

“Will English make me a better person?”: How Asia Pacific language students view the personal effect of studying English

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Abstract

English as a second language has become increasingly important in the Asia Pacific region for the purposes of international communication; however language policies in these countries do not generally consider the personal learner benefits of any such study. This paper reports a study of students at an international university in Japan, and researches the relative motivations for their studies. The top-down approach of language policies throughout Asia demonstrates the aims of the governments setting the policy. This paper will show how the students feel about their studies under these policies, arguing that their voices should be incorporated into the language policies of the Asia Pacific.

Key terms: Asian English, World English, language policy, motivation, personal benefit

Introduction

English has long been a part of the Asia Pacific region, first with the economic benefits for those nations who traded with Britain and then the US, followed by colonialism in some Asian countries, and latterly through the post-colonial integration of the language into the social, political and financial tapestry of Asian members of the global market. In the era of globalization, English has emerged as the language of international communication, and English language instruction has come in the form of British Council courses, foundations funded by large corporations, private language schools, and the education policies of individual nations themselves. In considering such policies, it is important to understand what their target students feel they need and in actual fact receive from their studies, in order that language courses and teachers can better structure their efforts to aid them. Such considerations are a fertile area of research in the Asia Pacific region.

Student motivations for their studies can be grounded in the professional or the personal, they can be for educational, economic, or for intangible benefits, or a mixture of all these in unequal measure. In a system where students are mandated to undertake years of language study such motivations can go unconsidered, as it is often expected that there will be a favourable outcome from a focus on that study. Where one language is considered globally preeminent, the benefits expected by the body setting the policy may well come in the form of the macro benefit of having a linguistically qualified populace, specifically among young learners entering a global marketplace. However, those young learners may not share the aspirations of their policy-makers. The intention of this research is to better understand the students' opinions of the study and use of English, in relation to the language itself and also the other EFL students they interact with. It is my intention through this research to provide a fully-rounded impression of students of English in the Asia Pacific region with the hope of helping them to more effectively learn and use English while working together with other Asian students of English.

Research Background

The Asia Pacific region is unique in the realms of globalized English in that it includes representative nations from all three of Kachru's three circles (1985), a sociolinguistic construct often used to define English use by countries around the world: 'native' speaker *inner* circle nations; ex-colonial *outer* circle nations; EFL nations of the *expanding* circle. In the Asia Pacific region, there are a number of competing interests in the field of sociolinguistics, specifically the role of English in intranational communication, and the effect on the globalized language of newer varieties of English being formed in former colonies of the British empire where the language was part of the control mechanisms of that era: the language was formerly a bar to access the higher-paid jobs and the key to political and economic independence and strength (Crystal, 2003).

Language policy in the Asia Pacific generally mandates English be studied. Nunan's study of Asian language policies in 2003 found that the trend in Asia was increasingly towards English and increasingly from a younger age, a spread that he termed 'pervasive' (p. 590). Concerns over the effect of 'linguistic imperialism' on domestic populations, requiring subservience to the inner circle nations who would act as gatekeepers for the language, was made clear by Robert Phillipson (1992), supported in turn by Tsuda's explanation of paradigms of English use worldwide (2008), which focused on former British colonies requiring an 'Ecology of Language' to protect domestic languages. Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas went farther in their review of the current state of language policy, questioning whether "the diffusion of English is compatible with the promotion and protection of the human rights of all the world's citizens" (1996). For an expanding circle nation perspective, Kubota provided an overview of the situation in Japan in 1998, including data on the use of loan words and the reported misunderstanding of those words by the general populace, which relates very closely to Tsuda's 'ecology' concept: if words are being used as loans and they are replacing domestic vernacular words despite being less comprehensible then there is perhaps a need to protect the domestic language more carefully.

