





Listening Comprehension of Non-Native Primary School Students Learning English As A Foreign Language

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Abstract

This research delves into the impact of native and non-native English accents on listening comprehension, encompassing 148 participants across grades 2 to 5. Listening tracks and comprehension exercises were used in the data-gathering process, and statistical analysis was used to identify connections between the variables and the performance of the students. Results show that students with native accents do better overall, with difficulties being especially noticeable in open-ended questions. Students in higher grades have superior comprehension skills, especially when speaking with native accents.

Keywords: Japanese Students, Native/Non-Native Accent, English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

Introduction

Both native and non-native accents have a big influence on students' language acquisition, comprehension, and communication skills while teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) (Kapukaya, 2010; Smith, 2020). Furthermore, Jones et al. (2018) claim

that both native and non-native accents play a crucial role in helping learners understand English language patterns and sounds. Students' general comprehension skills improve when they are exposed to a variety of speech patterns, which is made possible by learning about diverse accents (Brown & Lee, 2019). Some research indicates that learners often indicate preferences for native accents due to their status or familiarity (Johnson & Wang, 2017; Yildiz & Bilgin, 2023; Kapukaya & Yildiz, 2023).

In Japan, where English language education is widespread but faces unique challenges, the importance of native and non-native accents in EFL teaching is particularly relevant (Gomez & Rodriguez, 2020). Japanese students usually favor native accents because they are perceived as more respectable, but it is important to integrate non-native accents into EFL instruction to promote linguistic variety and diversity (Jones et al., 2018). Due to shared linguistic origins and experiences, non-native accents are easier for Japanese students to understand and handle, but native accents are still favored because of their perceived authenticity (Nguyen & Pham, 2017).

In general, perceptions about native versus non-native accents among Japanese students in EFL classes may vary based on a number of factors, such as personal preferences, educational background, and exposure to different pedagogical techniques. However, students of Japanese language are becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of employing both native and non-native accents in EFL instruction to foster inclusive learning environments and teach pupils the tools they need to interact with others in a globalized world (Ito, 2019).

This study examines how native and non-native accents affect Japanese primary students' listening comprehension abilities. It included 148 participants, concentrating on pupils in grades 2, 3, 4, and 5. Students' performance in listening comprehension tasks was examined. Specifically, the research aims to:
Evaluate students' listening comprehension abilities when exposed to native and non-native accents through true/false, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions.

Literature Review

English as A Global Language

A language is considered global when it plays a unique role that is acknowledged worldwide, according to Crystal (1997, as cited in Rohman, 2005; Celik & Yildiz, 2019). A language does not need to be spoken as the primary language by citizens of that nation to receive recognition from that nation. One can speak the global language as a first, second, or foreign language. A global language stands out because it is the language most people use for communication worldwide (Rohmah, 2005; Dayan & Yildiz, 2022).

English has become a widely used language for communication. Furthermore, many individuals are fascinated by its influence on language learning and global reach. In

nations where it is acknowledged as a native tongue, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, English is widely used (Moghaddam, 2023). Recent surveys estimate that 400 million people globally are native English speakers. Even though each of these nations has a distinct vocabulary and accent, they are all united by a common language (Kim, 2023).

Beyond the states mentioned above, English is now more widely spoken as a second or foreign language in many other nations. According to the latest statistics, about 1.5 million people use it as a second or additional language worldwide (Kim, 2023). In the graph below, a representation of the most spoken languages worldwide in the year 2023 is presented.

