Language Learning in Japan

The Significance of English in Modern Japan

Ritgerð til BA prófs í Ensku

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the English acquisition in Japan. Due to globalization, English has become international Lingua Franca. It is important in modern Japan, as it helps with the economic, scientific and technological advancement of the country. Furthermore, English is highly popular in Japanese pop culture and is viewed as a great advantage in one’s personal life. However, the English fluency in Japan is still viewed as a rare skill. There are various factors contributing to this situation, ranging from the linguistic, phonetic and sociocultural differences, the education system as well as Foreign Language Anxiety. This paper examines both the issues formed in the process of English as a second language acquisition by the native speakers of Japanese, as well as possible techniques or ideas which may help in their language learning. Factors such as teaching methods and educational system, as well as cultural ideas are taken into the consideration in connection to language learning. Other aspects which can be exploit to the learns advantage are the linguistic phenomenon such as, common in Japanese, loan words derived from English.
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1. Introduction

In the times of globalization, the importance of an international lingua franca, which English has become, is undeniable. English-as a Lingua Franca, is a tool needed for countries to support their relations with each other, for business, political, technological and cultural reasons. This applies to Japan, where English education has been encouraged and supported by the authorities. Nevertheless, although much effort and resources have been put into English education, the results are not encouraging. This can be tracked to various factors, such as linguistic differences, an alleged negative view of English, pressure to perform at a native speaker level and distorted view of English vocabulary through Japanized loan words. In addition, certain Japanese social and cultural traits may not help, particularly shyness, tendency to think in the form of group, communicative difficulties, frequent use of backchannels and high regard for hierarchy and social class. Those hindrances can be overcome by various means, as for example introducing the idea of Japanese English and international English variations and non-native English teachers. Furthermore, English proficiency can be supported by interaction with foreigners and positive experiences involving English. Teaching English in a less formal and relaxed environment is also likely to assist students in their English language acquisition. Moreover, both the teachers and students need to be aware of cultural differences in order to ease intercultural communications. Although English studies in Japan are important and supported, general English proficiency in Japan is very low. This can be linked to many aspects, ranging from socio-cultural, linguistic, phonetic, cultural and social factors, as well as the educational system. Those issues can be directly addressed and resolved, for example by innovative the teaching methods, studying foreign cultures, interacting with foreigners and learning through positive experiences.
2. Literature Review

2.1 The Significance of English in Modern Japan

English has become the most important language in the world and is used in many countries as a lingua franca (Britannica). Be it in South Africa, Poland or Norway, knowing English has become a very important part of intercultural communication. Indeed, it is, in fact, the use of English which allows international relations to flourish. This is also true for countries which have, historically, been very secluded. For centuries, in order to cut off unwanted foreign influence, Japan issued a strict no contact policy. The Japanese people wanted the country to remain secluded to allow, unique and beautiful culture to flourish. However, as times progress, such policies are no longer realistic. According to Hosoki, when Japan opened its doors to the west in 1854, they also introduced the English language into the educational system (2011). Kubota writes that in the mid-19th century America initiated business trade with Japan, thus introducing English as a major Western Language (1998). English has played an important part in Japan ever since. As Kubota mentions, both the Minister of Education in the 19th century, Arinori Mori as well as post World-War II politician Gakudo Ozaki advocated for English to become Japan’s national language (1998). Although their efforts were not fruitful, and English is highly unlikely to ever entirely substitute Japanese in Japan, it nevertheless holds a great value in modern Japanese society and culture.

Firstly, the knowledge of English can be seen an incredible asset in the workplace. As mentioned by Kubota, Japan is one of the few non-Western countries which has reached a major economic success, while maintaining its cultural identity (1998). According to Ryall (2013), as the Japanese economy is stagnant, the firms look to the business from abroad in order to keep up profits. This is a significant reason for the Japanese to invest in their second language proficiency. As the companies work on establishing and strengthening international business relations, it is understandable that they will look for employees whose English skills at a high level. Ryall mentions that one of Japan’s largest companies, Soft Bank, is paying one million yen to any employee who passes Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) with a score of at least 900 points, mentioning that the maximum score is 990 points (2013). Another company, a giant online commerce chain Rakuten, has established English as their in-house language (2013).
Thus, a number of firms are actively supporting and encouraging their staff in their language education. For many young adults, English proficiency comes with a great advantage when looking to start a career and job hunting. Hiring people who will be able to perform well in the international business scene is seen as a great investment for the future of the companies. Ryall (2013) writes that Japan is a global leader in mobile phones, cameras as well as other types of advanced technology. However, the language barrier creates a significant hindrance in allowing those companies to achieve their full potential. Furthermore, as Yamagami and Tollefson write

As in many countries around the world, in Japan a common rationale of the developments is that English is the most important international language of science, technology, and economic competitiveness, and therefore, English Language ability is essential for individual participation in the areas of "globalized" human activity and for economic well-being of the society. In this sense, the discourse of English promotion in Japan resembles that of many other countries, where English is viewed as essential for the participation in the global economy (2011).

