

Article

“EFL + α ”: Attitudes Towards English Use in Japan Around Necessity, Value, and Ability

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Abstract

English has a complex status in Japan. On the one hand, it is considered “foreign” in the sense of being the go-to, in-demand foreign language of study. On the other hand, it has had a strong influence in Japanese society in ways that are unique to Japan, such as the use of *katakana* ‘Western loanwords’ as part of Japanese. This complex status is paired with equally complex attitudes towards the role of English in Japan. In this paper, we explore the connection between the status of English and attitudes towards English in Japan, or what we call “EFL + α ” (meaning ‘with something extra or something special’ in Japanese). We examine data from a variety of sources in the public Japanese discourse relating to English use, ranging from online chat boards to official government documents. Based on our data, we notice three prevailing attitudes towards English use in Japan: English as an assumed necessity, English as unnecessary and overvalued, and English as a marker of general communication ability and intelligence. Finally, we suggest approaching the concept of “EFL + α ” as a way of making sense of “English in Japan” not only as what is (i.e., variety of English is used in Japan), but also as what is being done (i.e., social and cultural practices around the role of English in Japan).

Keywords

English as a Foreign Language, Japanese English, Asian English, World Englishes, Japan

1 Introduction: The State of English in Japan

We begin this paper attempting to summarize the state of English in Japan, which is a complex matter. Those unfamiliar with Japan’s cultural, historical, and educational context may assume, rather simplistically, that English operates as nothing more than a foreign language in Japanese society. In this section,

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we portray the multi-faceted nature of the role of English in Japan, including the way English certainly functions as a foreign language, but also how English use has evolved to adapt to local contexts and needs. After reviewing a broad range of studies about the state of English in Japan, we conclude the introduction by proposing the concept of “EFL + α ” as a way of understanding the role of English in Japan.

1.1 English as a foreign language and English education

English has a complex and paradoxical status in Japan (Sergeant, 2020). On the one hand, the term “English as a Foreign Language (EFL)” can be seen as accurately describing the primary role of English in Japanese society. English has no official status in Japan and is not often used in everyday communication (Yano, 2011), even if English is used as a lingua franca to communicate among speakers of multilingual and multicultural backgrounds (Konakahara & Tsuchiya, 2020). While it is difficult to know exactly how many English speakers there are in Japan, studies suggest that possibly 10% of the population have a basic knowledge of English (Kirkpatrick & Lixun, 2021; Sergeant, 2020). At the same time, English in Japan is primarily treated as the de facto foreign language of study (Bolton & Botha, 2020; Sakamoto, 2012).

Based on policies from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), English education in Japan has been continuously expanding in the name of internationalization and globalization. For instance, English was a required subject from Grade 7 to 12 for many decades, but in 2013, MEXT issued a report titled “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization”, stipulating that by 2020, English instruction would start in Grade 3 and English classes in Grade 5 and 6 would be changed to a formal academic subject (MEXT, 2013). This means that the typical 5th and 6th grade English education would shift from somewhat informal and creative language activities (Kubota, 2019, p. 112) to a more traditional type of English class. Moreover, English education has also been expanding in higher education. In 2008, MEXT announced the “Global 30 Project”, which promoted English as the medium of instruction (EMI) as a way of increasing the number of international students and boosting the internationalization of Japanese universities. The initial goal of this project was to increase the number of international students to 30,000 by 2020 hence “30” (MEXT, 2009). In 2011, MEXT reported that about 30% of universities provided EMI classes, and 26 undergraduate and 174 graduate schools provided programs where students can earn a degree through taking EMI classes (MEXT, 2011).

Even with a steady expansion of English education, Japan has a relatively low English proficiency rate compared to neighboring countries such as China, South Korea, and Taiwan. Based on 2018 and 2019 data from IELTS, TOEFL, and EF English Proficiency Index, Bolton and Bacon-Shone (2020) summarize their findings of English proficiencies in Asian countries with a broad, three-tiered categorization with Japan in the lowest tier, lower than all other East Asian countries, namely, China, Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Based on our first-hand experiences as English educators who taught in Japan, one noticeable phenomenon we recognize about EFL in Japan is that speaking and listening proficiencies are not given as much attention as reading and writing skills are, and most people do not question this imbalance in the conventional school curriculum. In a way, in modern Japan, English learning and teaching is unique in this dichotomy between English as an academic discipline (focusing on reading/writing) and as a communicative skill (i.e., speaking/listening). That is, traditional English education in Japan, or *eigo* (‘English’), prepares students for entrance examinations whereas English conversation, or *eikaiwa*, is largely considered to be an extracurricular activity. Our observation reveals that these two sets of English proficiencies appear to be linked to two language ideologies, one which implies intelligence and well-educatedness and the other, success in communication-oriented skills. These two ideologies are not mutually exclusive; a Japanese person can be equipped with both sets of proficiencies. However, even those

