by native speaker norms.

Narrowing down the scope of analysis for the Asian context, Kirkpatrick, Patkin and Wu (2013) propose the adoption of a multilingual teacher model in Asian countries instead of the still ubiquitous dominance of native speaker teachers. They believe that the most important advantage of native speakers over their non-native counterparts is their in-depth knowledge of their own culture, i.e. the culture of an English-speaking country. This inevitable superiority, though, seems irrelevant in a context where all the parties in communication are of Asian origin and use the English language as the only means of communication available to them. They add that local multilingual teachers of English are to be more efficient as they have sufficient knowledge of the regional varieties of English along with regional cultures. On the basis of the corpus collected in the ACE (2014) project, numerous topics that multilingual people in Asian settings use for small talk have been identified; for instance, rice, Islamic finance, chili as a metaphor of jealousy, yin-yan (as joking) for mismatching slippers (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

Kirkpatrick (2014) comes to the conclusion that some basic guidelines to teach English in Asia in non-Anglo cultural contexts must be defined in order to raise awareness of the lingua franca approach among teachers working in this field, and find more efficient ways of teaching English. The six principles he finds crucial are summarised in the following list.

1. Mutual intelligibility is the goal of communication and teaching instead of an attempt to approximate native speaker English.
2. Native speaker cultures ceased to be the target, the development of an intercultural competence has become more realistic.
3. Well-qualified local multilinguals, who apply bi-or multilingual pedagogy, instead of a strict monolingual approach, might be more efficient English teachers than native speaker ones.

4. Lingua franca speakers benefit a lot from learning in lingua franca environments.
5. Spoken English is very different from written English. Genres, styles, and rhetorical structures should dominate the sphere of teaching written English.
6. Assessment must be in line with what is being taught.

Although lists and too suggestive tips may easily become dogmatic or superficial without critical thinking and adaptation to local needs and circumstances, these principles provide food for thought for stakeholders and English teachers, as well. There may be endless debates about the advantages and disadvantages of native speaker/non-native teachers and the ways English should be taught, but the fact that English teaching in Asia takes place in an ELF context should not be questioned any longer. Accordingly, if ELF is seen as a valid and justified context of teaching, curricula must be edited and updated in line with this approach in mind.

2.2 Teaching English in Japan

English teaching programmes in Japan are often strongly criticised (Bailey, 2004; Hosoki, 2011; Matsuda, 2005; Riches, 2006) for being inefficient when language learners' communicative skills are examined. As Hosoki (2011) overviews, there are several reasons in the history of education in Japan leading to a structure which is still extremely rigid and does not prepare students for lifelike, 'everyday' means of communication, but provides vast amount of descriptive grammar information about the English language, mainly explained in Japanese. He also claims that the average TOEFL score is one of the lowest in Asia and blames grammar translation practices, and in general the tendency of teaching for testing, as well as unrealistic group sizes with even around 40 students in each, and the still prevalent frontal teaching method, rote-learning and lack of opportunities for students to discuss their opinions in class.

Although some political changes were introduced with the best of intentions in order to improve the quality of foreign language education, such as the Japan

Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program since 1987 and the MEXT guidelines in 2003 (Hosoki, 2011), the outcome in terms of the productive skills of the students has not changed significantly. As a result of these programmes, there are numerous foreign teaching assistants and teachers in the country; in addition, the curricula and textbooks have similar contents due to governmental supervision. These changes still have not made much progress in teaching English as a foreign language in Japan. Matsuda (2005) criticises the efficacy of English teaching in Japan, also from the perspective of providing students with only one language variety, dominantly with American English; therefore, the representation of World Englishes in textbooks is advocated.

3. Method

The study is set in the qualitative research paradigm and attempts to gain an insight into the views and beliefs of the participating teachers on their own perception of English language models and on the norms they want to represent to their students, their views on the needs of their students and on the Japanese context as of teaching English as a *lingua franca*.