The importance of English in the business environment is strongly stressed by the companies. However, English in Japan holds more importance than only in terms of the business opportunities. Students who have studied abroad are viewed as valuable additions to the staff. This is because those people have already not only learned the use of English but have put it to practice as well as explored and experienced another culture first hand. As Hosoki mentions, people in modern Japan, with the introduction of the internet are more exposed as well as they have more chances than ever to meet English speakers in their daily lives. This, as well as the JET programs (The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program), have affected peoples’ motivation to learn practical English (2011). The knowledge of English is now viewed as an investment in human capital, which benefits both individuals on personal levels, such as for example helping them with their careers, as well as companies which can benefit from bettering their international communications.

Indeed, with the introduction of internet and social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, Japan has become as close to the outside world as it ever could be. The new generation of people is often very interested in the western culture.
Young people listen to foreign music, watch Hollywood movies and look up to the celebrities from outside of Japan. The cultural position of English has shifted from simply being a subject in school, not drastically different from mathematic or chemistry, to something much more substantial. Knowing a foreign language, especially English is often seen as something to be looked up to and admired. From the sociological point of view, Japanese English speakers can often appear to be “cooler” than others. The skill can be compared to a talent such as playing an instrument or being able to draw beautifully. The popularity of English is undeniable when looking at modern day pop culture in Japan. Many fashion-forward boutiques have in their offers shirts, tops, hoodies or hats with English words or phrases on them, although more often than not they are not semantically correct or have the wrong syntax. In addition, many of Japan’s music groups have songs entirely in English, or more commonly, with a couple of English lines in the lyrics. Often they also have English names, such as the Bump of Chicken, which happens to be one of the most popular music band in the country.

Additionally, foreign loan words have an extraordinary acclaim in Japan, specifically ones which come from English. Such words are becoming more and more common and are written in katakana, a specific phonetic alphabet designed for loan words (Kubota, 1998). Those words are used commonly in everyday occurrences as well as in business or academic ones. Kubota writes that words spelled in katakana are increasingly popular in advertisements, product names, and titles of magazines or TV shows (1998). Furthermore, the English words substitute for more complicated or outdated Japanese versions of themselves. points out, even words used in welfare policies, such as home helper, day service or hospital are often spelled in katakana, although they have Japanese equivalents (Kubota, 1998).

Furthermore, besides the economic benefit and pop cultural references, Japan has as a society, ideas and assumptions about English and its proficiency. As previously mentioned, English proficiency is perceived as an attractive attribute. Kubota claims that for some Japanese, the work opportunities which are related to increasing one’s personal level of second language fluency are not the major motivations for English studies. Instead, some individual wish to learn a foreign language in order to appear “cool” and “unique” to their peers (2011). This shows how English proficiency can improve
individual’s self-image and confidence levels as they feel more accomplished due to their abilities of international communication. Second language learners who are successful in their studies may, therefore, feel content with themselves. Moreover, as Bailey argues, the will of learning English, manifested in the huge popularity of eikaiwa, or the English Conversation classes are due not only the idea of advancing one’s career but also as it is connected to a form of escapism (2006). Bailey’s study concentrates on young women in their twenties or thirties, most commonly office workers. He claims that a large number of the eikaiwa class attendants wants to improve their language skills in order to be able to travel to foreign lands, as well as is a purpose of finding a Caucasian romantic partner (2006). From the Feministic point of view, it often appears that women in Japan often do not have the same options for their career prospects as men do. Furthermore, the strong social hierarchy which is predominant in Japan often puts women in less favorable positions than men. Women usually have to choose between their personal careers or things such as having a family. As Bailey points out, the young Japanese women are therefore interested in either moving abroad or finding a Western husband in order to escape this rigid social situation (2006). Indeed, a skilled Japanese woman with proficiency may find a more favorable career setting for herself in foreign countries where the work environment is less dominated by males. As Bailey writes

> Given the historical context replete with many of the ideologies which younger women find unacceptable, its (English proficiency’s) potentials are particularly powerful and alluring for women. In being used deliberatively to open these spaces, sometimes in strategic ways that challenge the mode of social regulations, and sometimes in personal struggles against specific forms of patriarchal domination - English language powers an epistemological challenge to the structures that shape the bounded performativity of gender in Japan. (Bailey, p.109. 2006).

Therefore, learning English allows women to feel empowered and in control of their own lives. Kelsky argues that proficiency in a second language is viewed as a “weapon” for Japanese women in the work environment, providing them with an option to be “liberated” from expansive and strict social rules of Japan, allowing them to enter the international scene where they feel they might acquire better self-expression and personal discovery (2001). In addition to the enhancement of career opportunities, English is also viewed as a tool which can be used for the improvement of one’s personal
happiness. According to Bailey, foreign men are extremely popular among the Japanese women, as they are viewed to be more open, romantic and passionate than a traditional Japanese male. Kolsky argues that white men are seen as gentlemen, who are sensitive and caring while at the same time being less sexist than the Japanese men (2001). This idea is supported by Bailey, who claims that the English language is viewed as a necessary skill for its users to access space where they can meet an idealized foreign partner – a frank, kind, gentle and enthusiastic man, thus helping the women to accomplish personal fulfillment (2006). Although both Kelsky’s and Bailey’s study put the main emphasis on Japanese women and their desire for a Western partner, the same trait can be applied to the males. This is apparent through the popularity of western female models in Japan, such as for example Dakota Rose from the USA, Beckii Cruel from the UK or Taylor R from Canada, or a highly noted model Miranda Kerr from Australia. All these girls have in common is that they have small frames, lighter colored hair than most Japanese, and big, bright eyes. Furthermore, importantly, they are all native speakers of English, and are extremely popular in Japan, where both men as well as women admire them for their appearance, and possibly the idealized image they have of them. Therefore, it can be assumed that not only western men, but women as well are viewed as attractive and desirable. This factor of a promise of romantic fulfillment is claimed to strengthen some individuals to learn English. In Kubota’s study, one of the female Japanese learners of English is not pleased with her career, even though she has accomplished high second language proficiency (2011). However, she had gotten married to an American man. Thus, arguably, accomplishing at least one of her objectives for language studies.