If the focus is English, where is the standard coming from? The 2003 Matsuda study of Japanese high school students found a very clear focus on inner circle varieties. MEXT (Japanese Ministry of Education) wants 'Japanese with English abilities', however the analysis of textbooks in Japan by Matsuda (2002) gives a picture of English being presented as that of the inner circle and native speakers. The fostering of 'internationalization through Americanization' was also found in Korean textbooks used for the study of English (Yim, 2007). In his investigation of the students of a World Englishes course at Chukyo University in Japan in 2005, Yoshikawa found that even though students were being given the opportunity to study varieties of English that were not inner circle standards (in this case specifically Singapore English) as part of their courses students did not accept that this variety was of use to them, or that 'non-native' teachers were of an equal standard as to 'native' teachers. Such a picture suggests a focus on inner circle varieties that is both endemic and systemic throughout the countries of the Asia Pacific region, one that begins from an early stage of state education and continues into tertiary education, regardless of that country's historical connection to English: EFL nations are as likely to be affected as former colonies. This would seem to support the claims of linguistic imperialism outlined above, and gives a picture of students in the Asia Pacific being motivated to integrate with native speakers of English rather than using the language to assist international communication more locally.

Concerns regarding the effect of English on native populations and languages have been confronted head on by other research. Canagarajah (1999) argued that while there existed the possibilities for invasion by an exterior and powerful language, such a paradigm could be resisted by contextualizing the languages, and rationalizing their use for purposes beneficial to that group of students or language users. Stanlaw (2004) looked at what he termed 'renegotiated meanings' in English loan words in Japanese, and how they were being adapted beyond their donor language meanings, in marketing, pop songs and everyday usage, to make the words more suitable and acceptable to the Japanese context. Hashimoto (2007) stated the position of English in Japan as being 'structurally disconnected' from donor countries for reasons of maintaining Japanese cultural independence, which would counter Kubota's and Phillipson's claims directly, being the practical implementation of 'Ecology of Language' suggested by Tsuda. Yim (2007), although finding that English was hegemonic in its position as a foreign language affecting modern culture in Korea, it was the medium by which Korea was able to project its own culture internationally, and therefore remain in control of its own national identity. The dominant position of English is therefore one of providing benefits not only for its native users, but also for international users on a national and personal level.

Where a language is being 'renegotiated' for domestic benefit, it removes from the donor language and the donor language users the exclusive rights to claim ownership over the language. It is the ability of the 'owner' to change, adapt,

reform or destroy linguistic constructions independently of others. When that exclusive right, and, in a real sense, responsibility, is taken away from the populace of those previously considered the native speakers, it can no longer be said that the language is anchored to, and therefore controlled by, the speakers from a populace geographically separate from the contextual user. English in Asia exists with such a distance, and while China possesses the economic and political influence necessary to place its language in opposition to English on the global stage (Graddol, 2006), it is moving to reinforce the paradigm by mandating English study from the 3rd grade of compulsory education (Cheng, 2002; Nunan, 2003). English in Asia is therefore part of the mediation of projecting region-specific economic, political and cultural issues onto the global stage due in large degree to a conscious decision. Further studies by Pennycook (2003) and Park & Wee (2009) suggest that these ‘renegotiated’ uses of English are breaking long-held sociolinguistic beliefs connected to the use of English in outer and expanding circle countries, and even the relevance of models such as Kachru’s long-standing ‘circles’ (1985).

Viewing the opinions expressed above holistically, the picture would appear to be that students of English in the Asia Pacific region use English because they are required to do so, and that this requirement is also linked to a focus on inner circle English for the improvement of communication between their country and inner circle users of English. One might wonder if this focus leads to a negative impression of the language, especially where it is closely tied to the culture of geographically distant countries. The students who become part of the education system of their countries are likely to study this language for more than a decade of compulsory education, and some choose or are required to continue this into tertiary education. The benefits for a country as a whole might be economic, political or cultural, but a benefit is expected, hence the overwhelming importance placed on its study relative to other foreign languages. However, is English viewed in a positive way by those who study it, and what is the perceived benefit to them as individuals? In addition, knowing this, what effect should this have on teachers and policy makers in such contexts?

