

# **Long-term English-speaking Residents in Japan: What are the Advantages of Japanese Fluency?**

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## **Abstract**

Japanese as a foreign language has been popular abroad since the 1980s, particularly in the Asia-Pacific Region. Fifty long term residents of Japan whose first language is English were surveyed about the benefits of having learnt Japanese, their sense of acceptance of their use of Japanese in the local community, and whether they considered themselves proficient in the complex honorifics system. They provided a wide-ranging list of benefits, including, a sense of well-being associated with establishing intercultural relationships, and the intellectual stimulation of the regular use of a language very different to their mother tongue.

## **Introduction**

This paper investigates the linguistic experiences of English speakers who are long-term residents of Japan, and explores their use of Japanese as a second language. Issues considered critical for acquisition of Japanese are: a sense that it is beneficial, a sense of acceptance by native speakers, and the ability to use honorifics.

## **Language distance**

Although 'all languages may be equally complex systems' (Cook, 2010, p. 116), meaning no language is intrinsically more difficult than others, the relative distance from the first language may

determine the length of time it takes to learn the new language. Many difficulties of Japanese for English speakers arguably derive from the language distance. Tokuhama-Espinsosa (2008) identified language typology as an important factor in determining the speed of second language acquisition. Furthermore, she cited the ranking provided by the Foreign Service Institute of the U.S. Department of State, in which Japanese appears in Category 4, which means it is one of the languages considered 'exceptionally difficult for native English speakers' (p. 66). Even within this category, Japanese is considered to pose slightly more difficulty than others in the same category. Iwashita (2012) explained that Japanese is more linguistically distant from English, than for example, Korean and Chinese, and Kirkpatrick (1995) included Japanese in the list of languages to be considered particularly difficult for learners whose first language is English, and recommended it only be tackled by students with special aptitude or motivation. Slattery (2009a, 2009b) pointed out that character-based languages such as Japanese, pose special difficulties for native English speakers. Accordingly, learners need to be informed that Japanese is linguistically distant from English, and thus requires a greater investment of time than a cognate, or related language such as French or German.

The extent to which learners of Japanese perceive their efforts to be worthwhile may also be influenced by the role of English as a *Lingua Franca*.

### **English as a *Lingua Franca***

The role of English as a *Lingua Franca* may influence the extent to which learners of Japanese perceive their efforts to be worthwhile. Even in 1873, English was considered to be a language of global importance, and Mori Arinori, the Japanese ambassador in Washington, suggested replacing Japanese with English, claiming:

The march of modern civilization in Japan has already reached the heart of the nation - the English language following it suppresses the use of both Japanese and Chinese. The commercial power of the English speaking race which now rules the world drives our people into some knowledge of their commercial ways and habits. The absolute necessity of mastering the English language is thus forced upon us. (Okubo, cited in Heinrich, 2012, p. 29)

Currently, English appears to be even more necessary in some business circles and has become the in-house language of Japanese companies such as Uniqlo and Rakuten (Asahi Shimbun,

2010). Furthermore, some Japanese universities have started to offer degrees in which the whole course is conducted in English (MEXT, 2015).

The reactions of Japanese people to Caucasians speaking Japanese led Miller (1977) to identify the ‘law of inverse returns’, in which ‘the better you get at the language, the less credit you are given for your accomplishments’ (p. 78).

### **Acceptance in Japanese Society**

Japan has a limited history of English-speaking foreigners being able to communicate in Japanese and many people therefore have low expectations of westerners (Mizutani, 1981; Siegal, 1996). Most English-speaking countries are multicultural, hence having a somewhat weaker connection between ethnicity and language than in Japan. In English-speaking countries it is possible to regularly interact with bilingual speakers from a range of language backgrounds, but this is less common in Japan. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that in English-speaking societies, similarly, the appearance of ‘foreignness’ can alter perceptions of comprehensibility. Rubin (cited in Tannen, 1994) described how American students listening to an English recording of a lecture given by an American woman from Ohio, rated the comprehensibility of their lecturer differently depending on whether they had been shown a picture of a Caucasian or Chinese woman.