Another important factor which strengthens the position of English in Japan is the idea of Nihonjinron, or The Japanese Studies. This is a somewhat nationalistic idea, where the Japanese people celebrate all what is considered Japanese, as for example specific culture, society, traditions and national character. In view of many, studying a foreign language can have many benefits for the country itself, such as introducing and promoting one’s country and culture in the international market. Furthermore, as McVeigh argues, through high English proficiency the Japanese are able to keep well informed on the new scientific and technological advances, thus helping Japan progress in this fields steady and improving the country’s international position (2004). Rivers claims that
Many within Japan believe that English abilities are needed in order to connect, or internationalize with the world as an entity existent beyond Japan’s domestic borders. However, such a process of internationalization is highly conditional – it must be achieved whilst positively maintaining a distinct sense of Japaneseness (p.115. 2010).

His argument shows that the Japanese are willing to partake in the international relations, however, they still wish to remain in connection to their national values and culture. Speaking English is seen as a tool to both integrate with the rest of the world, as well as supporting the flourish and advance of Japan.
3. Factors which may hinder acquisition of English by Japanese Speakers

While the position of English is well noted in modern Japanese society, not only in the work environment but by society as a whole, it is still quite a rare skill amongst the Japanese people. This allegation is also noted by Ota, who mentions that in comparison to the amount of time and effort put into English teaching, the English competence in Japan is very low (1994). Takeshita found in her study that majority of students she questioned are very unhappy about their English proficiency in all four language skills, but particularly in speaking (2000). Similarly, Martin writes

At the age of seventeen or eighteen, a Japanese student will have had at least three hours of English per week for six years. At the university level, students add another two years of English. However, despite the great amount of time, energy, and money spent on English teaching, it is rare to find a Japanese student who, after six years of English, is able to engage in even a marginal dialogue with a speaker of English. (p. 50, 2004).

There are various reasons including linguistic or cultural ones - which hinder second language attainment. One of the important reasons is the difference between Japanese and English grammar, syntax, semantics as well as phonology. However, it would be an oversimplification to trace the hindrances merely to linguistic differences. The social and cultural aspects play just as important, or even more important, role than the linguistic ones. Japan, historically, has by large, a distinctly different cultural and social background. The ideology prevalent in Japan is very different from the Western cultures and often contrasting. Lastly, one of the very important points is the education system in Japan, which is not successful in helping people gain a high level of English proficiency. Japanese and English are grammatically quite distant languages. The Japanese word order in sentences differs quite noticeably from English. As Fukui (1991) explains, an important part of the cross-linguistic examination is the study of “head parameter”. It can be found by looking at the position of the verb or noun (head) and its complement in the sentence. English is a “head-initial language” while Japanese is “head-last” structure (1999). This means that while it in typical English sentence, a verb comes first and is followed by its complement. In order for a Japanese speaker to speak fluently in English, he or she must become acquainted with the different way of sentence structure. In all
likeness, if one would have applied the Japanese syntax rules to English, it would still be understandable, however, it would sound very unnatural.

The next significant difference between the two grammars is the matter of determiners. In English, it is important to put a determiner such as “a”, “an” or “the” before a noun. However, this is not a necessity in Japanese. Without speaker’s instinctual knowledge of where and when the determiner should be used, the perfecting of the skill may take a lot of work and effort. In addition, Japanese does not use an active form for plural. This means, then as in English, one can signify if the noun is singular or not, as for example a singular form: a cat, a dog, a child. The plural form differs, meaning that if the noun is representing more than one singular object, it changes for, for example, a cat-cats, a dog-dogs, a child-children. This is a fundamental difference between Japanese and English grammar, as in Japanese there is no distinction between singular and plural forms. For example, a noun neko can mean either one cat or many cats. One has to simply assume the meaning through the context of the sentence. Therefore, native Japanese speakers studying English need to learn the use of distinctive noun forms which do not necessarily have a direct translation or representative in their own language. This may form a slight difficulty and requires a sufficient amount of practice in order to familiarize oneself with this different way of word use. However, although those differences are notable, many of the academic articles and studies do not prescribe them as the main reason for the low English efficiency in Japan. English education is compulsory in Japanese schools, most of the people are already well aware of English grammar and syntax. Therefore, although those contrasts are important to take a note off, they are not vital or major hindrances to the performance level of English by the Japanese.