Research Question

What do students at an international university view as the personal effects of their study of English?

This report uses data from a large-scale survey of student opinions at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. The 10th item on this survey, and the 4th item for discussion in the qualitative focus group was the statement “If I can speak English, I will be a better person”. This item was included as agreement or disagreement would require explanation, of what the word ‘better’ meant, as it is a polysemous word, able to be defined in multiple ways – it could mean talented, outgoing, desirable, or any other number of other positive adjectives. Even so, this is an item that could be viewed as linguistic chauvinism if seen in abstraction, and while this was not a point that was raised in the focus groups, this possibility played a part in whether to include it in the survey stage of the study or not, as its ambiguity, and therefore value to the discussion, would necessitate it being included in the focus groups.

Other words were considered as part of this item, such as ‘improved’. The syntax of the item was also considered, for example “I will be a better person if I can speak English”, or “English will make me a better person”. The decision to reverse the condition to first position was to foreground the speaking of the language. The choice of having a conditional sentence was to mitigate the pejorative aspect of the sentence suggesting that it was the language that was making them better, rather than the speaking and studying of it. While the potential for the appearance of being pejorative remains, I ultimately decided this form of the item best balanced research intentions with participant reactions.

Study Design

The study was conducted with the kind permission of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University. The statement “If I can speak English, I will be a better person” was presented as the 10th item in a 25 item survey. Respondents were requested to rank their approval of the statement on a 7-point Likert scale. Responses were collected from students of APU’s Fundamental and Intermediate English courses, with 533 overall responses to the survey. Filtered to include only the 3 largest respondent

populations, there were 526 responses, of which 92.2% Japanese, 4% Chinese, and 3.8% Korean. This study is intended to inform a larger study collecting responses from throughout the Asia Pacific.

Focus groups, intended to provide qualitative support to the survey data (for the full discussion items text see Appendix II), had 43 participants, comprised of Japanese (12), Korean (9), Chinese (4), Thai (6), Vietnamese (2), Sri Lankan (2), Myanmarese (1), Indonesian (1), Malaysian (1), and Philippine (1) students, and also students who self-identified [themselves] as being from Taiwan (3) and Hong Kong (1). Participants led the discussion and questioned each other in their respective groups. The size and composition of the groups varied based on the availability for the meeting times.

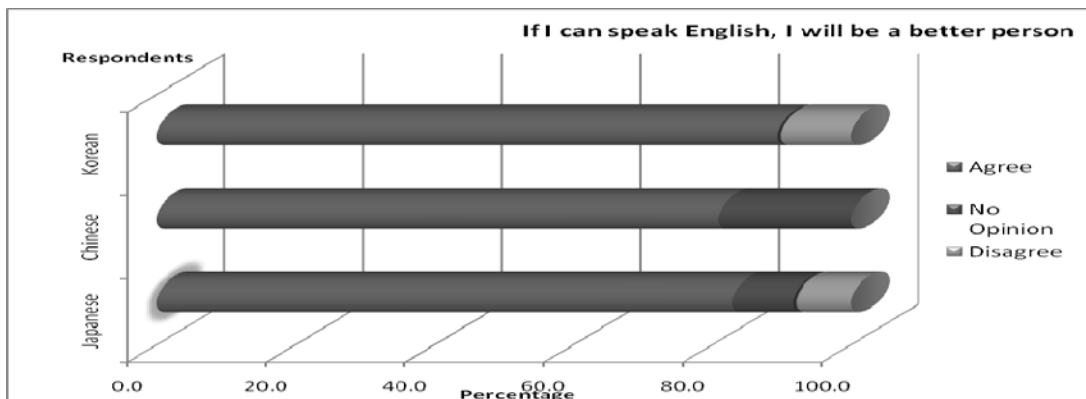
The focus groups were organized so that the researcher was not intruding into the discussion. Participants were given the statements on a paper, and asked to introduce themselves and give their major, then respond as they saw fit to the statements they were given. The researcher left a recorder on the table and moved to sit out of the group and take notes. Participants were allowed as much time as they felt was necessary to complete their discussion, with some groups being as short as 30 minutes while some continued for over an hour. The discussion was not interrupted or prompted until the participants themselves mentioned that they felt that they had come to the natural conclusion of discussing the points put before them.