Neustupny (1985) explained that an appearance of foreignness influences the language behaviour of Japanese interlocutors: ‘When the base language is Japanese, the factor can assume a high prominence, with a strong version of foreigner talk being applied by Japanese participants irrespective of the competence of the foreign speaker in Japanese’ (p. 48). According to Simon-Maeda (2011), ‘Issues of race and national background significantly impact on an individual’s opportunities to interact with people in the local community that in turn affects the development of one’s L2 [second language] proficiency’ (p. 38). Simon-Maeda described herself as being ‘semiliterate and privileged’ (ibid), and, citing Bourdieu (1991), explained that her cultural capital depended on her ‘existence as a white, western, English-speaking person, and being an inarticulate Japanese speaker was an acceptable state of affairs’ (p. 39). Furthermore, Simon-Maeda explained the stereotypical view of a westerner as ‘someone incapable of mastering Japanese beyond simple greetings and who flagrantly violates Japanese customs’ (p. 41). English speakers in particular are viewed as having ‘the highest degree of foreignness’ (Fairbrother, 2009, p. 147). Komisarof (2012) discussed the conflict which occurs when westerners desire assimilation into Japanese society, but their Japanese interlocutors do not share this expectation, and concluded that this can ‘strain interpersonal relationships’ (p. 226).

One major difference between Japanese and English is in the way they express politeness. Honorific language is widely used in Japan, and is strongly influenced by the relationships between speakers.

### **Honorific language**

*Keigo*, the Japanese honorifics system, reflects the hierarchical relationship between interlocutors and is most commonly expressed in the choice of verb endings. Different verb endings are used depending on the power and distance variables in the relationship. Not only must the English-speaking learner of Japanese learn the various forms of these verbs endings, they must also learn how to use them judiciously because excessive use of the polite register can come across as cold. Conversely, excessive use of the informal register may be seen as being too familiar. Therefore, Simon-Maeda (2011) argued, a cleverly chosen blend of these registers can avoid extremes of coldness or over-familiarity. *Keigo* also has 'unconventional usages' (Okushi, 1998, p. 9) and can be used to express 'criticism, sarcasm and playfulness' (p. 8), demonstrating the complexity of proficient *keigo* usage. Mastery of *keigo* is one of the challenges faced by speakers of languages such as English which do not encode verbs to express differences in power and distance between speakers.

Tomita (1999) claimed it is important for Japanese as a foreign language learners to master *keigo*, in order to 'avoid causing offence' (p. 124), and to develop an understanding of the sociocultural contexts in which *keigo* is required: 'The first and most important thing a foreigner needs to learn is how NOT to be impolite' (ibid).

In contrast, Ishida (2001) argued that English-speakers may be considered to be outsiders in Japanese society, and are therefore expected to confine themselves to the formal *masu* verb ending rather than the informal form. English-speakers often use the formal register in contexts where informal choices would have been appropriate, and Ishida highlighted the cognitive difficulty of juggling both linguistic items and form.

Chen (2000), in a presentation for the Japan Studies Association of Australia, identified differences in etiquette between Australian and Japanese culture, and argued that Japanese etiquette will be followed by Australians except when it is contrary to their cultural norms. Hence, as Tomita (1999) suggested, the sociocultural context is important, but the examples provided by Chen suggest that some of the norms in the respective cultures conflict with each other, and this may pose additional difficulties for English speakers of Japanese. Obana and Tomoda (1994) highlighted differences between what is considered polite behaviour in Australian and Japanese cultures:

Many terms associated with politeness in English language as used by Australians (friendliness, consideration, attentive, approachable, kind) do not have equivalents in the Japanese terms mentioned by the informants. In the Japanese case, 'teineina' and 'reigitadashii' were primarily associated with features of the *keigo* world. This imposes aloof interactions, concern for keeping public face, and formal settings. Thus teineina and reigitadashii offer formal, distanced, unfamiliar and ceremonial features which are quite remote from English language associations with politeness. Sketching this by rule of thumb, politeness in English language is often associated with barrier-breaking features whereas in Japanese language, politeness initially sets up a social barrier. (1994, p. 46)

These cultural differences are clearly reflected in the respective linguistic systems, and the degree to which the politeness systems diverge presents yet another level of complexity for learners of Japanese.