3.1 Participants

The most crucial aim of the participant selection process was to ensure maximum variety (Creswell, 1998) among the target group members in order to gain a deeper understanding of the spectrum the teachers represent in the institution. All the six participants work as English as a foreign language teaching professionals and arrived from one of the affiliated partner organisations of the university, except from the Japanese teacher. They show a wide diversity in terms of their age, cultural and multilingual backgrounds as well as their education, language proficiency (English and other foreign languages) and teaching experience. The nationality of the instructors comprised of the following: American, Belarusian, Belgian and British, Hungarian, Japanese and New-Zealand. Four participants were male and two female, while their age ranged from 28 to 49. Three of the interviewees

considered themselves native English speakers, one as bilingual in English and French and three of them as non-native speakers of English with high level of proficiency. Considering their education, the native speakers completed their BA studies in non-teaching related fields, such as psychology, communication and anthropology but attended teaching English as a second language MA programmes or received a CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). All the non-native speakers graduated from English language and language teaching MA programmes from their home country. The teaching experience of the participants in and out of Japan varied a great deal from a few months to a decade.

The common feature of all the teachers is the English programme they are currently working in. These instructors are involved in teaching mainly communication classes and regular 'eigo' classes; the former aimed at improving all the four skills for international communication students, the latter providing any other-major university students, regardless their faculty with the obligatory English lessons set by the Educational Ministry. These courses are significantly different as for the content of the course, the proficiency and motivational level of the students.

3.2 Instruments, data collection and data analysis

As the aim of the study is to seek a deeper understanding of the beliefs, opinions and subconscious attitudes of the participating teachers towards the language model they want to represent for their students, the needs of their students in reference to learning English and the phenomenon of English as a lingua franca in their own teaching context, conducting interviews seemed the most suitable research tool. Therefore, a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix) was developed and analysed by a fellow-researcher in order to improve comprehensibility of the questions. A semi-structured interview guide, on the one hand, aids the researcher to remain focused on the topic selected; on the other hand, provides room for other topics to emerge and discuss, which might add valuable information to the analysis. The structure of the interview guide and some of the questions were adapted from a previous research project (Illés and Szatzker, 2013) investigating the language awareness of prospective English teachers in Hungary or inspired by a study on an international

approach to English pronunciation and teachers' identity (Jenkins, 2005).

All the interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants in order to ensure member check. The language of the interviews was intended to be the mother tongue of the participants, which was applicable in case of English and Hungarian, but as for the Belarusian and the Japanese teacher, the only shared language was English. Additionally, the interview guide was applied flexibly to suit the given interviewee's needs, since certain questions, especially regarding English language learning history, were irrelevant for native speakers. To follow the guidelines of the constant-comparative method (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994), the interviews were first transcribed; subsequently, they were read through several times to identify emerging themes without preset categories. The meaningful units of data as a result of the analysis are presented in the discussion session.

The participants are referred to by the interview number (e.g.: Interview1) and only the fact that they are native or non-native speakers is indicated as their nationality is irrelevant; moreover, privacy issues must be taken into consideration. Direct quotations selected from the transcriptions are only applied in representative cases and not all the participants are necessarily quoted in each subsection.

4. Results and discussion

The interview transcriptions provided a lot of information and since the atmosphere of the conversations was quite relaxed, the participants easily opened up and shared their opinion, beliefs and ideas. Some of the topics occasionally touched upon more sensitive issues, more value-judgement type of questions, but they all attempted to elaborate on all the themes in question. This massive amount of information is grouped and analysed in two bigger units of meaning in the following subsections. The discussion purposefully follows a pattern through which the similarities and differences between the views of native speaker teachers and non-native speaker teachers are highlighted.

4.1 The Japanese teaching context and the needs of Japanese students

All the interviewees shared a lot of details about the participants' teaching experience in and outside Japan and during these conversations several reoccurring topics were mentioned, which are grouped and interpreted in the following three subsections.

4.1.1 Teaching English as a foreign language in Japan

Although all the participants interviewed have suitable qualifications to teach English as a foreign language, their education history is substantially different. Not only with regard to language acquisition, which makes an inevitable distinction between NSs and NNSs, but also learning about the English language explicitly in order to become a teacher. Interestingly, all the NS teachers agreed that the theoretical knowledge they gained in the field of linguistics does not prove to be useful enough in their everyday lives as a teacher, whereas NNS teachers found these subjects in their education invaluable in building a solid knowledge about the structure of the English language, which aids them explain e.g.: the grammatical rules more easily to the students as well as provided them with a more conscious knowledge of the language, through which they also become more proficient language users. However, NSs also mentioned teaching grammar as an area where they tend to be less confident.