who attend universities are mostly trained only in so called ‘grammar translation’ proficiencies, where students are trained to translate English text into Japanese by learning English grammar (Brown & Lee, 2015 pp. 18-19). Thus, English conversation became an extracurricular activity for those who wish to acquire English conversational skills outside their school education. While average Japanese people do not expect those with tertiary education to actually speak English, taking eikaiwa (‘English conversation’) courses has been common among people of all ages, and a number of private eikaiwa schools have prospered across the country since the 1980s (see Kubota, 1998). Across the nation, it is also widely offered as part of popular certificate or qualification courses along with other subjects such as aromatherapy, Microsoft Office, and real estate for property agents. Today, one’s English skills are perceived as a sign of not only practical communication skills but also an emblem of intelligence. Among other things, English, being one of the key school subjects for all majors, must be seen to contribute to one’s overall cognitive ability. We further address the connection between English and these two ideologies (i.e., communication and intelligence) in a subsequent section “EFL + α : English as a Marker of General Communication Ability and Intelligence”.

1.2 English in Japan: Beyond a foreign language

The other half of English’s “paradoxical status” in Japan is that it often feels like more than just a foreign language. However, the prevalence and familiarity of English use in Japan suggests that perhaps deeming it as only a foreign language does not fully describe the complexity of its role in society. Inagawa (2015) expresses “a general feeling that English is probably the least alien language to the Japanese due to its cameo appearances in everyday life in Japan” (p. 12) where ‘cameo appearances’ refer to rampant English loanwords in everyday Japanese. Indeed, these English loanwords show that English has become integrated as part of Japanese life even if not they are not used in everyday communication. For example, English is readily visible in public signage such as posters and advertising, or what many scholars now refer to as the “linguistic landscape” (LL) (Backhaus, 2010, 2019; Rowland, 2016). Researchers have found that English use in the LL goes beyond a form of international communication for foreigners or tourists. Studies have described English use in the Japanese LL as “emblematic” (Hyde, 2002, p. 13), “ornamental” (Seargeant, 2005, p. 315), and “decorative” (Dougill, 2008, p. 21), using English for its “cosmopolitan flair” (Backhaus, 2010, p. 364) and as a “symbol face of globalization” (Seargeant, 2011, p. 7). These affective meanings attached to use of English are part of what we call ‘plus alpha’ elements, an added on social meaning particular to English in Japan. Furthermore, Rowland (2016) finds that when Japanese university students are asked about their opinions of English use in the LL, they convey both materialist (e.g., for commercial purposes; adding style and prestige to stand out; integrating into a globalized world) and idealist (e.g., showing Japanese kindness and hospitality towards foreigners) explanations. Again, this indicates that use of English invokes affective meanings in Japanese society today.

It is worth noting that interpretations of English use in the LL have not been uncontested; a good example of this Stephens’ (2017) discussion of Inagawa (2015) and Barrs (2015), with the former emphasizing innovative, creative wordplay and the latter emphasizing errors in English spelling and word choice relating to English loanwords. The stark differences in their respective analyses of English use in the LL lead to even a greater divergence in how they interpret the state of English in Japan. In fact, Inagawa (2015) claims that English use goes beyond being simply decorative, suggesting “a greater permeation of English at a deeper level as localisation or nativisation” (p. 15). At the other end of the spectrum, Barrs (2015) argues that common errors in English spelling and word choice (as influenced by English loanwords) negatively impacts the global reputation of Japanese English as merely decorative and even comical. The opposing stances represented by Inagawa (2015) and Barrs (2015) represent the way that perceptions of English use in the LL are linked to perceptions of the state of English in Japan.

1.3 Asian Englishes & Japanese English

So far, we have English use in Japan. In this section, we will discuss the legitimacy of the term “Japanese English”. Most scholars recognize that English in Japan is more than a foreign language, though some scholars are not fully convinced that the English used in Japan should be labeled as “Japanese English”. For example, most recently, Low and Pakir (2021) are among scholars who question the label “Japanese English”, pointing out that because English in East Asia is mainly learned and used for educational mobility or workplace contexts, East Asian speakers of English may depend more on Inner Circle norms (i.e., norms from the United States, Britain, Canada, etc.) rather than developing a local norm.