In order to comply with ethical guidelines, data used in this study comes from volunteer respondents and participants. Respondents to the survey were informed of the research purpose of the study, that their answers in the survey would be anonymous and protected, and that completion of the survey was completely voluntary. The participants in the focus groups were all informed of the form of the interview before they volunteered, and were asked to sign consent forms agreeing that they knew that their responses would be confidential and that they could be used in research.

Results

Survey

The responses to this item were very positive. Korean students were the most positive (89.5%; n=19), with Japanese (82.9%; n=457) and Chinese students (81%; n=21) also responding positively. The most popular answer for all three groups was *very strongly agree*, with Korean students again being the most positive with 57.9% of respondents selecting this option, followed by Chinese (42.9%) and Japanese (37.6%) students. No Chinese respondents disagreed with the statement, and those Korean students who disagreed did not do so strongly. Only Japanese respondents selected either *strongly disagree* or *very strongly disagree*, and even then only 1.5% of respondents did so. Therefore heading into the focus group period of the study I was interested in *why* this was so well supported rather than *whether* it was supported or not.



Focus Group

The majority of the comments on this statement could be divided into three categories, given here in order of popularity, with the nationality of the speaker given in parenthesis:

1) *‘Better’ means a broader perspective, and an understanding of wider opinions: the speaker is improved because they know more about other people.*

Some examples include the comments ‘it’s good to communicate, and English gives me more chances’ (Korean), ‘having a wider perspective is better’ (Korean), ‘speaking fluently helps me to collect information’ (Japanese), ‘we can spread our minds and perceptions’ (Japanese), ‘we can communicate with others so it makes us better’ (Japanese) and ‘we are better with opportunities, to make friends’ (Chinese).

Here the students may well be considering their surroundings along with their abilities: Ritsumeikan APU takes around half its students from outside Japan, and many of them are English-language based students, meaning that the primary language of instruction in their courses is English. For Japanese-based students to learn about many of their class and group mates, not to mention housemates at the university dormitories, English is a definite positive. Considering this point more broadly, given the opportunity to practice English in a constructive context, the students recognize the benefit, and work to seize it. For students not in this environment, it is likely that the immediate benefit of their study will not be so apparent. It is for this reason that language teachers should be aware that the environment of their students can play a part in how their students react to their studies, and how motivated they are to complete them.

2) *‘Better’ means more valuable as a prospective employee, or for entrance to higher education courses: the speaker is improved as a personal talent.*

Some examples include the comments ‘more confidence means a better job and higher income’ (Korean), ‘it’s important for our job or a better university; it is a tool to be successful’ (Korean), ‘if you want to get a better job you need English’ (Korean). Korean students were much more likely among the 3 respondent populations focused on in this paper to mention the added professional value that comes from speaking English. Other sample responses included: ‘English makes you more valuable in the workforce’ (Thai), ‘studying more gives you more opportunities’ (Vietnam), ‘without English I can’t be at [Ritsumeikan] APU’ (Taiwan).

Here the students are considering their positions relative to their peers, and finding that an increased proficiency in a foreign language, in this case English, provides them with an advantage that other prospective employees may not have. The specific example given by students already studying overseas in Japan is instructive of such a mindset, that without the language they may not have achieved so much of what makes them a successful student. Therefore the achievement that is already in their past, is aiding their present, and is a relevant motivation for their future studies and work.

