

Japanese University Students' Perceptions of Asia: Grounds for an English as a Lingua Franca Approach

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Abstract

This study explores Japanese university students' perceptions of Asia and examines the implications for adopting an English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) approach in Japan's English education. The research is motivated by Japan's ongoing challenges in English proficiency and the potential advantages of an ELF methodology, which prioritizes mutual intelligibility over native-like accuracy. The study is contextualized within Japan's emerging multicultural environment due to increased immigration from Asia, tourism, and international student exchange programs. A survey of 121 second-year university students at Kyushu Sangyo University was conducted to assess their interest in traveling to Asia, cultural preferences, economic awareness of Asia's ties to Japan, and attitudes toward learning Asian languages. Key findings reveal that only 27% of students had visited an Asian country, and the majority expressed a preference for Western cultures. Additionally, most students overestimated the economic influence of Western countries on Japan while underestimating the significance of Asian nations. Other than English, Korean was the most popular language to learn among students, with 41 expressing interest in learning it. These findings suggest that Japanese students harbor a Western-centric worldview and limited interest in Asian culture, which may hinder the adoption of ELF-based communication strategies. The study concludes by advocating for integrating ELF principles into Japan's English education to align with the nation's shifting demographic and economic realities.

本研究では、日本の大学生のアジアに対する認識を探索し、日本の英語教育に英語を共通語（ELF）として用いるアプローチを採用する意義を検証している。英語能力の向上という日本の継続的な課題と、ネイティブスピーカー並みの正確さよりも相互理解を優先する ELF（共通語）アプローチの潜在的な利点を検討。近年における国際化、アジアからの移民の増加、ア

アジアからの観光客、留学生交換プログラムなど、日本における多文化環境の変化を背景に、効果的な異文化コミュニケーションの必要性を強調している。九州産業大学の2年生121名を対象に、アジアへの旅行への関心、文化的な好み、アジアと日本の経済的なつながりに対する認識、アジアの言語を学ぶことに対する姿勢を評価するための調査を実施した。調査は、自由回答形式と選択回答形式の両方の質問で構成され、学年度中に複数回実施。主な調査結果は、アジア諸国を訪れたことがある学生はわずか27%であり、外国文化に触れる際に好む文化として、大多数の学生が西洋文化を挙げた。また、ほとんどの学生が、西洋諸国の日本経済への影響を過大評価する一方で、アジア諸国の重要性を過小評価していることが明らかとなった。英語以外で学生が学んでいる言語として最も人気があるのは韓国語で、41人が学習に興味を示しているが、2番目に人気があるのはフランス語で、西洋文化への強い関心を反映している。これらの調査結果は、日本の学生が欧米中心の世界観を抱き、アジア文化への関心が限定的であることを示しており、ELFに基づくコミュニケーション戦略の採用を妨げる可能性を示唆している。この研究は、日本の英語教育にELFの原則を導入し、変化する人口動態と経済状況に適応させ、学生の異文化に対する意識と言語適応力を育成することを提唱して結論づけている。

Background

Masaki Oda (2020) notes one of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT) 2014 goals was that “Japan had to compete against other Asian countries in order to achieve “top-level English proficiency” without any reason other than globalization and “MEXT singles out English as the crucial language for Japan’s future, while not talking about any other languages” (p.307). Has this goal been achieved? In as recent as an April 2024 article in *The Asahi Shimbun* the government’s new curriculum for teaching English has been called a ‘big failure’ according to junior high school teachers, cram schoolteachers, and university professors. From a survey of 107 junior high school teachers and 440 cram schoolteachers, the main response was that there was too much material in the new curriculum. Teachers said that there was too much content, vocabulary, and grammar and that assessment and entrance exams have gotten more difficult as well (Uematsu et al., 2024). It is hard to argue with these teachers’ concerning assessment of Japan’s English approach seeing that Japan got the third worst TOEFL score in 2023 in Asia only beating out Laos and Tajikistan (*TOEFL IBT*®, 2023). This researcher thinks that maybe a shift to an approach less focused on adhering to strict native like grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation would help Japan improve its English performance. English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) is one such approach that would fit Japan quite well seeing that it has already been

applied to close a neighbor in Asia, Singapore, with very successful results. Singapore ranked number 3 in the world, very high proficiency, on Education First's English Proficiency Index while Japan ranked 92, low proficiency (SoraNews24, 2024). One way Singapore has achieved these results is by implementing an English as a Lingua Franca approach (SG101, 2015).