Other scholars have taken a more inclusive stance in considering the legitimacy of the term “Japanese English”. Seargeant (2020) argues that the concept of “Japanese English” does not have to be a separated indigenized English, such as Singaporean or Indian English. In fact, Kirkpatrick and Lixun (2021) also propose an expanded conceptualization of Japanese English by using an identity-communication continuum to describe the different varieties of English in Asia, where varieties such as Singaporean or Filipino English are positioned close to the “identity” end and varieties where English functions mainly as a lingua franca are positioned closer to the “communication” end (Park, 2021). Interestingly, Stanlaw (2004) argues for strong claims about the legitimacy of Japanese English that seem both identity- and communication-oriented, including statements such as “English is necessary to speak Japanese today” and “English linguistic forms are a created-in-Japan variety for use by Japanese in Japan regardless of how they may appear to native English speakers” (p. 299-300). This is *katakanago* (‘Japanese Anglicism’) or what Stanlaw (2004) calls “created-in-Japan variety”, which is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Our contribution to this extended dialogue is not to designate which distinctive term should be used to describe English in Japan (e.g., Japanese English, English as a foreign language, etc.). Rather, we hope to shed light on the complex discourses by the Japanese public on the role of English in Japan. In other words, how do people in Japan make sense of the multiple roles and uses of English in Japanese society? And how can we, as researchers, make sense of the varying, and often competing, perspectives of English in Japanese public discourse? To answer this question, we introduce the term “EFL + α ” (i.e., pronounced as “English plus alpha”). The Japanese expression “plus alpha” is a common English loanword meaning “a little something extra” or “the icing on the cake” in Japanese. We chose this term because it not only marks the way that English is more than simply a foreign language in Japan, but also is a word that is a good example of the way in which English is more than a foreign language.

1.4 *Katakanago*: ‘English loanwords or Created-in-Japan variety’ to refer to western imaginaries

Before we begin the discussion on *katakanago* (‘Japanese Anglicism’) or what Stanlaw (2004) calls “created-in-Japan variety”, some background regarding Japanese writing system is provided here since the term *katakana* refers to a certain orthographic style. Written forms of Japanese mark words’ etymology via distinctive orthographic practices; *yamato-kotoba* (‘native Japanese vocabulary’) is written in *hiragana* script, *kango* (‘Sino-Japanese vocabulary’) in *kanji* (‘Chinese characters’), and *seiyō-kotoba* (‘western loanwords’) in *katakana* script. For example, one of the expressions mentioned earlier referring to MEXT’s English education policy, ‘English education reform plan corresponding to globalization’ will be written as:

グローバル	化	に	対応	した	英語教育改革実施計画
<i>grōbaru</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>taio</i>	<i>shita</i>	<i>eigokyōikukaikakujisshikeikaku</i>
<i>katakana</i>	<i>kanji</i>	<i>hiragana</i>	<i>kanji</i>	<i>hiragana</i>	<i>kanji</i>
‘globalization’	‘to’		‘corresponding’		‘English education reform plan’

Historically, Chinese characters became important due to diffusion of Buddhism since the 5th century. After the 19th century, however, many new loanwords from the West were added into Japanese

lexicon. According to Yano (2021, p. 5), today, “English-originated loanwords are found everywhere in government documents, the media, businesses, schools, advertisements, and popular songs”. These loanwords are written in *katakana* (‘the orthographic system used mostly for words of foreign origin’) and became labeled as *katakanago* (‘words or language written in *katakana* characters’) which refer to either (1) western loanwords or (2) words created to showcase modernity (about the symbolic value of Japanese scripts, see Morita, 2013; Robertson, 2020).

As with many other places in the world, people in Japan associate feelings of modernity with English. While most Japanese are unable to utilize English as a communication tool, they have some basic knowledge of English from their school EFL education. Thus, for EFL students who have difficulty attaining fluency and confidence in speaking English, using *katakanago* or other English-sounding expressions, regardless of their accuracy in actual use, may bring comfort and ease any negative feelings of guilt or failure. The proliferation of ‘Japanese English’ or ‘created-in-Japan variety’ as observed by a number of scholars (e.g., Dougill, 2008; Loveday, 2008; Seargeant, 2005; Stanlaw, 2004) may reflect the post-war EFL learning cohorts’ strategies to cope with *eigo konpurekkusu* (‘an inferiority complex about English’). This means that English education has been focusing on the teaching of grammar and translations of English texts into Japanese for decades, and not many people succeed in speaking English, or manage to use English practically. Hence, it is common for Japanese people to spread English phrases that deviate from the original meanings without knowing about it. Examples that deviate away from the original English include phrases such as *tarento* (‘talent’) to mean a celebrity, *atto hōmu* (‘at home’) to mean homely/homey, and *kanningu* (‘cunning’) to refer to an act of cheating among many others. Owing to the modernized and stylish effects its use imparts, *katakanago*, in both faithful English loanword usage as well as Japan-specific English usage, has only been amplified, and is indeed used in product names, slogans, popular song lyrics, haiku poems, and everyday conversation. All in all, the point of using *katakanago* or Japanese English is to bring Japanese people positive feelings about embracing progressive and globalized worldviews, which is often associated with use of English. New English loanwords are spreading quicker than ever with the rise of social media and internet among Japanese speakers.