Tateyama (2001) in her study of 27 American learners of Japanese, of whom all but two were native English speakers, explained that learners were unaware of the correct Japanese expressions to express apologies and gratitude, and also that the choice of register was difficult for them. Some were 'unnecessarily polite' (p. 210). Interestingly, Tateyama explained that explicit instruction of Japanese pragmatic norms may have resulted in 'teaching-induced pragmatic hyper-correction' (ibid). Other weaknesses revealed in her study were dysfluent delivery, pronunciation, being overly polite, speaking too abruptly, not being adequately apologetic as a result of not using a hedge, and not using the appropriate sentence-final particle which was appropriate for the register. Again, this study confirmed the complexity of the honorific system, and the multiple potential sources of error.

## **The study**

### *Survey*

The survey, which can be seen in the Appendix, was designed to elicit comments in four areas:

- Which language long-term residents use with their family, colleagues, and office staff
- The benefits of having learnt Japanese
- Their perceived acceptance in Japanese society
- The difficulty of using honorifics

Fluency in a second language can depend on opportunities for its use, which in turn depends on inclusion in the speech community. Given the discussions provided by Simon-Maeda (2011), Fairbrother (2009) and Komsarof (2012), we can hypothesize that expatriates in Japan who are perceived to be English speakers will be considered to be visitors and therefore not expected to be fluent in Japanese. We asked whether the respondents considered themselves to be ‘linguistically integrated’, with the aim of eliciting the degree of belonging and participation they felt as long term residents of Japan.

Also, we anticipated that the system of honorifics known as *keigo* would present difficulties for English speakers, because it expresses social distinctions that are not accorded linguistic importance in their mother tongue. English-speakers may therefore be unwilling or unable to fully adopt its usage.

### *Method*

Teachers who had been in Japan for more than five years and whose first language was English were invited to respond to an online survey. The invitation was sent to colleagues and acquaintances working as English teachers at universities in Japan, and also to a group of foreign women with Japanese partners. Because it consists of long term residents of Japan, who work for Japanese universities and/or have Japanese family members, the sample can be considered representative of the linguistic experience of expatriates who have had adequate exposure to Japanese language and culture.

### *Participants*

Fifty responses were received. The average length of residence in Japan was eighteen years, with a range of seven to forty years (note: one person did not respond to the length of residence question). Table 1 shows the situations in which the respondents used each language.

<b>Interlocutors</b>	<b>Japanese is used</b>	<b>English is used</b>	<b>No. of Responses</b>
Family	37%	63%	49
Colleagues	39%	61%	49
Office Staff	69%	31%	49
Informational exchanges outside the workplace	71%	29%	49

**Table 1: Use of Japanese and English in different contexts**

## **Discussion**

### *Benefits of Speaking Japanese*

Forty-seven of the fifty respondents answered the question asking them to identify the benefits of speaking Japanese. Our prediction that there would be numerous benefits, other than economic, was confirmed. A sample of the respondents' comments are:

### *Social Benefits*

- communicating with children and spouse
- understanding their children's world
- making more friendships possible
- avoiding loneliness
- getting a more friendly response from Japanese people
- being able to put Japanese speakers at ease who might feel uncomfortable if they were expected to speak English
- helping friends
- having an identity as a member of Japanese society
- gaining respect

### *Cognitive Benefits*

- slightly increased grey matter in left parietal cortex
- slightly improved metalinguistic awareness
- slightly improved potential to multi-task as a result of daily code-switching
- understanding mistranslations

### *Independence*

- the independence it gave because of not having to be accompanied by Japanese speakers to conduct important transactions
- independence - especially when visiting a government office or a doctor

### *Functional Benefits*

- increased ease of living in Japan
- increased participation

- access to medical care
- ease of shopping
- catching public transport
- ordering in restaurants and bars

#### *Access to Information and Culture*

- at least partly understanding the news on television
- enjoying Japanese culture through films and books
- appreciation of humour and cultural nuance
- being able to follow directions on packages
- being able to understand signs (road signs, product labels, supermarket aisle signs, etc.)