Similarly to their educational background, the participants also show diversity regarding their teaching experience. It was especially interesting how they described the context they are currently teaching in Japan in comparison with other teaching experiences in Europe or with having worked in other Japanese institutions in the past. One of the NS teachers (Interview 4) described the role of NS teachers as 'conversation partners' in many institutions in Japan, typically in high school without much professional responsibility or teaching experience expected. This approach towards NSs was confirmed by another NS participant (Interview 1), who missed their involvement in decision making and creating curricula, and felt as if NS teachers were only expected to cover the textbook with the students. NNS teachers did not raise this issue, probably due to their lack of teaching experience in Japan.

Regardless of their background, all the participants mentioned the motivation of the students as a crucial issue in Japan. The answers approached the question from various angles: focusing more on cultural differences or individual differences, or blaming previous education experience of the students. The situation was summed up as follows: “When you first come here, you have no idea what it’s gonna be like and your expectations change. And you realise that you have a few motivated students and maybe you can work with them, you can help them to reach their goals. But generally it’s a bit difficult (Interview 4).” Furthermore, it is also difficult to draw the borderline between a lack of/low motivation and a certain level of shyness deriving from totally different cultural norms and expectations. As for cultural differences, one of the NNS teachers (Interview 6) said that the most crucial facts that foreign teachers should understand about their students in Japan is that Europe is “more international” as opposed to Japan, which is rather isolated and people seem to have less information or exposure to international information in any field outside Japan, especially in English. As a result, it can easily occur to the students that simply they do not know how to communicate with a foreign teacher or get more interested in the person of the teacher than the subject taught.

The perception of communication was a reoccurring theme in the conversations. In interview 5, this to-the-point remark was made: “The conception of communication is different here, and this is reflected in the TOEIC test: only passive skills, reading and listening.” All the teachers agreed that students are passive or unwilling to share their opinion in class because they might lack the proficiency to do so, or simply they do not know how to converse.

4.1.2 The needs of Japanese students

Discussing the issue of communication led most of the interviews to students’ needs and the overall aim of their foreign language education. The teachers pointed out that the most important goal of teaching English is to enable students with efficient communication skills and raise their awareness of different communication patterns. However, nobody elaborated on the issue of what they mean by those patterns or in general, in what situations their students might use English any further.

On the basis of the stories and examples they shared from their everyday classroom experience, it can be suspected that the NSs have a NS-Japanese interaction in mind, whereas NNSs rather refer to NNS-Japanese conversations when they explain what they mean by communication for their students. Only one of the teachers emphasised the fact that most probably the students would use English with other NNSs, mainly from other Asian countries.

Some of the teachers thought that their students do not think a great deal about why they learn English; they learn it because they are obliged to do so. Only the Japanese teacher was in the privileged situation to conduct thorough needs analysis among the students since it must be carried out in their native language due to their proficiency in English. Relying on the results of these analyses, the most common need of the students was “some kind of social interaction”, which actually matched all the guest lecturers’ assumptions. Additionally, the most frequent replies among the teachers defined a B2-level proficiency suitable for functioning in a working environment in the field of travel industry or commerce and also for private travelling purposes in their free time. On the contrary, one of the teachers also mentioned that most of the Japanese students who do not want to travel abroad or use English in their workplace might not need English language knowledge at all.