Kumadaki (2004, p. 1472) observes that while recognizing the existence of some anti-*katakanago* sentiments, the overall attitude towards them is still positive. She explains that the English-sounding words have positive effects on people at a visceral level even though the epistemicity of the loanwords are not grasped. Iijima (2003, p. 213) also takes a note of the pervasive positivity for *katakanago* among Japanese people and explains that it is a product of a mixed emotion coming from both an adoration and an inferiority complex about the West. A relevant article about Japanese EFL was reported in *The New York Times* with a featured interview of a staff member of Toyota Motor Corporation on the topic of the use of English in advertisements in Japan. The staff member comments that the main reason English appeals to Japanese consumers is a result of “the complex psychology of the Japanese toward things foreign” because “Many Japanese still have a complicated inferiority complex about the West” (Lohr, 1983). In summary, the desire to be a part of the global community motivates use of *katakanago* and English ultimately still remains as a foreign language in terms of its practical usage as a linguistic tool in Japan.

So far, we have reviewed the complex state of English in Japan, as the primary foreign language of education, a decorative language often visible alongside Japanese in public domains of Japanese society, and an incorporation of English in Japanese as a “created-in-Japan variety” through *katakanago*.

2 Examining Attitudes Towards English in Japan

In this section, we examine “EFL + α ” to refer to three explicit attitudes towards English present in public Japanese discourse: English as an assumed necessity, English as unnecessary and overval-

ued, and English as a marker of general communication ability and intelligence. We examine specific examples of how these three attitudes towards English play out in public Japanese discourse and how they complicate the role of English in Japanese society as more than simply EFL.

2.1 A prologue of competing stances: Is English a necessity?

The topic of English education is a highly polarized one, particularly within the education field. Looking at multiple articles on professional websites, social media posts, vlogs, and discussion sites in Japanese, these perspectives are even clearer. We recently stumbled across a post on Yahoo Chiebukuro, one of the main discussion websites in Japan where people commonly ask and answer questions posed by each other, like Reddit. The post highlights the wide range of perspectives quite clearly,

An anonymous questioner posted: *naze keizaigaku ni wa eigo wa amari hitsuyō ga nai hazu na no ni keizaigakubu no nyūshi ni wa hotondo no tokoro de eigo ga hisshūkatsu sono haiten mo hoka no nyūshi kamoku yori mo ōkii tokoro ga ōi no desu ka?* ('Why is it that there are subjects like economics which should not really require English and yet the entrance examinations for most economics departments require English and that the points for the English portion are higher than other subject areas?') (IDHikoukai, 2018). Although the post is phrased as a question, as can be seen by the use of the interrogative *naze* ('why') at the very beginning of the post, it is also a complaint and a criticism. We can see in this post that the author questions the requirement of an English test and thinks that the test is overvalued in relation to the other subjects in a way that does not match the discipline of economics. The use of the auxiliary *hazu* followed by the *na no ni* construction serves to intensify the stance of indignation of the post.

The responses to this post are equally enlightening in that they express the exact opposite stance. The first response listed starts with a straightforward statement in support of English for these programs by saying: *mochiron kono riyū wa keizaigaku ni wa sūgaku no tsugi kurai ni eigo ga hitsuyō dakara desu* ('Of course the reason is that economics requires English right after math.'). Beginning with the adverbial *mochiron* ('of course') makes the response's tone somewhat aggressive against the original post.

The second response to the post gives even more weight to the necessity of English argument stating things like *matomo na keizaigakusha wa eigo de shika ronbun o kakanai tame eigo no yomikaki ga dekinakereba keizaigaku no benkyō ya kenkyū wa mattaku dekimasen* ('Any decent economist writes articles only in English so if you can't read and write in English you can't study or do research in economics at all') and *Ichiryū reberu no kokuritsu daigaku da to hisshū kamoku ga eigo de kaikō sarete iru koto mo sukunaku arimasen shi, keizaigakusha ni totte wa nihongo yori mo eigo no hō ga haruka ni mijikana gengo desu* ('At first class national universities, mandatory courses are frequently conducted in English, plus English is a much more familiar language to economists than Japanese'). This response given by a person calling themselves *Mannenkyōju*, meaning the perpetual *kyōju* (a rank equivalent to assistant professor in some university systems), lends the weight of professional expertise to this support of English, basically making English intrinsic to the discipline of economics by phrasing that economists would be more familiar with English than with Japanese and also creating a ranking system *in situ* by stating that classes in English are a feature of *ichiryū reberu* ('first class level') and national ('*kokuritsu*') universities.