The phonetic factors also play an important role in language acquisition. The Japanese alphabet consists of syllabaries which follow the consonant-vowel pattern. The previously mentioned katakana, used for spelling foreign words adapted into Japanese also follows this rule. The vast amount of English loan words in Japan, therefore, becomes highly phonologically distorted. Martin writes that

When katakana characters are used for English phonemes and syllables, the result is a Japanese-English in which “bus” is basu, “and” is ando, “test” is tesuto, and so on. Also of interest is a plethora of words and phrases created from English but
unrecognizable to native speakers of English, often because they are also abbreviated. (p.53, 2004)

Although the loan words could be helpful when learning the second language, it is suggested that in Japanese they may actually become hindrances. Martin argues that the distorted phonetic values of English loan words, such as Japanese intonation and pronunciation patterns are fossilized by the general use of katakana (2004). Martin argues that the fully Japanized foreign vocabulary is causing difficulties, as the speakers of English are not able to understand the Japanese way of the word pronunciation, and in return, the Japanese people may not recognize the, supposedly familiar words, when spoken to in English (2004). Similarly, Olah brings up this argument, as he mentions that the use of katakana requires placing vowels between consonant clusters, which results in expanding of the words and requesting far more sounds and vowels in Japanese than in English (2007). It is important to note the phonological differences between English in Japanese, as in Japanese there are only 5 vowels sounds while in English there are 12. Olah argues therefore that many English loan words have to undergo a major phonetic change when absorbed into Japanese vocabulary (p. 180, 2007). Therefore, although words may origin from English, they become solely Japanese, and suggesting instead of assisting with intercultural communication, is disadvantaging it. In addition, English loan words sometimes become distorted further. As Olah mentions

In order to save time when speaking, many loan words have been shortened (a linguistic technique that Japanese apply extensively to a host of words and expressions throughout their language). These shortened versions become the standard way of saying or writing the loan words with people often unaware of its original form. In other cases, two loan words have been combined, with one or both of the original English words being shortened (p.179, 2007).

This furthermore creates a distorted view of English vocabulary present in Japanese, which instead of assisting with language learning process may cause difficulties as the words are very different from their previous forms. Furthermore, many of the loanwords present in Japan change their semantic meaning. For example, the word mansion, in Japanese manshon in commonly understood Japanese instead of signifying a great luxurious house, is referring to an apartment building. Moreover, the word juice, in Japanese jusu, does not refer only to fruit juice, but also to other soft drinks. Yamazaki
has shown in his study that majority of Japanese have difficulties recognizing the correct meaning of loan words from English (1988). Olah argues that this is a considerable issue for English learners in Japan, as when they speak English they are likely to use loan words with different semantic meanings, thus not being able to communicate correctly (2007). Japanese people who are unaware of the original pronunciations or semantic meaning of English loanwords present in Japanese are therefore set up for miscommunications with the English speakers, resulting in negative mental association in connection to communicating in English. Although previously mentioned linguistic factors are important to be accounted for, there are other highly significant components worth looking into. When discussing the possible low level of English users in Japan, the influence of cultural and social factors may not be overlooked or ignored. Firstly, the Japan is historically known as a country which values their cultural individuality, in the past actively trying to resist any influence from the western world. Even though English written language or phrases are increasingly popular in pop culture, the possible anxieties connected to it have not entirely disappeared. Granting that an average Japanese citizen does not regularly ponder over the disturbing past Japan shared with the westerners, particularly World War II, it is in fact quite reasonable to assume that it nevertheless has an effect on how their view English and English speaking countries. Kowner argues that to this day, many Japanese perceive communication with foreigners as an unpleasant experience and tend to avoid it (p.339, 2002).

The cultural and social background in Japan may lead to difficulties in communications with speakers of foreign languages, both in the class environment, as well as in private life. Cutrone mentions students may experience difficulties in English classes as there are not accustomed to western teaching style, which celebrates individuality and critical thinking (2009). This idea is supported by Nozaki, who explains that in Japan the students are meant to the be, traditionally, passive and obedient, and are not often not required to put much input into the lessons themselves (1993). In addition to the previously mentioned high regard for hierarchy as well as shyness, this forms an immense issue, as the language learners do not fully use the potential of their classes. As Helgeson mentions in majority of his students were not actively participating in the classes, did not ask questions and rarely volunteered to solve a problem (1993). This argument is supported
by Anderson as he mentions that Japanese and Western culture codes are very different. It is not necessarily the fact that they do not wish to participate in class, however taking over initiative is unlikely, as they may be worried of the opinion of their peers (1993). They are often too concerned about the judgment of others, not willing to take a risk of seeming rude or unintelligent, thus refrain from asking teacher for assistance or additional explanations.

Yuta, a popular Japanese YouTuber and author of the book Dating in Japan in his video titled “If All Japanese Spoke English, What Would Happen” asks passersby in Tokyo on what their opinion on the matter was. One of the answers which has really stood out was the notion that if everyone would be fluent in English, Japan would be at risk of losing its identity. This suggest that some Japanese have either consciously or unconsciously, in a negative mindset in connection to English, and what it represents. The idea is supported by Ellis, who claims that the learners may fear losing their own cultural identities by emerging themselves in a foreign one (1994). Western culture- of which the language is undeniably a huge part- is met with sort of a resistance, as it is associated with many negative factors. Reesor supports the claim that the foreign aspects are often associated with the degradation of society, where Japan may lose its own strong identity built on tameness and loyalty to more negative ones (2002). This idea has been apprised by Hayes, who claims that the social factors in Japan, such as nationalism and ethnocentrism causes the Japanese to be distrustful of English acquisition, as it’s speakers may be viewed as no longer “pure” Japanese, becoming somewhat contaminated by the foreign influence (1979).