3) *‘Better’ means an improved mental state: the speaker is improved as they are more confident or happier using English than their own language in certain circumstances.*

Some examples of this include the comments ‘better equals more positive, English is a more equal language’ (Korean), ‘I become more positive and interesting, and can make new friends’ (Japanese), and also from other countries’ participants: ‘English represents a more developed and wild person, which is admired, and we can express more’ (Thailand). Such responses suggest that the respondent feels their character is in some way changed by the fact they speak English, that the language confers extra-linguistic qualities that make the respondent more confident or positive. This is an entirely subjective assessment, but falls in the realms of possible linguistic imperialism if this moves from viewing English positively to viewing one’s own mother tongue pejoratively. The focus groups’ transcripts do not suggest that the latter is the case, and overall this was the third most likely response. In considering how this impacts a student’s study, teachers should be aware that students may react differently in their second language than in their mother tongue, making their responses and interactions in class

less predictable, and in the case of English it would seem that such students would be more talkative due to their improved confidence.

The most significant of the responses that did not fall into these three types was one Chinese group participant who felt that English had been 'rude' as there is now no choice about which language can be used for international communication. It was an important reminder that teachers should be made aware of the fact that there are students in their classes who are pursuing the language for such pragmatic ends. This participant was not angry in their assertion, but was clear that it was not fair to students, in their opinion, because they did not have a choice about the language they could learn. Despite this point being raised, and the earlier considerations of the potential for respondents and participants to feel that the statement was pejorative, there were no other negative opinions expressed in relation to it.

Discussion of findings

The first point to be raised here is that the survey results were overwhelmingly positive, and the focus group comments remained similarly in support of the proposition. Despite the small sample size for both the Chinese and Korean respondents to the survey, trends of agreement were very similar to those of the Japanese respondents, with the Korean respondents clearly being the most positive. In relation to the categories of responses, Korean or Japanese participants in the focus groups were more likely to mention perspective; Korean responses were more likely to give responses considering their economic position than other respondents. Although participants did mention English being related to their personality, it was by far the 3rd most popular category of response, and there were far fewer examples of participants mentioning English being related to character or mood. This suggests that students feel it is either their personal horizons or opportunities that are being improved, rather than that they are being changed as people by their experience of studying English.

The second point illuminated by these results is that these students are personally motivated to take their studies beyond national language policy mandated minimums, and as such these considerations should be known and taken into account by policy makers, whether they be in the public or private sector. The respondents to the survey were clear in their opinion that there was a positive aspect to the study and the use of English on a personal level, and the participants in the focus group, although not always in agreement about what the benefits were, could see clear personal advantages with the use of this common language of international communication. Policy-makers or teachers could therefore benefit from this personal relationship to the language by tailoring courses and class activities that relate to students as individuals and allow them to work towards their personal aspirations.

Conclusion

When reviewing the background of English within Asia, with the negative impressions of linguistic imperialism and the proliferation of dominant global influences necessitating a planned ecology of languages, the image of a linguistic and cultural invasion is difficult to ignore. While there are aspects of English that are affecting the mono-lingual domains of Korea and Japan, and impacting the development of Chinese as a global language, on a personal level there is a genuine impression that English is a path to improvement, and not merely in the image of an inner circle native speaker but for individual growth. This improvement is personal before it is financial, internal before it is manifest in actual concrete benefit. The participants in this study are still students, the future of the workforce but not yet part of it. This improvement through use of English involves introspection and consideration of others, and while it may include an adoption of some aspects of foreign language culture it is for positive reasons rather than this being forced upon the students from an external influence. Such a conclusion does not ignore the negative aspects of the language but is an appreciation of the complex issues that surround the use of a single language for international communication. Yes, English will make these students better, but by

listening to their voices it becomes clear that they feel this improvement is on their own terms, not according to an external agenda, and they recognize and appreciate the opportunity.

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