

# An Exploration into Japanese Secondary School Students' Awareness of ELF and Their Language Attitudes

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## Abstract

Given that English is currently used as a contact language, or as a lingua franca (ELF), in this internationalised world, this paper aims to explore the ELF awareness and the language attitudes the students at this school hold. Throughout the questionnaire survey and individual interviews, it was revealed that the participants of this study were aware of the current role of English in international communication to some extent. If the collected data was analysed in a more detailed manner, however, it indicated that they were subconsciously constrained by 'native' norms. Considering these findings, this paper discusses the possibilities of ELF for secondary education in Japan.

**Keywords:** English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), international communication, intercultural communication, language attitudes, language awareness, English education in Japan

## 要 旨

現在の国際社会では、英語は「共通語」(ELF)としての役割を果たしている。本稿では、このことを踏まえ、本校生徒の言語意識や言語姿勢をELFの観点から分析する。自由記述形式の質問紙調査とインタビュー調査から得られたデータによると、参加者の多くは国際的なコミュニケーションで使用される英語の「共通語」としての役割を認識していた。一方で、それらのデータをより詳細に分析すると、彼らは国際的なコミュニケーションの文脈においても、無意識のうちに英語母語話者の規範に捉われていることも明らかになった。これらの結果を踏まえ、本稿では日本の中等教育におけるELFの教育的可能性を議論する。

## 1. Introduction

English has been used as a contact language, or as a lingua franca (hereafter ELF), in international communication since our world became globalised. In a context in which people do not share their lingua-cultural backgrounds, they are highly likely to use English in order to communicate with each other (see e.g.,

Jenkins, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011).

Given that a great number of people currently use English in international communication, ‘all English varieties, native or non-native, [should be] accepted in their own right *rather than evaluated against a NSE benchmark*’ (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011: 284, emphasis added). Japanese English users, however, are often reported to be positive only towards English used by so-called ‘native’ speakers of English (hereafter NSEs) and/or towards ‘native’ varieties of English (e.g., Chiba, Matsuura, & Yamamoto, 1995; Galloway, 2013; Matsuura, Chiba, & Yamamoto, 1994). As a result, those who are ‘native’-oriented in English communication are conversely less willing to use English lest they be regarded as ‘non-native’ speakers of English (hereafter NNSEs), being constrained by ‘native’ norms (see e.g., Kohn, 2017).

This attitude is likely to cause problems to Japanese people in international communication in that the possibilities of using English in the current globalised world are becoming much greater than before mainly in academic and business settings (Murata, Konakahara, Iino, & Toyoshima, 2018) and people whom they communicate with are not only NSEs but also NNSEs (Murata, Iino, & Konakahara, 2017; Murata, Konakahara, Iino, & Toyoshima, 2018). This paper, therefore, aims to investigate (1) whether the students at this school are aware of ELF and (2) what language attitudes they hold towards using English from an ELF perspective.

In what follows, I will first introduce the backgrounds of the current research. After reviewing the previous studies, I will present the methodology of this study, which will be followed by the analysis and discussion of the collected data.

## **2. Theoretical backgrounds**

This section provides theoretical backgrounds of the following two issues directly related to the current research in the field of sociolinguistics: the brief definition of ELF (2.1.) and Japanese English users’ language attitudes and their ELF awareness (2.2.).

## **2.1. English as a lingua franca**

As briefly introduced in Section 1, English is now being used not only by NSEs but also by NNSEs. As a result, there exist varieties of English all over the world. Given such circumstances, Widdowson (1994) claimed that English belongs not only to NSEs but also to NNSEs, that is, '[English] is an international means of communication' (Widdowson, 1994: 385) and this leads to the ELF paradigm in which English is generally regarded as a lingua franca in order to communicate with people from different lingua-cultural backgrounds (e.g., Jenkins, 2009; Seidlhofer, 2011).

Considering English is used as a lingua franca in international communication as Widdowson (1994) stated, a number of researchers (see e.g., Hynninen & Solin, 2018; Margić, 2017; Seidlhofer, 2018) have claimed that 'native' norms are not necessarily the 'standard' in ELF communication. Furthermore, Widdowson (2015) pointed out the unnecessary of strict conformity to 'standard' norms for successful ELF communication by stating that 'people are capable of communicating effectively without conforming to the norms of standard language – that indeed such conformity may well result in *ineffective* communication' (Widdowson, 2015: 361, emphasis original). Hence, English used by every single person in order to communicate with each other in international communication is accepted equally in the ELF paradigm (Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey, 2011).