In much more recent study, Sullivan and Schatz) found that some Japanese have negative attitudes towards English due to its close relationship with the Westernized and Americanized cultures, thus forming a threat to Japanese national identity and uniqueness (2009). The idea of contamination and purity is highly prominent in Japanese cultural background, as it is one of the most prominent factors stressed in both of the national religions, Shinto and Buddhism, especially the Confucian ideology. Those belief systems are centered greatly around symbolic as well as spiritual purification, which in the context of language learning is an interesting concept. It is possible that the unconscious dismay and distrust is linked to the foreign cultures which infiltrate and
“contaminate” Japan, causing reluctance towards the second language studies. Befu claims that the Japanese have developed a strong sense of pride of their country, a cultural nationalism, as a form of a form of response to the threat of post-war strong Western influence (1987). Despite this not being something which is usually clear or premeditated, it is still, to this day, visible in Japanese society. Kubota claims that the Japanese may have negative attitudes towards English as well as foreigners as a form of defense mechanism protecting them from an identity crisis which can result from overly emerging oneself in a foreign culture (1998). The Japanese people are concerned that the Western culture might eventually overthow or overshadow the native culture of Japan. Kubota compares the issue of Americanization to the era of Colonization, where the Western countries took control over many Asian countries, such as India, and promoted their own ideologies as the correct and right ones while simultaneously criticizing the local ones (1998). These reasons are likely to create an array of feelings in connection to English. The foreign language is popular and well established in both pop culture as well as in business environment, causing it to be sought after. However, on the other hand, the Japanese are varying of the influence it may have on their own, unique culture.

Asides from the unconscious resistance to speaking a foreign language, the Japanese people are also often culturally conditioned into thinking that learning a second language is not a realistic possibility. As Hinenoya and Gatbonton write, there are two distinctive words for “Japanese language” in Japan, Nihongo, directed as Japanese as the second language and Kokugo, Japanese as the native language. The authors claim that this shows a distinction Japanese see between a first language and a language acquired, later on, suggesting that the opinion is that only Japanese people can really become proficient in Japanese, which then in return transfers to an opinion that only a native English speaker can truly master English (2000). In pop cultural materials, such as manga or movies, a person who is able to speak any language besides Japanese, especially English or French, is immediately viewed as intelligent and cool. Their second language ability is usually explained by either them being only half Japanese and half of foreign origin, them having lived overseas for extended period of time, or, which is often the case, both. And in fact this seems to be true, as Takeshita mentions that in her study she found out that the only students who were happy with their English proficiency were
the ones who have experience living abroad in an English-speaking country (2000). This can affect the way the Japanese view second language acquisition. It is perceived as something that a regular, not-extraordinary person cannot accomplish. Speaking English is viewed as a very special ability, almost at the level of a superpower. This prejudiced view on language is, without a doubt, a substantial hindrance. The learners pursue their language study with the pre-conditioned impression that they will, personally, never really be able to accomplish fluency. They are under the impression that in order to learn a second language, they need to be either extremely bright or immensely dedicated to their studies. Takeshita mentions that students are unhappy with their own language skills as they feel they need to aim for native-like perfection (2000). Because of this, the Japanese people may not actually really try to apply themselves whole heartedly to their second language studies, as they start off with the idea of failure back printed in their minds. This may lead to dropping of their motivation level, as they may simply not see any achievable goals ahead of them. A Japanese student’s objective in his or hers second language education is not necessary to be able to communicate in English, but to get high enough scores to graduate from high school. This point is supported by Hinenoya and Gatbonton, who claim that the English teaching is typically oriented on assuring that the learners receive high scores on their examinations, therefore putting the majority of the pressure on grammar and text translations, often omitting the significance of actual oral communication (2000). Furthermore, the Japanese who believe the second language is something not attainable are also less likely to practice the skill. They compare themselves to the native speakers, and are concerned over their own linguistic imperfections, which they feel would indicate their lesser intelligence and capability.

Moreover, there are vast differences in the way the members of the Japanese and western cultures, such as for example Americans or Europeans are expressing themselves. While in the west, speaking one’s mind clearly is considered a good thing, in Japan a person is not meant to speak of their opinions straightforwardly. As Hinenoya and Gatbonton mention, the Japanese are likely to rely highly on silence or non-verbal forms of communication, believing that the person being spoken to will understand what is implied, even if it is not actually communicated directly (2000). In Japan, straightforwardly disagreeing with somebody or not accepting their offers is seen as
greatly rude and offensive. This has often been a source of distain for companies who are doing business with the Japanese firms, as they may not note them if they are not pleased with the contracts. In Japan politeness is one of the most important traits, even if it means that one is not to express their feeling and opinions. In addition, it is important to note that hierarchy and social status play an important role in communication in Japan. As Ellis argues, the Japanese tend to be more formal and to give recognition to status relationships between speakers rather than to level of familiarity (1991). This causes a hindrance in their English studies, as they are not familiar with the more direct approach to conversation. As Kowner argues that the verbal, as well as non-verbal differences concerning status recognition, are so substantial that the Japanese may experience the sensation of violation of their social status while communicating with foreigners (2002). The unlikeness of the social codes and conceptions of what is perceived as “proper" behavior is a major factor in intercultural communication. As Kowner explains that Japanese tend to enter an encounter with a non-Japanese, as with a fellow Japanese whose status is not established, assuming a cautious, respectful, modest, and perhaps introverted manner. Non-Japanese, however, enter, or at least are perceived by Japanese as entering, such an encounter in a much less cautious manner. This non-cautious extrovert manner is perceived as similar to the communication style of high-status people, and, thus, it violates initial within-culture expectations (p.357, 2002).