The other responses all support the need for English in this context with occasional rude implications towards the position of the original post. One response starts with *nani itten no* ('whatchu talkin' about') a very sarcastic tone which could easily lead to a fight or argument in real life exchanges notably when sensitive topics are involved. Due to *juken* 'entrance examination' culture which has contributed in increasing people's anxieties and competitive sentiments over English education or education in general. Among those who take their academic qualifications and English skills seriously, discussions like this can cause frictions and/or undesirable outcomes. For instance, based on an extensive investigation of junior high school bullying, Ogiue (2018) reports that students' grades are identified as a major cause of school

bullying. In this thread, another response starts with saying *eigo wa keizaigaku (dake ni kagiranai kedo) sekai kyōtsū gengo* ('English is a universal language for economics (and other disciplines)') and finishes with '*amari hitsuyō ga nai' tte yū no wa, amari ni bakageta iikata* ('saying 'should not really require' is ridiculous'). In this response, not only is English seen as a language used around the world ('*sekai kyōtsū gengo*') but the original post's criticism is framed as ridiculous/stupid by the use of *bakageta* (meaning 'absurd' but containing the insult *baka* meaning 'fool/idiot').

2.2 EFL + α: English as an assumed necessity

As presented in the previous example post from Yahoo Chiebukuro, one of the prevailing perspectives of English in Japan is the intrinsic importance of English. As such, many education services and websites often treat the focus on and learning of English for Japanese students as something which should be obvious. Here is an example of this argument being made. The following is an extract in Japanese (followed by an English translation) drawn from in a series of articles for parents of young students on the educational website Kodomo Manabirabo ('Children's Learning Lab') in which Japanese language education researcher Shigenori Tanaka tells parents the main reasons their children need to learn English (Tanaka, 2018):

世界で約 15 億人も！ 英語はできて当たり前？

今回は第 1 回目ということで、「なぜ英語を学ぶのか」ということについてお話していききたいと思います。

中学 3 年生に「どうして英語を学ぶの？」と質問しました。結果、「入試に出るから」「英語で映画を観たり、歌を聞いたりしたいから」「学校の授業で英語が教科としてあるから」「親に言われてしかたなく」「今や英語は世界中で使われ、これからの時代を生きるのに必要だから」といった回答が返ってきました。教師に同じ質問をすれば、最後の「英語は国際語だから」が目立つ回答だろうと思います。

確かに英語を実用的なレベルで使うことができる人は世界で 15 億人ほどであるという推計があります。その内、母語として英語を話す人は 4 億人弱です。圧倒的多数の人が第二言語として英語を使っているということです。

アジアでも、韓国では英語ができなければ生きていけないということから国策として英語教育が重視され、中国でも英語が使える人口が急速に増えています。同じことが東南アジア諸国についてもいえます。「英語はできて当たり前」という状況が現実のものになってきているのは間違いないと思います。世界中の人が英語を使うということは、英語は多文化共生の手段であるということです。

同じ中学 3 年生に「英語は得意ですか」と聞きました。すると、6 割が「苦手」あるいは「やや苦手」と回答しました。英語はできて当たり前という状況にあって、過半数の中学生が英語は苦手だと考えているというのは、教育的には深刻です。

しかし、同時に「英語ができたらどう？」と聞くと、9 割が「うれしい」あるいは「ふつう（悪くない）」と応えました。英語が苦手でも「英語はできないよりできたほうがいい」と感じている生徒が多いということです。英語教育はこれにちゃんと答えなければならないと思います。

(English translation)

Over 1.5 billion people in the world! Is it normal to be able to speak English?

In this first post, I would like to talk about why we learn English.

When speaking to third-year junior high school students, I asked them "Why do you learn

English?” I received answers such as “because it will be on the entrance exam,” “because I want to watch movies and listen to songs in English,” “because English is a subject in school,” “because my parents told me to,” and “because English is now used all over the world and is necessary for living in the future.” If you ask the same question to teachers, I think the last answer, “because English is an international language,” would stand out the most.

Indeed, it is estimated that there are about 1.5 billion people in the world who can use English at a practical level. Of these, less than 400 million speak English as their first language. This means that the overwhelming majority of people use English as a second language.

Even in Asia, in South Korea, English education has been emphasized as part of their national policy because people cannot survive without English, and in China, the number of English-speaking people is rapidly increasing. The same can be said for Southeast Asian countries. There is no doubt that being able to speak English is becoming a reality. The fact that people all over the world use English means that English is a means of multicultural coexistence.