As we have overviewed so far in this subsection, English is currently used as a lingua franca in international communication and the ownership of English belongs to every English user in this globalised world. If we look at previous studies on Japanese English users' language attitudes towards English and awareness of ELF, however, they are less likely to be aware of ELF which we now turn to.

## **2.2. Japanese English users' language attitudes towards English and their awareness of ELF**

Against the use of English around the world, which was introduced in the preceding subsection in a brief manner, previous studies have revealed unbalanced language attitudes towards varieties of English: a number of studies have found that Japanese English users tend to hold more positive attitudes towards 'native'

varieties of English (e.g., Chiba, Matsuura, & Yamamoto, 1995; Galloway, 2013; Ishikawa, 2017; Matsuura, Chiba, & Yamamoto, 1994). Galloway (2013), for instance, investigated Japanese university students' attitudes towards varieties of English and found that her participants held more positive attitudes towards American English than 'non-native' varieties of English. In addition, the participants of the study by Ishikawa (2017) revealed that Japanese university students are likely to have a desire to use English as NSEs do.

Although only a few studies are named above, they have basically pointed out that Japanese English users are likely to hold more positive language attitudes only towards 'native' varieties of English. This tendency shows that they are more likely to hold 'native'-oriented language attitudes towards English and this indicates that they are less likely to be aware of the current role of English, which have been empirically revealed by previous studies.

Matsuda (2003), for instance, investigated whether Japanese secondary school students were aware of the fact that English was used globally. In her study, Matsuda (2003) found that secondary school students were not aware that there were a number of varieties of English. Although they knew the fact that English is used globally, they 'had little idea what they were like or how different they were from each other' (Matsuda, 2003: 488). In Matsuda's (2003) interview, the participants, for instance, became confused when they were asked questions about varieties of English other than American English and British English. Considering that finding, Matsuda's (2003) study indicated that her participants were not aware of WE, or possibly of ELF either; more specifically, the secondary school students whom she interviewed did not believe English belongs not only to NSEs but also to NNSEs as Widdowson (1994) claimed.

Ishikawa's (2017) study which investigated university students' ELF awareness also found that most of the participants of his research did not understand what ELF was at the beginning of the interview. More specifically, Ishikawa (2017) found that there was only one out of 18 interviewees who thought he 'knew Jenkins' (2000) research' (2017: 251). Considering the findings of these studies, therefore, it can be said that the concept of ELF has not been spread among Japanese English users yet.

I have so far reviewed previous research investigating Japanese English users' language attitudes and ELF awareness, and the findings indicate that they are more likely to be positive only towards 'native' varieties of English and they are less likely to be aware of ELF. This tendency can cause problems in their future when they communicate with people from various lingua-cultural backgrounds in English, or ELF. As Murata et al. (2018), for instance, mentioned that people need to communicate not only with NSEs but also with NNSEs in the current globalised world, and thus it is necessary for future global citizens, or more specifically secondary school students, to be aware of the diversity of English and actual ELF interaction.

Given that, the current paper aims to reveal (1) what language attitudes the students at this school hold towards using English from an ELF perspective and (2) whether they are aware of ELF. This research is significant in that (1) the number of the research exploring Japanese secondary school students' language attitudes and ELF awareness is limited and (2) the findings of the current study may suggest the pedagogical possibility of ELF at secondary school level.

### **3. Methodology**

The current research employed a qualitative method, namely a questionnaire with open-ended questions and individual interviews. In what follows, I will introduce the methodology of this research and how I analysed the collected data in a detailed manner.

The participants of the present study were three high school students at this school. They were accessible in that they were enrolled in the ELF-informed course offered by the current author in the academic year 2020<sup>1</sup>. In addition to the questionnaire survey, individual interviews were conducted in a casual manner using Japanese with semi-structured style. The average length of the interview was approximately 30 minutes and the participants were asked to elaborate their responses to the questions in the survey in a detailed manner.

In order to respect their privacy, the participants were coded in accordance with the academic year they were enrolled in the ELF-informed course (2020), their overseas experience (Y or N) and the destination and the duration of their stay,

and the abbreviation of the term *informants*, INF, followed by the number of the informants. For instance, an informant who was enrolled in the course in the academic year 2020 and stayed in the UK for two weeks will be coded as follows: 2020\_Y(UK/2w)\_INF1<sup>2</sup>.

The collected data was analysed qualitatively employing a narrative inquiry which ‘focus[es] on the stories of lived experience and reconstruction of the individual’s experience as told by the individuals’ (Nogami, 2020: 242, referring to Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2007; Etherington, 2007). Considering this definition and its nature ‘placing [ELF] users at the centre of the research’ (Takino, 2016: 118), I decided to employ this approach in that it enables me not only to understand the informants’ language attitudes towards using English and their awareness of ELF but also to reveal what influences their language attitudes and language awareness.