Therefore, the Japanese person may feel discomfort when speaking to a foreigner, as he or she may experience that the speaker is not paying them enough respect, is acting impolite or even speaking down to them. Kowner argues that the Japanese are often aware of the less formal communication patterns of the west, however that does not change the fact that when interacting with a non-Japanese they are still likely to experience discomfort and nervousness (2002). Therefore, it is important to note those cultural traits. When an English speaker communicates with a Japanese in a way which is appropriate to his own cultural background, it does not mean it is viewed as such from the Japanese perspective. This can transfer the idea of communicating with English speakers into something undesirable, troublesome and even distressing. Kowner claims that Japanese view their need to be formal and modest, taking on a “lower status" behavior, while not meeting with a proper response from the person they are speaking
with as a huge nuisance (2002). This can lead to them being likely to avoid speaking to
foreigners all together, associating English with negative emotions, as well as not willing
to practice their communicative skills.

It is also important to acknowledge the communicative and cultural differences
between the West and Japan. In comparison to the Japanese, the Western culture
celebrates confidence, being outspoken, assertiveness and individualism. However, in
Japan the values are reversed. The traits seen as admirable are passiveness, politeness,
calmness and very importantly, being considerate to others. Matsumoto claims that due
to Japan’s cultural background strongly entwined with the Confucian ideologies, the
Japanese are likely to appear shy and introverted. Character traits such as strong sense
of individuality and outspokenness are perceived more as flaws rather than positives
(1994). Those points may seem, from the point of view of an outsider, as a sign of lack of
confidence. As Zimbardo claims that the Japanese, are naturally conditioned to be more
sensitive and shy than their Western counterparts (1977). Kowner supports this idea, as
he mentions that the Japanese are very likely experience shyness when communicating
with foreigners, especially in the presence of other Japanese, as they are
afraid that their performance will be too far from perfection (2002).

Furthermore, Takeshita argues that the Japanese are often unsatisfied with their non-
native like pronunciation, thus affecting their perception of their idea of their English
proficiency (2000). The alleged shyness can become a serious hindrance to the second
language learners. As Hinenoya and Gatbonton write, shy people are less likely to interact
with speakers of the language they are intending to learn, thus missing opportunities to
practice and further their second language capability (2000). In addition, Japanese are
noted to use more backchannels- forms of communication such as nods, than westerners.
Cutrone mentions Japanese use backchannels in situations when they did not understand
and or disagreed with what the person they were speaking to was saying (2014). That is,
as the following responses demonstrate, many of them seemed to place a far greater
priority on preserving harmony and saving face rather than expressing their opinions
clearly and honestly. The common use of backchannels by Japanese may cause a
hindrance in their language studies, as it causes misunderstandings both in class
environment as well as outside of it. As Cutrone mentions, teachers have noted that they
have misinterpreted their students’ backchannels such as nods and Mhmms as a sign of understanding, when in fact the students did not understand at all (2013).

All of the before mentioned factors may strengthen, or lead to a Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) - the feeling of uneasiness and discomfort connected directly to use of foreign language. Gardner and MacIntyre define language anxiety as the apprehension experienced when a situation requires the use of a second language with which the individual is not fully proficient (1993). Cutrone writes that symptoms of FLA manifest through nervousness, tension, apprehension, and introversion (2009). This can affect the Japanese students, who are not fully comfortable with their second language performance. K. A. Foss and A. C. Reitzel addresses this issue, as one of the main points stressed by them is the important role of self-image when performing in the second language. They claim that students’ positive of view on themselves plays a crucial part in their language performance while the negative view hinders it (1988).

As previously mentioned, there are many reasons why Japanese speakers may not feel comfortable with their use of English, from factors like syntax and phonetics to social and cultural points. Moreover, the Japanese are known, as a nation to be rather timid in their communication. As Dewaele indicates, if a speaker is not comfortable performing in their native language, there are very likely to be uncomfortable while using their second language (2007). Kowner claims that it has been noted that the Japanese find it difficult to communication with each other, which only extends as a general issue with communication (2002). Furthermore, Spolsky supports the idea that relaxed and self-assured students are much more likely to speak, write, and participate more during the lessons than the ones who are anxious and insecure (1989). This supports the idea that Japanese may experience issues with second language acquisition due to their social and cultural background. As they are conditioned throughout all their lives to not do things such as clearly and confidently stating what is on their minds, what are their opinions, likes or dislikes, which often leads to various miscommunications, both in private lives and work environment. If the Japanese are not able to fully express themselves in their native language, it is not surprising they are not comfortable trying to do it in a foreign one. In comparison to people from the Western cultures, Japanese people are more likely to be very cautious, apprehensive, vary in their communications and highly considerate
of social status and hierarchy. This can cause a difficulty in English learning classes. A behavior which is a predisposition by the Japanese cultural background were being passive and respectful of others is very significant.
4. Overcoming Hindrances