#### *Pleasure*

- liking Japan more
- fun

#### *Professional Benefits*

- giving students explanations in Japanese
- being able to understand the students' point of view when teaching a second language
- understanding students' English when it is incorrect
- smoother classroom management
- job responsibilities
- reading specialized materials

#### *Having a Broader World View*

- insights into both Japanese and one's own culture
- hearing a wider range of opinions on any topic
- seeing the world in completely new way

#### *Economic Benefits*

- using Japanese in job interviews
- increased work opportunities in Japan
- obtaining tenure at university



- more money
- better employment opportunities ('I had to take a qualifying exam to get hired at the juku I work at.')

One reason often given for the global expansion of the study of Asian languages is the competitive advantage that is presumed to derive from the resulting linguistic proficiency (see Gil, 2010), and in Australia, nearly twenty years ago Asian languages were identified by the Rudd Report as having priority for reasons which were 'entirely economic' (Kirkpatrick, 1995). Nevertheless, for the expatriates surveyed in this study, the non-economic benefits vastly outweigh the economic ones. This does not necessarily imply that the economic benefits are unimportant; they may have just been taken for granted. Also, respondents were not randomly selected, they participated on a voluntary basis and therefore our sample may not be representative of the wider community of English-speakers' in Japan. Furthermore, the responses may have been different if the respondents had included business people.

Nevertheless, the responses indicate a myriad of benefits associated with learning Japanese. The greatest range of benefits belongs to the 'social' category, and integration or acceptance in Japanese society was an important issue we wanted to explore.

### *Acceptance in Japanese Society*

The question 'Do you feel you are linguistically integrated?' aimed to elicit a sense of the respondents' language-integration into Japanese society. Sixteen indicated 'yes', twenty-one 'no', and thirteen were ambivalent.

Of the sixteen who indicated they felt linguistically integrated, the following additional comments were provided:

- Pretty well. I'm comfortable in Japanese in most contexts.
- Linguistically, yes.
- Yes, definitely.
- Mostly yes. I can talk about most things with my neighbours.

Of the twenty-one who did not feel linguistically integrated, they added:

- No. Have no 'Japanese' Japanese friends. Only international type Japanese friends.
- Not really. If your Japanese isn't perfect people treat you like a child.

- No. It is a source of frustration that many of the things I want to do require linguistic skills which I do not possess. Everyday things like buying fertilizer for the lawn or a gate for the driveway.
- No, but it is my responsibility and my fault in most ways.

### *Ambivalent responses*

Comments from the thirteen who indicated a sense of partial linguistic integration were:

- In face-to-face spoken interactions, yes [I am integrated]. I have trouble with people speaking too fast on the telephone and with written material.
- Not quite perfectly. Some people shy away. But I have been *hancho* [leader] in the neighbourhood association twice.
- Fairly well, but if you get into a deep discussion with me I may get lost.
- I survive at a high level, but I am not fluent enough in reading and writing to handle the myriad demands related to my children's education so these end up with my wife and I end up rather outside of things in my community.
- Sometimes depending on the context. With family, yes. With co-workers often, but sometimes it's a barrier or I feel excluded because I only get one chance to explain myself and they move on.
- Somewhat. When I meet newcomers who are Japanese, they often are at a loss how to start talking with me so I usually take the initiative by using Japanese. I live in an area where there are few non-Japanese users, so I have found little difficulty linguistically integrating.
- I can talk to people I need to, say what I need to say, and understand what they say back. I do not strive for anything more than that. I'm not interested in 'becoming Japanese' .... I think that foreigners who think that's even a possibility are delusional. ... I will always be a foreigner here, and I don't mind.