Japan is in the expanding circle in Braj Kachru's (2015) "Three Circles of English" model with an inner circle (native speakers), an outer circle (English as a second language speakers), and an expanding circle (English as a foreign language speakers). ELF is when English is used to communicate between two speakers who are not Native English speakers (Jenkins, 2000). This means "English being used as a lingua franca, the common language of choice, among speakers who come from different linguacultural backgrounds" (Jenkins, 2009. p.200). Because English is the global means of communication this type of interaction happens particularly often and is relevant to Japan's future. Speaking of a typical ELF interaction Jenkins (2009) says, "in practice this often means English being used among non-native English speakers from the Expanding Circle" (p.201). An ELF interaction includes "shared communication strategies, a collaborative disposition, and the deployment of linguistic resources shaped by similar Englishing experiences" (Hall, 2018. p.79). "ELF speakers are typically strongly oriented towards achieving mutual international intelligibility as they are very much aware of and prepared for the asymmetries that diversity poses among the speakers" (Sanako, 2021, para. 3). The emphasis on sharing and collaborative communication could be a welcomed change to Japan's current English educational approach of mimicking native speakers which is a recipe for failure if you judge them by their current English proficiency. Those linguistic resources also include "multilingual practices" (Cogo, 2018. p.363). Multilingual practices mean using other languages' words while using English. Singapore has its English-based Creole language Singlish and Japan has one too, Janglish. However, the difference is that Singapore has embraced its creole (SG101, 2015). Japan should take this approach as well. "Japanese should discard their deep-rooted native-speakerism, should use their own grammatically and communicatively acceptable English, making use of their linguacultural repertoire rather than being copycats of "native speakers", and should never be intimidated by Native Speakers" (Yano, 2020. p.320). Japan has long toiled away using the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) approach that emphasizes Native like fluency only to produce underwhelming results. Why not give ELF a chance where the language learning goal is mutual intelligibility among non-native speakers? As opposed to

imitating native speakers as Jennifer Jenkins' (2000) "The Phonology of English as an International Language" suggests. About the English as a Foreign Language approach, which focuses on Native English, Graddol (2006) says "although EFL has become technologized and has been transformed over the years by communicative methods, these have led only to a modest improvement in attainment by learners" (p.83). Japanese English speakers will in all probability be speaking to non-native speakers because just like the rest of the world David Crystal (2003) calculated that, as far back as 2003, non-native speakers outnumbered native speakers by a ratio of 3 to 1. Japan's current immigration situation will show that non-native English speakers inside the country extremely outnumber native English speakers by far.

The current immigration situation in Japan is ripe for an ELF approach considering that the government has made a historical immigration policy adjustment, permitting an additional 800,000 foreign workers from Asian countries to enter the country over the next five years (Kyodo News, 2024). The workers will come from the Philippines, Vietnam, China, Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Nepal, and Mongolia. According to the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare, the current foreign workforce in Japan reached a historic high of 2 million individuals, predominantly comprising of Vietnamese, Chinese, and Filipino nationals (Zandt, 2024). There has also been a record-breaking influx of overseas tourist visits to Japan with Korea, China, and Taiwan being the top 3 places of origin (JTB Tourism Research & Consulting Co. 2025). Japan's government's future education panel has also unveiled a plan to get 400,000 international students into the country by the year 2033 (Hogan, 2024).