I asked the same third-year junior high school students, “Are you good in English?” Sixty percent responded that they were “not good” or “somewhat bad” in English. The fact that most junior high school students think that they are not good in English is a serious educational problem in a context where English is taken for granted.

At the same time, however, when asked, “What if you could speak English?” 90% of the respondents answered “happy” or “normal (not bad)”. This means that even if they are not good in English, many students feel that it is better to be able to speak English than not. I think that English education must answer this question properly.

It is clear from the first sentence after the title that Tanaka intends to explain the reasons why Japanese students need to learn English. Even the title brings this up by asking the question *Eigo dekite atarimae?* (‘Is it normal to be able to speak English?’). The use of the word *atarimae* which can mean ‘obvious’ or referring to something which should be assumed echoes the sentiment from our earlier Yahoo post’s use of *mochiron* (‘of course’). We see that Tanaka begins by listing reasons given by junior high school students, ranging from the prevalence of English in popular culture to different academic applications to its use internationally which he frames as the popular answer among teachers. He then goes on to give his own reasons for learning English.

In third paragraph, Tanaka first approaches his argument for the necessity of English by focusing on the number of English speakers in the world. He explains that 1.5 billion people around the world use English at what he terms as a ‘practical level’ (*jitsuyōteki na reberu*). He then explains that only 400 million speak it as their first language, which means that most people use it as a second language, an argument well established in the applied linguistics literature (Crystal, 2003). While there is certainly much truth in these statistics, this argument amounts to saying ‘well, *everyone* else is doing it’, and ignores the possibility of a more localized or *glocalized* approach to language education for Japan (Lin, Wang, Akamatsu, & Riazi, 2005; Matsuda, 2003).

Next, Tanaka compares the state of English education in Japan to other neighboring countries, arguing that Japan needs to catch up. He explains that South Korea has changed its educational policy to focus on English, China has increasing numbers of English speakers, and Southeast Asia is approaching a situation where speaking English will become the norm. Here, Tanaka states that English should be expected of people because Japan needs to catch up to its neighbors/rivals for fear of being left behind or losing in an economic race. This echoes the concerns reflected in the Interim report by the Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, which phrases it as *wagakuni no keizai ga aratana seichō kidō e to sai fujō suru tame ni* (‘for our country’s economy to re-emerge and grow in a new direction’). This report also includes comparisons to China, South Korea, and India’s growth and success with global human resources.

2.3 EFL + α : English as unnecessary and overvalued

Arguments which run counter to the government's stated plans to increase English education and studying abroad in similar websites and online forums usually focus on two things raised by the initial Yahoo post regarding English, that there is little need for English in Japan and that Japanese universities give too much weight to English. In the case of the latter, it is not particularly surprising given that MEXT itself is vocally pushing for the focus on English, therefore resulting in the English segments of many university entrance exams in Japan given greater weight. In the previously used Center Test, a major test used for college admissions until 2020, the Japanese language segment was worth 200 points, geography, history and culture were 100 points each, math 200 points, science 200 points and English at 250 points carrying the most power and potential in the overall score (Daigaku Juken o Seikou Saseru Juku Erabi Gaidobukku, n.d.). While this is not the same in all entrance exams, it is common enough to cause some people to complain much like our original Yahoo post such as pas***** (2011), another post on Yahoo who asks *naze, daigaku nyūshi de eigo no haiten ga takai no desu ka? kokugo no chikara ga otoroete iru shi, kokugo no hō ga jūyō da to omou no desu ga, naze deshō* ('Why are English scores counted so high in university entrance exams? The Japanese language is losing strength and I think it should be counted higher. I wonder what's behind this').

Regarding the idea that there is little need for English in Japan, one common reason is a tendency to assume that human beings have a limited ability with language based on the monolingual model. Such voices often assume that to learn English will lead to either subtractive bilingualism or the death of culture as they know it. These are the same concerns which have plagued bilingual programs for years (Krashen, 2001).

Similar arguments against studying abroad and learning too much English can also often be found on many job hunting sites in Japan. One example of this is an article titled *Eigo baka wa NG! Kikokushijo/ryūgakusei ga shūshoku katsudō de ochiirigachi na yottsu no wana* ('Don't be an English idiot! Four traps that returnees/exchange students fall into when job hunting') (Gaishishukatsu.com, 2017). This website attempts to warn graduates who have studied abroad at some point, using two different terms *kikokushijo* ('returnee') and *ryūgakusei* ('exchange student'), of four concerns: only selling yourself to potential employers with your English ability, not being able to have smooth group interactions in Japan, getting frustrated with the Japanese job hunting process, and limiting yourself to foreign companies. The first clearly relates to English language ability but the remaining three are arguably more relevant to one's level of Japanese culture. While not focusing on only one skill, in this case English, makes sense, articles like this often go out of their way to remind that Japanese companies are not looking for English ability primarily.