English is an important factor in the Japanese workplace and society. Although Japanese have difficulties learning English there are possible ways to overcome this. One of the first things that make an impact on the matter is English education in schools. It is a mandatory subject in Japanese high schools, however, the studies revolve mainly around grammar, reading and writing, often with an omission of the actual importance of speech and listening exercises. Furthermore, Cutrone notes that many of the Japanese teachers of English are, themselves, not fully fluent in English (2013). Therefore, the students do not receive enough of stimulus needed for them in order to really embrace their language studies. This is an issue which is actively addressed, as more and more of English teachers come from abroad, especially from the USA, England or Australia, often trough the JET program (The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program). The native speakers of English are more likely to teach students the correct pronunciation of English words. However, English classes taught only by native speakers are not the best solution. As Rivers mentions, teachers who are native speakers of English give their students unrealistic expectations of what their own English should be, thus causing a feeling of inferiority and resignation (2010). Therefore, introducing English classes thought by Japanese who are themselves fluent in the language, or by foreigners who are not from an English speaking country can prove to very beneficial. Having such teachers is likely to give the students a good example, contradicting the belief that only native speakers can acquire high proficiency. It is also important to introduce Japanese English, as something not to be ashamed of or inferior. Takeshita writes

> Despite the global spread of English as a language for wider communication, many Japanese still believe that English is the property of the U.S.A. and Britain. They are ashamed if they do not speak English the way native speakers do. Behavioral acculturation also is presupposed as a must (p.7, 2000).

Yet again, this idea can be countered by introducing non-native teachers of English, which would be reassuring to the students as a sign that not only fully Americanized or British form of English is acceptable. English is used worldwide and is thus bound to have different varieties across the globe. Takeshita argues that English has to be understood as a multicultural phenomenon, meaning that Japanese variety of English is not
something to be disdained, and therefore helping the Japanese feel less obligated to mirror the native speakers perfectly (2000).

In addition, the previously discussed issue of loan words has a great significance. Although there are reasons to see English loan words as hindrances, it is argued that if utilized correctly they can become a great asset in English teaching. Olah argues that the enormous amount of English loan words in Japanese is a great advantage, as it means that the students have already acquired a large English vocabulary. He claims that the disadvantages of distorted pronunciation and meaning of loan words can be easily countered by teaching students to recognize those differences. Olah mentions that this may become a great tool in language teaching, as students are not only already aware of many words in English vocabulary, but also as a side effect, they are likely to feel encouraged and confident in their studies knowing that they already have a vast knowledge needed (2007).

Furthermore, the attitude of the teachers themselves bears great significance. As Cutrone mentions, qualities that an English teacher should have include a sense of humor, kindness, and friendliness (2009). The teachers, as well as the students, must understand and acknowledge their cultural differences. Kowner writes that by doing so, both sides may avoid unwanted misunderstandings which may result in negative experiences. Kowner stresses that by socially appropriate behavior, foreigners can help the Japanese with feeling comfortable and therefore more at ease in communicating with outsiders (2002). The students need the positive feedback as a reassurance that their efforts are noticed and appreciated. Notwithstanding the clear and definite importance of firstly studying the language in theory through learning of its grammar, syntax, vocabulary and semantics, one may not overlook the value of putting that acquired knowledge into practice. Conversational classes are gaining popularity, however, mainly the students who have stronger interest or purpose in learning English attend them, as they are not part of mandatory education. Therefore, it is significant that language learners reach outside of the classroom environment in order to increase their English proficiency. As Cutrone writes, the classes in Japan commonly have a very strict and formal atmosphere, which may likely cause a feeling of anxiety and discomfort in students (2009). The unconventional language acquisition methods may often be more enjoyable and
accessible for some individuals. An excellent example of such activity is surrounding oneself with media in the language one is trying to learn. Watching movies, without subtitles, is a pleasant way to learn, as one is able to get accustomed to the sound of the words, as well as is likely to pick up many common phrases and words. If done simultaneously with the classical method of teaching, it has a potential of enhancing the effect of the studies. Furthermore, watching movies or TV shows from a given country can help in understanding its culture and well as social mechanics. All of the foreign movies or TV shows in Japan are either dubbed or have subtitles. This, although helping in studying a foreign culture, is not beneficial in English learning. Additionally, while nearly all Western countries use the same popular internet websites, such as eBay or YouTube, Japan has their own websites corresponding to them. This means, that unlike countries like Iceland, where majority of the people use English websites on a daily basis, the Japanese people do not. Instead, they mainly browse through the Japanese side of the internet.