It seems that Japan's future is one of a budding Asian multicultural society, like Singapore, that could use English as a lingua franca to communicate inside the country. Also, it is already being used as a lingua franca by Japanese companies outside of the country as well. Sampson (2017) found in a survey of 450 Japanese companies that occupational English use was mostly with non-native developing countries. Japanese students' future looks to be filled with interactions with many different Asian ethnicities within their own country and outside of it during their careers. They should be learning about what it is like interacting with other Asian non-native English speakers as opposed to what has been up until now an utter failure of impossibly mimicking native-like speech patterns in hopes of one day interacting with a native speaker. This idea has been present in Japan for much longer than one thinks. Nobuyuki Hino (2020) in "English as a Lingua Franca in Japan" presents the historical context for Japan being ripe for the introduction of ELF educational practices. He

introduces two popular writers from the 1970s that wrote about the internationalization of English, how it was essential for Japan to learn a de-Anglo-Americanized English and the legitimacy of Japanese English. This awareness of English internationalization characterized by Hino (2020) means that “Japan could be quite open to the idea of ELF with the spirit of post-native-speakerism which delivers language users from native-speaker norms” and “it should be relatively easy for Japan to embrace the concept of ELF” (p.31). Hino also points out that Japan’s orientation towards indigenization and eclecticism are values that can only help ELF education in the Japanese context. In that context how do Japanese university students react to ELF? Yoko Nogami (2020) found in earlier research that “an ELF context fostered students with a positive sense of self as an ELF user and reduced a sense of a failed ESL learner and demonstrated that previously accuracy-dependent students changed to more intelligibility-oriented” (p.176). This is an example of an ELF context changing a student’s self-identity. Mayu Konakahara (2020) taught courses on ELF-related academic content to Japanese university students about the “numerical significance of non-native English speakers, fuzzy definitions of native English speakers and English of native speakers, varieties of English, the problematic nature of native-speakerism, and pragmatic strategies used in ELF communication, all of which the majority of the students were unaware of” (p.202). After this instruction, these students “understood the sociolinguistic reality of English and English communication as well as the problematic nature of native-speakerism, they expressed the importance of acknowledging diversity in English and valuing mutual intelligibility through accommodation rather than correctness that they had consciously or subconsciously clung to” (Konakahara, 2020. p.201-202). Japanese students when presented with the ELF realities of the world and English can embrace ELF as an English education methodology.

But are they ready for these interactions? America’s overwhelming cultural influence in Japan can even be tied to its motivation to learn English. Kobayashi (2025) found that desire “for the West increases young and mature Japanese women's willingness to spend time in (re)studying English, especially among beginner-level learners and mature women burdened with household chores” (p.183). America’s influence is overwhelming and Japanese students often picture themselves interacting with Western native speakers rather than Asian non-native speakers. This phenomenon has been observed by surveying students’ ideas of an English-using future self where Sampson (2017) found that Japanese students often thought their future English-speaking self would be interacting with native speakers and

that activities exposing them to the reality, that they would be interacting in English with other non-native speakers, were necessary. Although America is starting to receive some competition because “Korean culture has now become an integral part of Japanese daily life” (Pyo Kyung-min, 2023, para. 12). Do the Japanese feel a connection to this other Asian culture? Murphy (2016) found that in Japan, “in everyday speech, Ajia (“Asia”) means Asia-ex Japan; the Western visitor to Japan can be startled when a Japanese acquaintance announces he or she has never been to Ajia. Maybe this could be explained by Japan being an island nation that is a part of Asia, never being conquered, and for the most part staying relatively ethnically homogeneous” (p.376). However, it has been observed (Kato, 2022) that when Japanese people leave their country and encounter other Asians abroad, they experience an epiphany, have deep emotion for Asia and actively identify as Asians. Maybe they will experience this epiphany when they begin to have ELF interactions with the many Asians inside their own country. What are their current attitudes towards Asians and Asia? This is important because this researcher speculates that Japanese students have a lower interest in Asian culture than Western culture, have an overinflated sense of the West’s economic importance to Japan compared to Asia, and have a low interest in other Asian languages. Successful ELF interaction is characterized by collaboration and multilingualism. Therefore, it is essential for Japanese students to be interested in and have a positive attitude toward the people they will be interacting with and to learn about their culture and language to a degree.