4.2 The perception of ELF and a language model for students

Considering the topic of a language model or preferred language varieties, a certain dichotomy is observed among both NS and NNS teachers. When the interview question overtly focused on a model they want to represent to their students, all the participants answered hesitantly. NSs unambiguously prioritised function and intelligibility over a certain variety of English, and did not claim that they wanted to represent their own native variety of English. None of them mentioned any varieties as models; they highlighted lexis and grammatical structures more as core issues considering models for students. However, it must also be noted that they were speaking more about their own expectations towards students, rather than their conscious image of the model they represent for them. For instance: “I’m not too concerned about a particular type of pronunciation or perfectly formed sentences. The

problem is more with vocabulary than sentences. They often use japanised English words (Interview 2).” On the contrary, at several other points of the conversations they referred to correcting intonation and pronunciation because the other parties in the interaction, clearly referred to be NSs, will not understand the message.

Neither NNS teachers clarified any language variety they preferred or wanted to represent, though they all mentioned that they prefer British English as opposed to American, both for themselves as language users and for their students as a model to approximate to. The NS-level proficiency as a target, especially in terms of pronunciation was repeatedly raised as a problem or an expectation, which cannot be met. This fact is especially noteworthy, hence both NS and NNS teachers agreed that a NNS teacher is just as valid model for the students as a NS one. One of the teachers pointed out this controversy in relation with the students as well: “I believe that we cannot become perfect: perfect grammar, perfect pronunciation and perfect intonation (...) They (students) realise that they won’t become perfect in English but they are not deficient communicators (Interview 1).” Furthermore, a NNS teacher was referred to as an ideal teacher in the International Communication Department, since “the students can understand the situation unconsciously, we raise awareness of the fact that if they can speak English, they can speak to everybody in the world (Interview 1).” All the teachers found NNS teachers as suitable models for their students, most importantly because they represent a successful language learner model, and they are also familiar with the process of learning English as a foreign language, which is essential while teaching it.

The perception of using English as a lingua franca in the Japanese teaching context seems controversial, as well. The responses presented a wide range of approaches towards the concept of ELF. ELF still tends to be interpreted as a variety: “Different types of English all around the world are just as valid as other forms of English, especially when it follows a pattern, then it’s considered a legitimate language (Interview 2).” All the teachers take it for granted that Japanese students use English in an ELF context, but when they attempt to define what this means or how ELF could be described, they refer to ‘accents’, mainly native English varieties from different English-speaking countries interacting with Japanese English. If non-native

English is mentioned, usually it refers to some other European countries but not necessarily to other Asian countries and the focus is always on pronunciation and lexis.

5. Conclusion

The interviews with the teachers shed light on several aspects of teaching English in the Japanese setting worth considering: the role of the NS and NNS teachers, the language models teachers want to represent to their students as well as the needs of the students in terms of using English in the future. The widely discussed advantages and disadvantages of both NSs and NNSs (Kramsch, 1997; Medgyes, 1992; Widdowson, 2003; Kirkpatrick and Walkinshaw, 2014) are also relevant in the Japanese context, though focusing more on the ELF environment. The superiority of NSs seems to disappear gradually, at least in theory. It would be beneficial for all the participants in education, such as students, teachers, parents, and stakeholders to put more emphasis on real needs analysis and the context of ELF in Asia in order to develop up-to-date curricula, which improve students' problem solving skills, communicative competence, and pragmatic skills incorporating the latest results of ELF research.

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Appendix

Interview questions

1. What is your mother tongue? Do you speak any foreign language?
2. How long have you been learning English?
3. Where did you learn English? How would you describe your knowledge of English? Are you satisfied with it?
4. What qualifications do you have as an English teacher? Did you study English language? Explicitly about the language? When, where, can you tell me some words about it?
5. Do you consider the language training you received at university sufficient for teaching? Why/why not?
6. Could you describe your teaching experience before you started working in Japan? (Where did you teach? What context? What level? What was it like?)
7. What challenges did you face that time? (linguistically: explaining grammar, the use of certain words or grammatical structures, in-class communication or something else)
8. Can you mention specific language elements you have found difficult during teaching?
9. Could you describe the Japanese teaching context as opposed to your previous experience? What are the differences/similarities?
10. What do you think your students' needs are? How do you find about them?
11. What do you consider "correct English" (for yourself and for your students)?
12. How important is accuracy for you? (grammar, pronunciation)
13. What do you think about non-native English as a linguistic model for language learners (and for yourself)?
14. To what extent do you consider Japanese English/katakana English acceptable?