2.4 EFL + α : English as a marker of general communication ability and intelligence

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, for decades, the government of Japan has struggled to improve its overall English scores and ability. Previous research has demonstrated how Japan ranks surprisingly low in English ability when compared to how well their education system is normally perceived (Gottlieb, 2008, p. 146; Seargeant, 2009, p. 3). In its attempt to correct this in the 1990s, MEXT worked hard to promote the learning and use of English in Japan under the umbrella of internationalization or *kokusaika* (Kubota, 1998). In recent times, this emphasis continues under a new umbrella term and concept, as *gurōbaru jinzai* ('global human resources') which was introduced with slogans such as competition ('*kyōsō*'), battle strategy ('*senryaku*') between a nation and nation ('*kuni to kuni*') and Japan as a whole ('*ōru Japan*') (Kitano, 2020: 200). As reflected in the slogans, being competent in English is associated with being competitive and tactful.

The phrase *gurōbaru jinzai* is often used to refer to the idea of developing citizens who can compete in the global market. It has been utilized by MEXT in conjunction with Japan's Ministry of Economy,

Trade and Industry with the hopes of improving and maintaining the economic power and status of Japan especially in light of the increased success of Japan's neighbors, South Korea and China (Yonezawa, 2014). Based on the reports of the Prime Minister's council on developing these global human resources, it is clear that both education reform and specifically a focus on functional English remains a verbally stated official goal of the government (Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development, 2011).

In these government documents, English becomes synonymous with general communication ability and increased numbers of Japanese students studying abroad. The council individually designates three important areas to focus on which will lead to Japan's development of *gurōbaru jinzai*: 1) elementary and secondary education/study abroad, 2) university education and the entrance exams for Japanese universities, and 3) placing such *gurōbaru jinzai* within Japanese companies. The section of the council's interim report dealing with the first of these important areas is titled *kōkō ryūgaku no sokushinto shotō chūtō kyōuiku no shokadai ni tsuite* ('Issues in primary and secondary education such as promotion of high school study abroad'), emphasizing the idea of studying abroad as key towards the ministry's plans for education. Their explanation of these issues states clearly that English ability is seen as related to studying abroad at the primary and secondary levels: *gurōbaru jinzai no ikusei to no kankei de wa, toku ni shōchūkō o tsūjita eigo•komyunikēshon nōryoku no ikusei, kōkō ryūgakutou no sokushin, kyōin no shishitsu nōryoku no kōjōtō ga motomerareru* ('In relation to the development of global human resources, there is a particular need to develop English•communication skills in elementary, junior high, and high schools, promote study abroad programs in high schools, and improve the qualifications and abilities of teachers') (p. 10). In this case, the use of the *nakaguro*, or the interpunct dot, between English and communication skills, while separating the two phrases as distinct also serves to lump them together. As you can see in Figure 1, this happens several times within the document, even within the same page making this use of the phrase *eigo•komyunikēshon nōryoku* ('English/communication skills') similar to an English slash term indicating that the two terms are used interchangeably.

Figure 1.

English/Communication Skills usage

3. 高校留学の促進等の初等中等教育の諸課題について

○初等中等教育段階では、基礎的な学力・体力・対人関係力等をしっかりと身につけさせることが重要である。グローバル人材の育成との関係では、特に、小中高を通じた英語・コミュニケーション能力の育成、高校留学等の促進、教員の資質・能力の向上等が求められる。

○前述のように、①②③レベルのグローバル人材の裾野の拡大は着実に進捗しつつあると考えられるが、今後は更に、④⑤レベルを意識して、その潜在的候補者層を厚くすることにも注力すべきである。

(1) 英語・コミュニケーション能力等の育成、異文化体験の機会の充実

○小中高を通じた英語・コミュニケーション能力等の育成を図るとともに、児童・生徒の国内外における異文化体験の機会を充実させることが重要である。

In addition to conflating English with general communication skills, English is also often used as a

measure of general academic ability rather than just language usage or acquisition. Conversations about this are not common on typical English learning sites or in education forums. Similarly, it is not often debated directly in research on English in Japan (Furukawa, 2014). Occasionally in blogs relating to language in Japanese you see people discussing it in posts with titles like *Eigo no shūtoku ni atama no yoshiashi wa kankei nai kedo, eigo ga dekiru to atama ga yosasō ni miete toku da yo* ('It doesn't matter if you're smart or not in learning English, but if you can speak English, you'll benefit from looking smart.') (Suke, 2019) or "*Atama no yosa wa kankei nai*" *Eigo gakushū no seikō shippai ni chinōshisū tte kankei aru? no ketsuron* ('The conclusion regarding whether smartness matters: What does your IQ have to do with success or failure in learning English') (Kurosaka, 2019).