Aims

The general aim of this research is to explore Japanese university students' attitudes towards going to Asia, interest in Asian culture, economic awareness of ties between Japan and Asian countries, and preferences for learning Asian languages. This researcher hypothesizes that Japanese students don't have much interest in going to Asia, have a low interest in Asian cultures, don't realize the economic ties Japan has with Asia, and aren't interested in Asian languages. Accordingly, the research questions are as follows:

- To what degree do Japanese university students have an interest in going to Asia?
- To what degree do Japanese students exhibit a higher interest in Western culture compared to Asian culture?

- To what degree do Japanese students recognize the economic significance of Japan's relations with Asia?
- To what degree do Japanese students have a reluctance to learn Asian languages?

These aims are in pursuit of knowing the gap and corresponding bridge building that needs to be accomplished to connect Japanese students with their Asian counterparts to create a fertile breeding ground for an ELF explosion of interaction. The research hopes to answer these questions and suggest that Japan drop its obsession with the West, adopt more interest in Asia, and take an ELF approach to English language learning to take advantage of its incoming demographic reality.

Sampling and Methods

Students from five different classes from Kyushu Sangyo University were surveyed at different times during the year. Participants in the study came from 121 second-year students who were both A1 and A2 level of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference of Languages (CEFR). The number of participants differed from question to question on the survey because each question was given at different times during the school year.

The researcher wanted to explore the opinions of university students, so a survey was chosen for data collection seeing that it is appropriate for investigating a specific group's perceptions. The items for the survey were mostly open-ended questions with one closed-ended question. The survey consisted of four items that hoped to answer the previously stated research questions.

1. Have you been to Asia?
2. If you could speak to a foreigner about their culture, which country would you choose? List your top 3.
3. Which country's economy has the most effect on Japan?
4. What language, other than English, would you like to learn? Have you ever studied it?

Analysis

When asked “Have you ever been to Asia?” only 38 students answered yes and 83 answered no. Out of the students who answered yes: 17 only answered yes, 15 said the name of other countries, and five said “Japan”. When asked “If you could speak to a foreigner about their culture which country would you choose? List your top 3” the number one answer was America, with second France, and third Germany (Table 1). The Western regions totaled 250 dwarfing the 58 responses that Asia as a region received.

Table 1

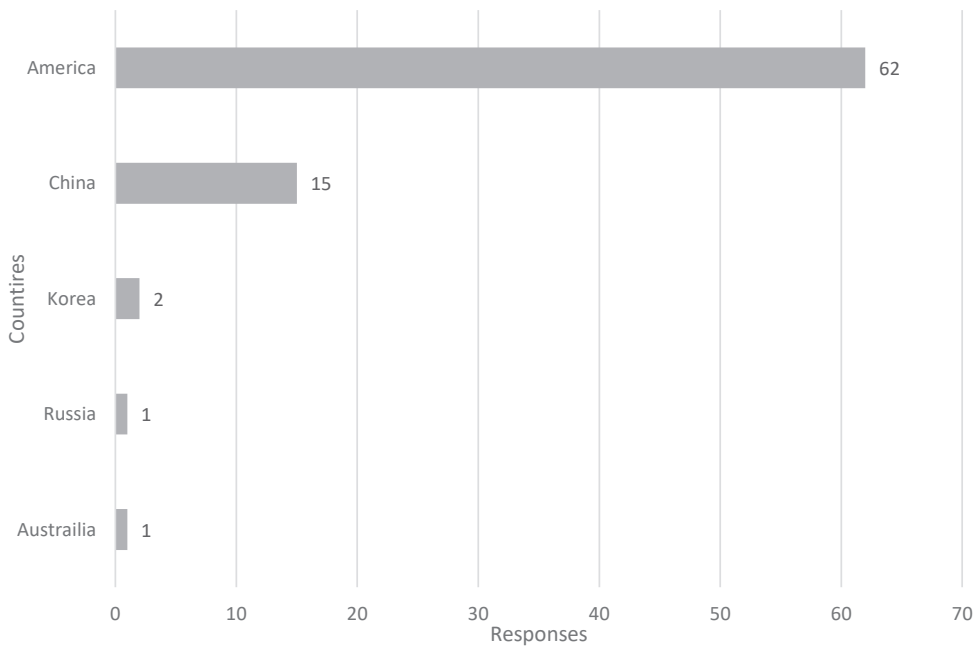
Preferred Countries for Cultural Conversations (N = 105)