However, the effect of the use of the internet in order to learn English should not be overlooked. Just through watching YouTube videos in English, one is able to learn a great deal, while doing something fun and enjoyable. Subsequently, putting ones already existing knowledge to use while communicating with the native or fluent speakers can bring great profits to language learning. There are many ways one can do it, as a good example a mobile phone application “HelloTalk” is widely popular. It gives people from all over the world opportunity for to meet language exchange partners. An English speaking person who wishes to learn Japanese may talk with a Japanese person who is, in exchange, willing to learn English. This is a highly profitable form of interexchange, where both sides can profit from interaction with a native speaker. The application offers various options, such as a standard written chat, a recording or video posting as well as correcting others grammar or spelling. The application allows people to communicate with each other in a friendly manner, and while doing so, simultaneously reinforce their language skills. Lastly, but the arguable most imperative form of successful language acquisition is the actual socializing with speakers of the language one wishes to learn. Through this, one is continuously exposed to the language, and even without necessarily need for books or homework, one is able to upgrade in it. If a Japanese person would be put in a
position where he or she would not be able to interact with other Japanese speakers, they would be quintessentially forced to speak another language, most likely English. Active practice and use of the language in real life is bound to be very beneficent and profitable. This, however, is not a likely scenario for the majority of Japanese. The rate of foreigners in Japan is only around 1%, from which many come from other Asian countries—meaning they do not necessarily speak English.

In addition, as a majority of the Japanese people lack confidence in their English skills, there are often apprehensive and may avoid interaction with foreigners, such as tourists. Moreover, many students may benefit greatly from going on an exchange program abroad. Being surrounded by non-Japanese speakers, one must socialize with foreigners, which is one of the most proficient ways to learn another language. However, even studying abroad is not equal to certain improving English skills. This is due to the fact that a clear majority of for example Japanese exchange students tends to surround themselves only with either other Japanese people, or people who are already fluent in Japanese. They form a closed group, as this allows them to remain in their comfort zone of their native language, even if they are, currently, living abroad. This issue is discussed by Koike and Tanaka, who claim that group forming and abstaining from infiltrating unfamiliar social circles is characteristic to the Japanese social psychology, as the Japanese feel uneasy and uncomfortable when disconnected from their group (1995). Unfortunately, if language learner is to remain in their comfort zone, it is very unlikely that their second language acquisition will progress a lot—if at all. As Hinenoya and Gatbonton write, as the people who are strongly attached to their groups, the Japanese are likely to shy away from interactions with “outsiders”, thus minimizing their opportunities for social interactions needed in order to successfully learn a second language (2000).

It bears great significance for native Japanese speakers who are willing to increase their English fluency to make efforts to socialize themselves with English speakers, through events, websites, or simply by befriending someone. As Cutrone mentions, moving away from the classroom into more friendly based relations are likely to ease the stress of learning, and therefore, make the process overall easier (2009). Furthermore, as Cutrone suggests, taking the English learning outside of school environment can have great benefits, in order to disconnect the negative emotions and stress related to the strict
evaluation system (2009). The pressure of performing at the highest level possible as well as competitive may effectively annul any joy a student could have had from acquiring a new language. The competition of best grades has deep roots in the Japanese culture, both traditionally as well as currently. It is often a motive in popular culture, for example in manga and anime, where people are being valued by the scores they receive on a test. It is also important to notice that in many Japanese schools the scores from exams are published publicly on a board where all the students and faculty can have access to them. Therefore, removing the learner from the typical classroom environment in favor of a more relaxed teaching style may be favorable. With Japanese students, the teacher must keep in mind that they cannot push their pupils, as this is likely to cause them to become defensive and even more anxious. Instead, positive encouragement, patience, and understanding are unquestionably very important when teaching people who may be prominent to FLA.
5. Conclusion

English has significant importance in Japan for various reasons. It is seen as an asset in the work market, and English studies are viewed as a major investment in human capital. English is also very prominent in Japanese pop culture and media, as it is associated with being admirable and attractive. Furthermore, English is seen as a device which can be used by women for their career progress and emotional fulfillment. In addition, English in Japan is viewed as an aid to promote *nihonjinron*, as well as a way to assist with the steady progress of the country itself. However, English proficiency in Japan is very low. This is traced to various factors. Firstly, Japanese differs greatly from English linguistic and sociocultural ways. Furthermore, it is suggested that Japanese may have a negative image of English and are therefore unwilling to learn it. In addition, they feel the pressure to perform at an unrealistic level, equal to native speakers. The prominent English loan words in Japanese cause difficulties as they are fossilizing their distorted pronunciation as well as different semantic meaning. Moreover, the low level of English in Japan can be linked to various cultural and social traits. It is argued that Japanese are more shy and quiet than the Westerners, tend to use more back channels, tend to form groups and are more concerned with social status. These factors, in addition to strict evaluation system, are likely to cause Foreign Language Anxiety in Japanese learners of English. These issues can, however, be countered by introducing the idea of Japanese English, lessons being thought by fluent Japanese people or non-native English speakers, and more relaxed classroom environment. Studying language outside of school environment, for example by interacting with foreigners or paying attention to media in English is also beneficent. In conclusion, although English in Japan is noted to have great value as a tool of international communication, it’s level is strikingly low in comparison to the efforts and time put into its teaching. Therefore, it is important to take note of the possible hindrances, so that they could be acknowledged and resolved, providing the Japanese with more suitable and culturally appropriate ways of English acquisition.
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