Similar to the findings of Miller (1977), Fairbrother (2009), Simon-Maeda (2011) and Komisarof (2012), many respondents indicated a lack of a sense of linguistic integration into the community. This question elicited a range of important responses, such as the experience of being linguistically integrated in some spheres but not others. Others expressed the distinction between feeling linguistically and culturally integrated; the response 'linguistically, yes' implies that the respondent felt integrated in a linguistic sense but that this did not extend to a cultural sense. Another indicated

that linguistic integration was not a goal they aspired to, and that they were content with their outsider position as a foreigner.

This lack of acceptance may be due to the difficulties of attaining a high level of proficiency in a language which is so distant from English. It could also be due to the status of English as an international language, in which English enjoys a favourable position in Japanese society and expectations of native English speakers are low. It could also be due to the appearance of foreignness, which prompts interlocutors to communicate in English.

### *Difficulty of Honorifics*

All fifty responded to the questions about honorifics: ‘Are you confident in your use of *keigo*? Do you consistently use it when required?’ but, only eleven responded in the affirmative. The negative responses confirm Chen’s (2000) argument of expatriates conforming to Japanese etiquette except when it conflicts with their cultural norms. The respondents lack of confidence in their use of *keigo* suggests that this is a case where Japanese and English-speaking cultures differ. The deference required when communicating in Japanese is absent from English speaking society, and therefore English speakers may be unable or perhaps unwilling to apply the rules of *keigo*.

Here are some of the responses regarding confidence in using *keigo*:

- No, I’m not [confident]. I can’t use it consistently, and frequently request it not be used so there will not be mistaken understanding (particularly on the telephone).
- No if it is in a difficult discussion with a bureaucrat on the other half of the conversation.
- So-so. Sometimes my daughter says that I speak too formally in informal situations. In meetings at univ [*sic*], I feel that while some words are appropriate, there are still many that I understand yet have not brought into my own usage.
- I have a good handle on the little set phrases one uses in business communications. That’s enough.
- No. I try to avoid it but use it from time to time.

Tomita (1999) described the offence caused by failure to use *keigo*, and Tateyama (2001) indicated the discomfort caused by excessive politeness. These distinctions are not helped by transfer from English and the responses here indicate the complexity of learning and applying an unfamiliar politeness system.

## Conclusion

The listed benefits of learning Japanese were wide-ranging, encompassing a sense of well-being due to the increased possibility of establishing relationships with people who have a different world view, the intellectual stimulation of the regular use of a contrasting language to their L1, having access to texts in another language, and carrying out daily activities in Japan. There were some economic gains, and for some, there were definite career benefits from knowledge of Japanese.

Less than a third of the respondents reported that they felt linguistically integrated in the Japanese community, and many indicated that the honorifics system posed particular difficulties. Although many said they have achieved adequate proficiency to participate in the wider community, very few claimed to have mastered the intricate honorifics system. This is arguably because it would require a replacement of the values of their first language English-culture with Japanese-culture in which hierarchical relationships are consistently expressed.

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## Appendix

### *Questionnaire for long term, background English-speaking residents of Japan*

1. How many years have you lived in Japan?
2. What language do you mainly speak with your family?
3. What language do you mainly speak with your colleagues?
4. What language do you mainly speak with the office workers?
5. What language do you mainly speak in informational exchanges outside of the workplace?
6. Are you confident in your use of *keigo* [honorifics]? Do you consistently use it when required?
7. Do you think Japanese word order and particles are difficult for English speakers to master?  
Why or why not?
8. Do you feel you are linguistically integrated into the local Japanese community?
9. List as many advantages as you can think of concerning having learnt Japanese.
10. How would you assess your achievement in Japanese in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing?