

# Native Speaker Myths: What Pre-School Students' Parents Think about English Education in Japan

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本論文では、幼稚園児を子供に持つ親を対象に、『理想的な英語教育者』とはどういう者を指すのかについて行なったアンケート結果の一部を紹介する。英語教育の世界ではEnglish as a Lingua Franca (ELF)の考え方が推奨され、それぞれの国の特徴を持った英語の存在が認められつつある。この考え方を維持すれば、日本英語は認められるべきであるが、幼稚園児を子供に持つ親はこの考え方を支持するのであろうか。それとも、やはり英語母語話者の話し方をゴールとし、英語母語話者に教わりたいと考えているのであろうか。以上の点を中心に『理想的な英語教育者』につき、考察をする。

## Introduction

In Japan, there have been many movements related to English education. From April 2011, English was introduced in elementary schools and from April 2013, English classes in high schools throughout Japan will be taught primarily in English. These movements have caused many lively discussions related to the effects of introducing English at an early stage as well as teaching English in English these days.

Currently, there are more non-native speakers (NNSs) of English than native speakers (NSs) all over the world. Some of the NNSs use English as a second language, others such as Japanese people use English as a foreign language. Moreover, the ideas of English as an International Language (EIL) and/or World Englishes (WE) are gaining popularity and being debated in the English academic world; however, how do the general public, such as parents who have their children in pre-schools, regard the “ideal teachers of English”?

From the research of both Canagarajah (1999) and McKay (2002), we can safely assume that nowadays 80 percent of English language teaching professionals worldwide are bilingual users of English. According to Carter (2003), 80 percent of NNS do not necessarily follow the Anglo-American way of language use. In addition, Cook (2003) points out that just being a NS does not guarantee proficiency in writing, rich vocabulary, range of styles, and ability of cross-cultural communication.

English is now used all over the world, and there have been various terms which describe the status-quo of English, including EIL (Smith, 1976), English as a Global Language (Crystal, 2003), and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (Jenkins, 2003). Unlike the traditional view of English as a language which only belongs to NSs of English, these ideas involve NNSs interacting in English both with NSs and other NNSs.

## Research Questions

The study was to find answers to the following questions:

- 1- Does the gender of the parents of children in pre-schools affect the ideas of English education?
- 2- Does the language proficiency of the parents of children in pre-schools affect the ideas of English education?
- 3- Does the “NS myth” still exist i.e., how many of the parents believe that NSs are better instructors compared to Japanese teachers of English?
  - 3.1- If they think NSs are better, what kinds of qualifications do they expect the teachers to have?
  - 3.2- If they think Japanese teachers are better, what kinds of qualifications do they expect the teachers to have?

## Methodology

Participants of the study included 448 persons (198 males and 250 females). The author visited two pre-schools (one in Tokyo; the other one in Saitama) and talked to most of the homeroom teachers about the research purposes of the questionnaire (see the Appendix). There, the author distributed a questionnaire and interviewed some of the parents. Later, in a PTA meeting the questionnaire was distributed to the participants to affirm their views towards the English teachers and education. Since most of the participants were Japanese people, the instructions and questionnaire were given in Japanese. In addition, the author took the respondents' English proficiency into consideration<sup>1</sup>.

After the author evaluated the data closely, the author found the following: Tables 1-1 and 1-2 below indicate the number of respondents who wrote their ideal teachers of English for their children.

**Table 1-1 Male parents' opinions of their ideal teachers of English**

Japanese	11% (21)
NS	87% (172)
Both	2% (5)

**Table 1-2 Female parents' opinions of their ideal teachers of English**

Japanese	13% (33)
NS	85% (213)
Both	2% (4)

As the Tables 1-1 and 1-2 show, most of the respondents believed that the NSs are better teachers. Even if the respondents could have chosen the answer “both Japanese and English teachers”, only a small number of respondents (2 percent, respectively) chose “both Japanese and English teachers” as the answer. Instead, more than 85 percent of both the mothers and fathers preferred NSs as their children's instructors.

In this study, the author divided the respondents' level into three sections (low, middle and high levels) to know whether the respondents' English proficiency affected their ideas or not. Respondents who chose Low Beginner, High Beginner and Pre-Intermediate were categorized into Low. In CEFR<sup>2</sup>, people in this group are considered A1. Respondents who chose Intermediate and Pre-Advanced were categorized into Middle. In

CEFR, they are in A2 and B1. And respondents who chose Advanced, Very Advanced and Near Native Speaker<sup>3</sup> were classified into High. In CEFR, they are in B2, C1 and C2, respectively. The following table (Table 2) displays the information.

**Table 2 Level-based data of the respondents**

	Male	Female
Low	58% (115)	49% (123)
Middle	23% (45)	33% (83)
High	19% (38)	18% (44)

### Status-quo of the English education towards pre-school students

Before concentrating on the details of the respondents, the author will address the English educational background of the pre-school students. Two questions were asked for this purpose: Q1 “Besides the pre-school, have your children already started to learn English?” and Q2-1 “To those who answered “Yes” to Q1, who is your children’s teacher?”, and Q2-2 “To those who answered “No” to Q2, when should they start to learn English?”

**Table 3 English educational background of the children**

Have already started to learn English	32% (144)
Not yet	68% (304)

As Table 3 shows, approximately one-third of the respondents have already given opportunities to their children to learn English. Analyzing what kinds of methods to be used, the author found the following; using DVD materials, reading books, hiring an English NS as a tutor and sending the children to a language school. On the other hand, there were about 70 percent of the respondents who had not given any opportunities to their children to familiarize themselves with English. For these respondents (304 people; 125 men and 179 women) the author asked a further question about the appropriate time to start to learn English. Gender-wise, there could be found a difference. Therefore, the author separated the data based on the respondents’ gender below.

**Table 4-1 Male parents’ ideas about when to start learning English**

No specific start date	42% (52)	Right after entering elementary school	18% (23)
Sometime from 1st to 2nd grade	10% (13)	Sometime from 3rd to 4th grade	16% (20)
Sometime from 5th to 6th grade	14% (17)		

**Table 4-2 Female parents’ ideas about when to start learning English**

No specific start date	39% (69)	Right after entering elementary school	38% (68)
Sometime from 1st to 2nd grade	16% (30)	Sometime from 3rd to 4th grade	2% (3)
Sometime from 5th to 6th grade	5% (9)		

Tables 4-1 and 4-2 show male parents in agreement with the government at around 14 percent and female around 5 percent. Furthermore, male parents (about 28 percent) in agreement with right after entering elementary schools and first and second grades. On the other hand, female showed 54 percent in agreement with right after entering elementary schools and first and second grades.

## Ideal English teacher

Based on Table 2 above, the author focused on the attitudes of the parents towards the preferred English instructor. Tables 5-1, 5-2 and 5-3 analyze the data more closely.

**Table 5-1 Low level group's opinions about their ideal teachers**

	Japanese	NS
Male	11% (12)	89% (101)
Female	19% (23)	81% (98)
Total	15% (35)	85% (199)

**Table 5-2 Middle level group's opinions about their ideal teachers**

	Japanese	NS
Male	10% (4)	90% (38)
Female	12% (10)	88% (71)
Total	11% (14)	89% (109)

**Table 5-3 High level group's opinions about their ideal teachers**

	Japanese	NS
Male	13% (5)	87% (33)
Female	0% (0)	100% (44)
Total	6% (5)	94% (77)

As the Tables 5-1, 5-2, and 5-3 indicate, over 85 percent of the respondents, no matter how proficient English speakers they are, believed that they wanted their children to be taught by NSs. However, compared to the other two groups, it is possible to say that the respondents in the low level group tend to have an additional preference for Japanese instructors.

Moreover, as Table 5-3 clearly shows, none of the female respondents that are categorized into high level English speakers supported Japanese teachers. It is unclear as to why they believed that way, but from here, the author wants to talk about NS fallacies and see what kinds of characteristics that they ask the native English speaking teachers to have and then move onto the ideas of people who prefer Japanese teachers.

## Native speaker fallacies

Phillipson (1992, p. 185) refers to unethical treatment of qualified non-native English speaking teachers as a result of the 'native speaker fallacy': a prevalent assumption that 'the ideal teacher of English is a NS'. Using the NS as a benchmark for teaching employment in this way can cause non-native English speaking

teachers to suffer from the 'I-am-not-a-native-speaker' (Suarez, 2000).

As of 1994, Widdowson wrote, "English is not a possession which native speakers lease out to others, while still retaining a freehold. Other people actually own it." (Widdowson, 1994, p. 385). Likewise, Norton (1997, p. 427) wrote, "English belongs to all people who speak it, whether native and non-native, whether ESL or EFL, whether standard or non-standard". Therefore, the idea of attaining English NSs' proficiency as the final goal is not novel. However, whether this idea is accepted or not among Japanese people is a different issue. As the research above shows, most pre-school children's parents still believe that NSs are more ideal teachers.