I now turn to report the findings of the current research exploring (1) what language attitudes the informants hold towards using English and (2) whether they are aware of ELF.

## **4. Findings**

In what follows, I will report the findings from the current research investigating: whether they are aware of ELF (4.1.) and what language attitudes the participants hold towards using English (4.2.) by referring to the actual utterances produced by the informants both in the questionnaire survey and the individual interviews.

### **4.1. Awareness of ELF**

This subsection focuses on whether the informants of the current research are aware of ELF. The collected data from the individual interviews and the questionnaire survey indicates that they are likely to be to some extent aware that English is used as a contact language in international communication even before attending the ELF-informed course.

One of the largest reasons why the informants are aware of the current role of English in this globalised world is that the secondary school they are enrolled in

has an exchange programme with secondary schools in other countries, namely Austria, China, France, Germany, South Korea and the UK. Hence, the students have opportunities to communicate with students from these countries in several languages including English and Japanese. It is highly likely that this multilingual experience has influenced their language awareness as one of the informants, who had a chance to be a host family of an exchange student from the UK, implied in the interview:

Excerpt 1

留学生をお兄ちゃんが家に呼んで来たことがあるんですけど、イタリア人がイギリスの学校に進学してから日本に来るみたいな感じで。そのイタリア人の人も[...]英語を話していたし、みんな話しているのかなっていう (2020\_Y (4d/US)\_INF3, emphasis added)

This excerpt was produced by the informant when he was asked how he realized that English is used as a contact language in the current world. According to the context of the interview, it is clear that the term ‘みんな (everyone)’ in the part ‘みんな話しているのかな (I guess everyone speaks [English])’ is highly likely to indicate everyone in this globalised world, although it might be a kind of hyperbole. As this excerpt suggests, the exposure to ELF communication is likely to be significant for Japanese English users in order to become aware of the role of English in intercultural communication (see e.g., Saito, 2019).

Another informant had also been significantly exposed to ELF communication. He joined a summer programme in the UK for two weeks when he was a second-year junior high school student. In the programme, he was enrolled in an English-learning course and stayed in a dormitory shared with people from various linguistic backgrounds. Through experiencing to communicate with them in English not only in the classroom but also at the dormitory, he became realised that conforming to ‘native’ norms is not necessarily important to make ELF communication successful (see Widdowson, 2015) as what follows implies:

### Excerpt 2

(留学を通して学んだことで) 一番大きいのが、正しく伝えようとする  
ことじゃなくて、明確に伝えたいという意思を持つ方が大事になっ  
ていう (2020\_Y(UK/2w)\_INF1, emphasis added)

This excerpt clearly shows that he became aware of ELF by being exposed to ELF communication in that he explained what he had learnt through 留学 (the summer programme) by stating ‘正しく伝えようとするのではなくて、明確に伝えたいという意思の方が大事 (the willingness to communicate properly is more important than communicating correctly)’. This utterance overlaps with what Widdowson (2015) pointed out, that is, he realised the current role of English in international communication.

Although the other informant had had little opportunities to be exposed to the actual ELF communication, he is likely to be aware of ELF from his daily experience, such as listening to broadcasts in which leaders in other countries made a speech in English.

Given these examples, the informants of the current study are likely to be aware of ELF to some extent even before attending my course. If we look at their utterances in a more careful and detailed manner, however, we can find that they are still subconsciously constrained by ‘native’ norms to which we now turn.

## 4.2. Language attitudes towards using English

The preceding subsection reported on the informants’ awareness of ELF. The findings of the current research have revealed that they appear to be aware that English is now used as a lingua franca in the international communication. Given that, this subsection discusses the informants’ language attitudes towards using English from an ELF perspective, which indicate that they are subconsciously constrained by ‘native’ norms even though they were likely to be aware of the current role of English as reported in the preceding section.

As briefly reviewed in Section 2.2., Japanese English users are more likely to be constrained by ‘native’ norms (e.g., Ishikawa, 2017), which may lead to their reluctance to use English in international communication. This tendency seems to

be applicable to the informants of the current research as the following excerpt shows:

Excerpt 3

最初は本当におどおどで、[...] 全部正しく言わなきゃいけないみたいなのがあった (2020\_Y(UK/2w)\_INF1, emphasis added)

This informant narrated his experience in the summer programme in the UK and explicitly described that ‘最初は本当におどおどで (he was quite nervous at the beginning of the programme)’ in that, according to him, ‘全部正しく言わなきゃいけないみたいなのがあった (he thought he should have used English correctly)’. This excerpt clearly indicates that he adhered to ‘native’ norms which made him afraid of making mistakes and, consequently, of communicating with others in English. In the interview, he claimed his attitudes to communicate in English in international communication changed after attending the summer course at the UK as Excerpt 2 shows. If we analyse other part of his interview, however, it seems he still conforms to ‘native’ norms in the subconscious level as can be seen in Excerpt 4, which is a response to a question asking how he wanted to use English in future:

Excerpt 4

文法もちゃんとした、しっかり伝わる英語、誤解なく  
(2020\_Y(UK/2w)\_INF1, emphasis added)

In the excerpt, we can tell that he focused on the intelligibility in communication from the expression ‘しっかり伝わる英語 (intelligible English [to the other parties])’; however, he simultaneously claimed that he wanted to use ‘ちゃんとした文法 (grammatically ‘correct’), which shows his conformity to ‘native’ norms. As Excerpt 2 suggests, this informant was likely to be aware of ELF on the surface level; however, if we look at his utterances, namely Excerpt 3 and 4, more carefully, it can be found that he still adhered to ‘native’ norms which may make him being afraid of using English again as he was at the beginning of the summer

programme in the UK.

The following excerpt was produced by Interviewee 3 who is the same informant quoted in Excerpt 1 which also suggests that he was constrained by ‘native’ norms. According to the response to the questionnaire survey, he seemed to desire to use English in business settings after he graduate from the university. Given this information, the researcher of the current study asked some questions about how he thought he would use English in future, in which the following reply was given.

Excerpt 5

ビジネスの場とかだったら変な英語を使っていたらそんな常識がないのかなって思われるのかなって思います (2020\_Y (4d/US)\_INF3, emphasis added)

The reason why he thought it would be better not to use ‘変な英語 (weird English)’ was, according to him, he believed that he would be evaluated negatively by the interlocutors unless he conformed to ‘native’ norms in his English use. Furthermore, the term ‘変な英語 (weird English)’ shows that this informant may evaluate English used by other people by comparing it with ‘native’ varieties of English on the subconscious level, which a number of ELF researchers have criticised. This informant seemed to be aware of ELF according to Excerpt 1 through his experiences in communicating people from other lingua-cultural backgrounds; however, the detailed analysis of his interview revealed that he was not aware of ELF in an adequate manner in that he appeared to be still constrained by ‘native’ norms.

The findings above suggest that (1) the informants seemed to be aware of the fact that English is currently used as a lingua franca in the international communication but (2) their ELF awareness is not likely to be adequate in that their language attitudes towards using English is still 'native' oriented at the subconscious level. Given that, we will now turn to discuss the possibility of ELF-informed instructions in this school, or more broadly in the secondary school education in Japan.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

The preceding section reported the findings of the current research which revealed that the informants appeared to be aware of the current role of English in this internationalised world on the surface level, but their ELF awareness could be developed more. Considering this, I will discuss the possibility of ELF-informed instructions for the students at this school raising their awareness of ELF to become global citizens.

This school provides the students with considerable opportunities to be exposed to ELF communication, such as exchange programmes with secondary schools abroad and second foreign language course which is compulsory for every student at least for one academic year. Given these opportunities, a number of the students are likely to become interested in becoming global citizens in future. For these students, it is necessary to become aware of ELF in that they are required to communicate with people from various lingua-cultural backgrounds in the current internationalised world. In accordance with the current research, however, it is more likely that the students are not aware of ELF in an adequate manner which might cause them facing problems in international communication. One of the main reasons why their ELF awareness is not significantly developed is likely to be that they have little opportunities to learn ELF in an explicit way at this school although they have chances to use English or to be exposed to ELF communication. Saito's (2019) findings, for instance, suggested that the exposure to ELF communication does not necessarily raise Japanese English users ELF awareness; more specifically, not only being exposed to ELF, but they also need to learn ELF explicitly to become aware of ELF adequately. Hence, since the students have more opportunities to be exposed to ELF communication with others at this school, their ELF awareness will be raised more by learning ELF through ELF-informed instructions, which the researcher himself has been in charge since the 2019 academic year.

The concept of ELF, which claims the equality of every English user regardless of their backgrounds (see e.g., Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011; Widdowson, 1994), should be acquired by the students at this school whether they are interested in becoming global citizens or not in that they will be surrounded by people who are

‘different’ from them even if they are from the same countries. Thus, teaching ELF, I believe, has a possibility to develop students’ language use required to live in this current internationalised world.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The responses from the participants were not influenced by the course in that the questionnaire and the individual interviews were administered before the course starts.

<sup>2</sup> This means of coding is employed from Murata et al (2017), Murata et al (2018) and Konakahara (2020).

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