Region	Country	Responses
North & South America	America	67
	Canada	10
	Brazil	7
	Chile	1
Europe	France	41
	Germany	25
	Italy	24
	U.K.	22
	Spain	18
	Russia	17
	Greece	5
	Sweden	4
	Switzerland	3
	Holland	3
	Ireland	1
	Poland	1
	Finland	1
	Asia	Korea
Australia		10
India		7
China		7
Singapore		4
Thailand		3
Laos		1
Malaysia		1
Nepal		1
New Zealand		1
Taiwan		1
Philippines		1
Other	Egypt	4
	Africa (unspecified)	3
	Senegal	1
	Iraq	1

When asked “Which country’s economy has the most effect on Japan?” 62 students responded America and only 15 responded China (Figure 1). The one other Asian country to be named was Korea with only two responses.

Figure 1

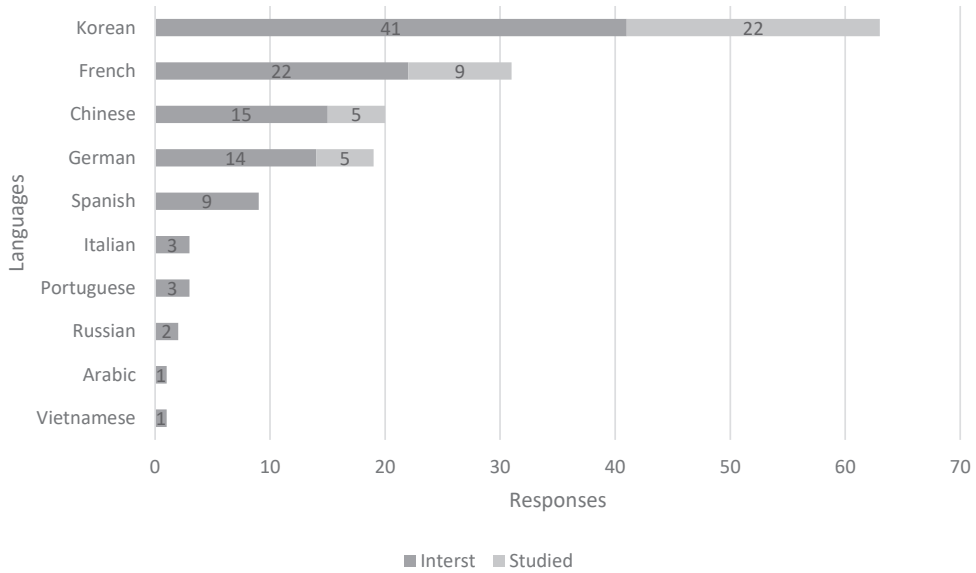
Perceived Economic Influence on Japan (N = 81)



When asked “What language, other than English, would you like to learn? Have you studied it?” 41 students responded Korean with 22 saying they have studied it, and the next most popular answer was 22 students saying French with nine saying they have studied it (Figure 2). Chinese, a language that Japanese shares a writing system with, only had interest from 15 students and only five had studied it.