Based on the research, the author will introduce the characteristics that the respondents require native English speaking teachers to have. Once again, 385 out of 448 respondents were for NSs of English. Table 6 is the result of "ideal" NSs. For this question, since multiple answers were possible, I only show the percentile of their answers.

**Table 6 Your "Ideal" NS (overall)**

	male	female
who have knowledge of teaching English	38%	54%
who speak and understand Japanese	29%	47%
who speak and understand a little Japanese	26%	37%
who cannot speak and/or understand much Japanese	22%	5%

Comparing the male responses to those of females', there is a big discrepancy between their ideas. Both men and women thought having knowledge of teaching English was the primary requirement. Even so, compared to the women's response, less than half of the male respondents regarded it as an essential requirement.

As for the NS's Japanese language proficiency, women tended to think it was better for the teachers to have some Japanese proficiency. On the other hand, 22 percent of the male respondents thought it was better to be taught by NSs who cannot speak and/or understand much Japanese.

About one fifth of the male parents' rigid opinions showed that NSs do not need Japanese proficiency, whereas only 5 percent of females were unsupportive of NSs who cannot speak and/or understand Japanese.

Referring to Table 5-3, all of the high level female English speakers reckoned that NSs were better teachers; therefore, the author will extract the high level female speakers' responses from Table 6 below (Table 6-1).

**Table 6-1 High level female respondents' "Ideal" NS**

	female
who have knowledge of teaching English	79%
who speak and understand Japanese	27%
who speak and understand a little Japanese	33%
who cannot speak and/or understand much Japanese	6%

The higher the proficiency level and/or knowledge of teaching English, the higher the percentage, for example, 54 percent of female respondents in Table 6 supported NSs who have knowledge of English Education and 79 percent in Table 6-1 were for those who have knowledge of teaching English.

Here, the author wants to take a close look at the reasons the respondents thought NSs were better instructors. This question allowed respondents to check more than one answer. Table 7 indicates the details.

**Table 7 Reasons to believe NSs are better**

	male	female
NSs' language proficiency level is high	11%	17%
NSs' pronunciation is perfect	44%	59%
NSs teach better	6%	4%
Learners will get used to English through talking to NSs	65%	62%
Learners will get used to talking to non-Japanese	46%	62%
I believe somehow NSs are better	2%	1%

As Table 7 shows, both male and female considered NSs to be people with perfect pronunciation. What is this supposed to mean? We should bear in mind that merely being a NS of English does not guarantee that he or she is a qualified teacher. Yet, as this result shows that pronunciation is one of the concerns that Japanese parents put an emphasis on. And to improve the pronunciation, they strongly believe that NSs are required. However, what kind of NSs do they have in mind? Are NSs indisputably well in pronunciation? Even if they use the phrase “standard English”, what kind of English do they mean by that? Is General American better than Received Pronunciation or the other way round?

Furthermore, when thinking about learners' mother tongue, in this case Japanese, some sounds are not easy to acquire, such as [th], [f], and [v]. Hence the NSs who do not know about the problems that the learners may come across cannot convey the skills successfully. Moreover, being a NS does not mean that they have the competency to impart the skills in others. However, not so many respondents (less than 20 percent and 10 percent, respectively) expected much about NS's language proficiency and teaching itself. In other words, most of them thought pronunciation was the most important feature for their children to acquire and to improve the pronunciation, NSs are the best teachers.

## Japanese teachers of English

Before conducting this research, there was assumption that to some extent some parents thought it was better to have Japanese teachers especially for the beginner learners such as their pre-school children because the children can ask questions in Japanese. However, this impression turned out to be wrong. The language proficiency of the respondents did not necessarily alter their ideas of choosing their ideal teachers of English.

Medgyes (1996, p. 436) lists six general pedagogical advantages exhibited by Non-native English speaking teachers. Namely, “they can: provide a [successful] foreign language learner model; teach language-learning strategies more effectively; supply more information about the English language; better anticipate and prevent language difficulties; be more sensitive to their students; benefit from their ability to use the students' mother tongue”.

Now in this section, let me summarize the ideas of those who chose Japanese teachers of English (54 people) as ideal. When conducting this research, as a precondition, I had already written, “the Japanese

teachers who have knowledge of teaching English (TESOL/TEFL)” on the questionnaire.

**Table 8 Your “Ideal” Japanese Teachers of English (overall)**

	male	female
who have near NSs' English proficiency	40%	47%
who are very advanced speakers of English	33%	36%
who are advanced speakers of English	27%	17%
who are pre-advanced speakers of English	0%	0%
who are intermediate speakers of English	0%	0%
English proficiency is not fully required	0%	0%

As Table 8 obviously shows, even though among the respondents who chose Japanese teachers of English as ideal, their expectations for the teachers were extremely high. More than 40 percent of both male and female respondents required near English NSs' language proficiency, which is sadly enough far from the reality.

Concerning the reasons they preferred Japanese teachers to NSs, their opinions were as follows (Table 9). For this question, multiple answers were possible.

**Table 9 Reasons to believe Japanese teachers are better**

	male	female
My child has not spoken to NSs in English competently yet.	32%	53%
NSs cannot fully understand my child.	4%	7%
Japanese teachers can understand my child's problems more easily and sympathize with them.	24%	40%
Japanese teachers can explain the English grammar.	12%	20%
Somehow I feel relieved to be taught by Japanese teachers.	20%	33%

To elaborate, the author wants to look at the first point, “my child has not spoken to NSs in English competently yet”. From this comment, it is possible to say that some parents believed that their children needed to be a competent English speaker to talk to NSs. However, most children have not been exposed to any English at this early stage unless they have been introduced to NSs via some language institutions such as international schools.

Also, in reality, many Japanese teachers of English are not confident enough to teach English in English because they tend to compare themselves to NSs of English. But at the same time, Japanese teachers of English do have some advantages such as they are in a better position in a sense that they share the Japanese culture and are able to bridge the gap between English and Japanese languages.

## Conclusion

Phillipson (1996) considers Non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs) to be potentially the ideal ESL teachers because they have gone through the process of acquiring English as an additional language. They have first-hand experience in learning and using a second language, and their personal experience has sensitized them to the linguistic and cultural needs of their students. Many NNESTs, especially those who have the same

first language as their students, have developed a keen awareness of the differences between English and their students' mother tongue. This sensitivity gives them the ability to anticipate their students' linguistic problems.

We are able to assume that many learners in the world learn English to communicate not with NSs of English but with other NNSs. In that sense, even if "standardized English" exists, the existence of many varieties of English cannot be denied. Although most respondents still believe that no matter what kind of dialect they speak and/or what kind of educational background they have, NSs are better English teachers, the needs of learners will definitely be changed in the future. Learning iconic American or British culture is not the only option, but they also need to talk about their own culture. Therefore, NSs are equally important teachers as NNSs, both having their strengths and weaknesses. A native English speaking teacher is not necessarily superior anymore only because of being a NS.

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Appendix: Questionnaire about the English Education in Japan (omitting some details)

0-1. Your Gender     Male     Female

0-4. Your English proficiency

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Low Beginner <STEP 5th grade>     | <input type="radio"/> High Beginner <STEP 4th grade>    |
| <input type="radio"/> Pre-intermediate <STEP 3rd grade> | <input type="radio"/> Intermediate <STEP Pre-2nd grade> |
| <input type="radio"/> Pre-advanced <STEP 2nd grade>     | <input type="radio"/> Advanced <STEP Pre-1st grade>     |
| <input type="radio"/> Very Advanced <STEP 1st grade>    | <input type="radio"/> Near NS                           |



2. Besides pre-school, my children have already started to learn English.     Yes     No

2-1. To those who answered "Yes" to statement 2, who is your children's teacher?

Japanese     NS     Non-Japanese whose mother tongue is not English

2-2. To those who answered "No" to statement 2, when should they start to learn English?

Right after they enter elementary school     From 1st to 2nd grade

From 3rd to 4th grade     From 5th to 6th grade

Haven't decided yet

3. Do you want your children to be taught English by an NS of English?     Yes     No

3-1. To those who answered "Yes" to Q 3, who is your "Ideal" NS

3-1-1. To those who answered "Yes" to Q 3, why do you want an NS as a teacher?

3-2. To those who answered "No" to Q 3, who is your "Ideal" Japanese teacher?

3-2-1. To those who answered "No" to Q 3, why do you prefer Japanese teachers to NS?

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, Japanese people tend to express their views in a modest way. Therefore, when they wrote their own language proficiency, there might be some possibilities that some of the respondents lower their English proficiency than what it actually is.

<sup>2</sup> CEFR stands for Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, none of the respondents chose Near Native Speaker which is C2 in CEFR in this research.