In addition to blogs arguing against this idea that English is a sign of intelligence in Japan, you can also find those that support it. One particular vlogger, Masanori Koide supports this idea in detail in the following extract in Japanese (followed by an English translation):

受験英語を勉強すると『頭がよくなる』からです。

このままでは分かりにくいと思いますので、次のように言いかえます。英語の配点が高いのは、「受験生の『頭の良さ』と『まじめさ』を調べるテスト科目として、現状では英語がベストだから」です。つまり大学側は「頭が良く」「まじめな」学生に入学して欲しいと思っていて、それを調べるために英語の試験を課し、その配点を高くしているのです。

※ここでいう「頭の良さ」とは、大学で専門的な領域を学ぶために必要な「知の力」のことで、「知能」「記憶力」「論理的思考力」「判断力」「処理能力」「未知の事を学習する能力」などを総合したものだと（僕が勝手に）定義しておきます。また、大学で行われるような研究では、学問にまじめに取り組む姿勢が重要になってくるので、入試で「まじめさ」も測られるのです。

(English translation)

Because studying English for exams “makes you smarter”.

Just leaving it like that might be hard to understand so I've rephrased it as follows. “The reason why the score for the English test is counted so high is that English is currently the best test subject for examining the ‘intelligence’ and ‘seriousness’ of students.” In other words, universities want students who are “smart” and “serious” to enter the university, so they give them the English test and give it a high score in order to find out.

*The term “intelligence” here refers to the “intellectual ability” required to study specialized fields at universities, which I will define (on my own) as a synthesis of “intelligence,” “memory,” “logical thinking,” “judgment,” “processing ability,” and “ability to learn new things.” In addition, “seriousness” is also measured in the entrance examinations, since a serious attitude toward academics is important in the kind of research conducted at universities.

In response to the general question of why English tests are counted so highly for college entrance exams, Koide states that it is because studying English makes students smarter. He intentionally uses the phrase *juken eigo* ('exam English'); this refers to the kind of English studied in typical academic English classrooms, where lessons are based largely on the grammar translation method in Japan. This classroom English is typically contrasted with a more conversational type of English which, while understood as having real world practical use, is still often seen as inappropriate for academic purposes. Koide claims that English is the best test subject for measuring the intelligence and seriousness of students, further explaining that these two qualities are the ones that universities are looking for most in students and so therefore, testing their exam English ability allows universities to sort through students to find the most academically desirable ones. For Koide, the term intelligence (*atama no yosa*) refers to a definite intellectual ability that allows one to study specialized fields in university which he describes as a combination of intelligence, memory, logical thinking, judgment, processing ability, and the ability to

learn new things. He then explains that the test also measures seriousness which he states is necessary to do university level research.

3 Conclusion

We began this article with a summary of the state of English use in Japan and examined in detail three specific perspectives of English in Japan: English as an assumed necessity, English as unnecessary and overvalued, and English as a marker of general communication ability and intelligence. We aimed to illustrate that just as the state of English in Japan is complex (e.g., not only a foreign language, but also incorporated in Japanese through *katakana*), so are the various attitudes towards English as shown from a wide range of sources (i.e., an online chat board, a Japanese education researcher, job hunting sites, official government policy documents, and a vlog). Furthermore, in our own attempt as scholars to make sense of the roles and attitudes towards English in Japan, we introduced and applied the idea of “EFL + α ”, with “EFL” representing the way English is perceived as a foreign language in Japan and “+ α ” representing the ways English is more than a foreign language in Japan.

One might imagine that for Japanese students taking the required English curriculum at school or the Japanese government crafting new policies for English education, any engagement with the subject of “EFL” simultaneously triggers an engagement with the ideologies of “+ α ”. At the same time, engaging with the ideologies of “+ α ” also sets certain expectations and precedents for future engagements with “EFL”. In this sense, “EFL + α ” as a concept can describe the way the state of English and the attitudes towards English in Japan are intertwined, with implications for not only what English *is* in Japan but also what people *do with* and *think about* English in Japan. This is in line with Park (2021), who argues for understanding “Konglish” (i.e., a pejorative term used to refer to English used by Koreans) not as a description for a linguistic variety (i.e., what Koreans are speaking), but as a cultural practice (i.e., what Koreans are doing). Similarly, we see the term “EFL + α ” as an attempt to balance current understandings of English use in Japan by recognizing the linguistic elements of English use (e.g., *katakana*) as well as highlighting the cultural practice of English use in Japan (e.g., what should be done with English).

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