Figure 2

Languages Other Than English Participants Would Like to Learn (N=111)



Discussion

The first question on the survey was asked to see if they had enough interest in the rest of Asia to travel there. Out of the 121 students 33 (27%) had traveled to a different Asian country and five realized that they were in Asia. This was surprising to me considering the very close proximity to the rest of Asia. From the city where these students live, it's only a 50-minute plane ride to Korea and there are even boat rides there as well. China as well is only a two-hour flight from them. However, considering the weak value of the yen now 27% is a considerable degree of interest. The second question's results concerning Asia were interesting. America came in first with 67 responses, France came in second with 41 responses and Germany came in third with 25 responses. This can be explained historically by Japan's obsession with the West since the Meiji period (1868-1912).

In the mid-nineteenth century, it [Japan] discovered a world that had been turned upside down. The China that had always loomed as the origin of power, culture, and technology in the Japanese conceptual universe had been reduced to a stuck pig being butchered by barbarians from distant lands who turned out not to be barbarians at all but the avatars of modernity...Japan frantically tried to distance itself from its

erstwhile cultural and national kin in order to establish its credentials for membership in this so-called advanced club of nations...the Meiji elite sought to demonstrate- to itself as well as to the West- that it was wholly distinct from weak, pathetic countries like China and Korea. (Murphy, 2016, p.375)

This obsession has continued throughout history from WWII until today.

The adoration and awe to Europeans and Americans, formed 150 years ago and amplified 70 years ago, seem to stay unchanged in the corner of the Japanese minds when they face Caucasians whoever they are. First, blonde and blue-eyed Caucasian models frequently appear in advertisements for products made in Japan by Japanese manufacturers and for Japanese consumers. Reports of tourists visiting Japan in newspapers or on television are with pictures of Caucasians while the majority of them are Chinese, Koreans and other Asians. The media seem to put a higher news value on the Westerners, especially Caucasians, than fellow Asians. (Yano, 2020. p. 315)

What was interesting was that the top Asian country to make it into the ranking was Korea at sixth with only 21 responses, with even Italy and the U.K. ahead of them. K-pop is not just booming in North America. It is hugely popular in Japan with Korean pop stars on Japanese TV all the time. And it doesn't stop there. Korean dramas, fashion, and makeup are hugely popular here.

Korean culture has woven itself seamlessly into Japanese society. Today, young people in Japan often incorporate Korean words into their everyday dialogue. The perceptions of Korea have undergone a positive transformation compared to the past. The influence of Korean culture extends beyond K-dramas or K-pop to Korean cuisine, literature and even Korean classical musicians, marking a broad cultural expansion (Pyo Kyung-min, 2023, para. 13)

Despite all that Korea only came in sixth. The next Asian country in the rankings was China with only seven responses tied for tenth with India and Brazil. China's cultural contributions to Japan include the written language: Kanji, forms of government, religion: Buddhism and Confucianism, and Ramen. I would have thought that the number of responses would have been more considering the background, but one does have to consider Japan and China's modern tension-filled relationship. The third question's answers on other countries' perceived effect on Japan were expected. As a teacher in Japan for the last twenty years, this researcher

foresaw students having an inflated idea of the American economy’s effect in Japan because of its overrepresentation in the country’s media and news stories. Only 15 out of 81 students understood China’s actual influence on Japan’s economy. China alone accounts for more of Japan’s imports and exports compared to America and Japan’s Asian imports and exports also outpace those of their Western counterparts. Table 2 shows the Japan Trade Balance, Exports, Imports by Country and Region 2020 from WITS Data.

Table 2

Japan’s Exports and Imports by Region by Billions of USD\$

Trade Flow	USA	China	Korea	SE Asia	Australia	Germany	Totals
Import Asia	-	164	27	110	-	-	301
Import West	71	-	-	-	36	21	128
Export Asia	-	141	45	88	-	-	274
Export West	119	-	-	-	12	18	149

Question four’s answer was the most promising with Korean with 41 responses being the number one response to which language they would like to learn other than English. 22 students said they have already studied some Korean as well showing not only an interest but motivation and action towards learning about another Asian culture. Chinese came in third with 15 responses but only five students said they had studied the language. What was perplexing about number four’s results was that French came in second with 22 responses and nine students saying they had studied French before. Combine that with number two’s results with France’s culture being second most popular and you could easily argue that French culture has more popularity than most of Asia in the eyes of Japanese University students. This researcher has lived in Japan for the last twenty years, is fluent in Japanese, a professional translator, an avid Japanese TV watcher, and a Japanese newspaper reader and has never seen any significant appearance of French culture in Japanese media, especially when compared to the amount of Asian culture in Japanese media. However, there is a prevalent amount of French luxury items in Japan. “Whatever the political weather, Japan’s love affair for things French has endured with the Japanese seeing France as a source of luxury bags, fine wine and, for some, a proxy for opposition to America” (Expatica France, 2022, para. 1). However, this affinity for Western culture and an emphasis on Native speaker

norms in their English education will not help them with the reality of the impending interactions with other Asians. This failed approach gives Japanese people an opportunity to turn the corner and embrace the idea of being Asian by connecting culturally with other Asians. The easiest way to do this would be by using the current global Lingua franca, listening to their English, interpreting its meaning, and then relaying their meaning in an ELF interaction. This phenomenon has already happened in Singaporean society and has translated into incredibly successful results in their English education. These impending interactions also show a need for a more globalized stripped-down version of English education that emphasizes the more attainable goal of being mutually intelligible instead of focusing on just the grammar and vocabulary of native speakers. This could help provide linguistic motivation and a mutual cultural education to students about the English speakers they're more likely to encounter inside and outside Japan. Japanese students will be increasingly surrounded by Asian immigrants, exchange students, and tourists. Why not capitalize on these multilingual and intercultural interactions by introducing a mutually intelligible type of English that is highly more attainable than native speaker like perfectionism?

Conclusion

This research, even though small in scale, has shown that Japanese university students have some degree of interest in going to other Asian countries, but have a low interest in Asian cultures compared with Western culture, don't realize the economic ties Japan has with Asia, and apart from Korean aren't interested in Asian languages to a high degree. Japanese students are being surrounded by more and more other non-Japanese Asians in Japan day by day. This is shown in the realities of Japan's emerging immigrant labor market (Kyodo News, 2024), the boom of tourism in their country (JTB Tourism Research & Consulting Co., 2025) and Japan's changing university demographics (Hogan, 2024). The failure of their English education approach is shown in their lower to near bottom TOEFL scores compared to the rest of Asia (*TOEFL iBT*®, 2023). Japan has shown no signs of starting to implement side-scale programs for learning other Asian languages. In order to communicate, a solution is staring Japan in the face, to what is happening with immigrants on a macroeconomic level inside of Japan, from the realities of what Japanese university students use their English for in their careers, to what has successfully worked for other Asian countries like Singapore: ELF based English language teaching. This researcher speculates that for Japan to take the first

step towards an ELF approach it must discard its inflated image and interest in Western culture and replace it with an interest in Asian culture and a realization of the economic importance of Asia. Only then can they start to take advantage of the ELF language learning opportunity of their current immigration, foreign student, and tourist situations. This researcher's suggestion is to first inform students of the reality of Japan and the impending actual English interactions they will have. Then, emphasize mutual understanding instead of native-like correctness, practice internationally intelligible pronunciation, and engage in different ELF interactional situations, introducing communication strategies often used by non-native English speakers, such as self-correction, repetition, clarification, conformation checks, and multilingual communication (Sanako, 2021). This researcher already practices these strategies in the classroom and recommends them to other lecturers in the Kyushu Sangyo University LERC department.

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