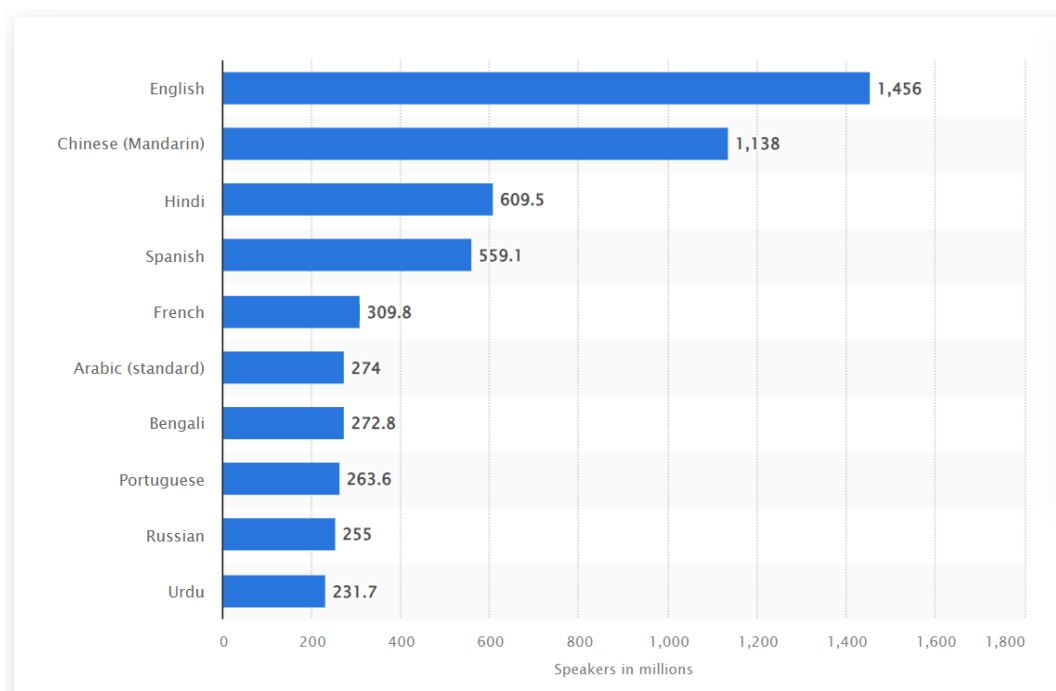


Figure 1: The most spoken languages worldwide in 2023 (by speakers in millions)
(Statista, 2023)

According to Figure 2.1., approximately 1.5 million individuals spoke English as their first or second language globally in 2023, just slightly more than the 1.1 million Mandarin Chinese speakers at the time of the study. That year, Spanish and Hindi were the third and fourth most common languages (Dyvik, 2024). However, people worldwide recognize English's critical importance in their lives, whether for scholastic or professional objectives, among other reasons (Dayan & Yildiz, 2022; Yildiz & Dayan, 2022;

Moghaddam, 2023).

English as a Foreign Language in Japan

Although English bilingualism is rising (Loveday, 1986), Japan is still mainly a monolingual country with a rich cultural and linguistic history (Shibata, 1985). The Japanese people have alternately assimilated Western culture and language, turned inward and away from the outside world, and absorbed Eastern culture and language. Nevertheless, they can maintain their distinctive Japanese identity and a strong sense of self (Blair, 1997).

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2011) has required foreign language study and use from the seventh through the twelfth grades (junior high and high school), despite some community resistance. English is taught in all secondary schools, even though it is not required. Almost all students choose to take English to meet the foreign language requirement. In addition, a lot of university-level students choose to study a second foreign language in addition to English, such as French, German, or Chinese. In Japan, the term "internationalization" is often linked to English, which is essential for career progression, job searches, and educational screening (Silver et al., 2002).

English Learning for Elementary School Students in Japan

Despite a dubious track record in enhancing the average Japanese person's English communication skills, Japan's English language education system has grown in recent years (Nunan, 2003). However, concerns about its effectiveness persist. The Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency (2011, p. 3) highlights recent developments, noting that elementary schools have implemented new foreign language activities, while the number of English classes in junior high schools saw an approximate 30 percent rise. Moreover, senior high schools have introduced classes taught in English alongside other innovative educational approaches. These efforts reflect a concerted push to improve English language instruction across different educational levels. Yet, despite these initiatives, challenges remain. As noted by Kobayashi (p. 34, 2023), "One thing becomes very evident when speaking with foreign English teachers in Japan: English instruction there is failing miserably. Although English language instruction is required in Japanese schools, a surprisingly small percentage of kids actually graduate with proficiency in the language." This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to address the shortcomings within Japan's English language education system and ensure the attainment of meaningful proficiency levels among students (Kobayashi, 2023).

Japan has a six-year elementary school curriculum, a three-year junior high school curriculum, a three-year high school curriculum, and a four-year (or two-year) university

curriculum. Attendance at junior high and elementary schools is required. Most kids attend high school, and over 60% enroll in junior colleges or universities. English was not a required subject for junior high school students until 2002. In high schools, students can select a language other than English as a second language. However, in practice, most high schools only offer English instruction because most institutions include English as a required subject in their entrance exams (Ikegashira et al., 2009).

In 1998, the introduction of English education into Japanese elementary schools sparked considerable debate. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture announced its decision to allow English to be integrated into elementary school curricula starting in 2002. English was initially incorporated into a "comprehensive learning" lesson to provide an educational experience free from undue pressure. During this period, schools were encouraged to offer diverse activities, from traditional practices like planting rice cakes to engaging with English-speaking guests through communication exercises. Many schools took the opportunity to welcome foreign visitors, allowing children to greet them in English. While schools were permitted up to 11 English classes per year, most opted for only one or two sessions annually. It is important to note that the integration of English into elementary education was not solely focused on language acquisition; instead, it aimed to cultivate "international awareness" among students (Ikegashira et al., 2009).

Native/Non-native Listening Comprehension in Japan

Flowerdew (2015) highlights the vast presence of English speakers worldwide, with approximately 400 million using it as their first language, 300-500 million as a second language, and 750 million as a foreign language. These statistics underscore the overwhelming prevalence of non-native English speakers compared to native ones. Despite this, countries like Japan, classified as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) nations, continue to prioritize native inner-circle English accents such as General American (GA) and Received Pronunciation (RP) in their language classrooms. This conserves the dominance of these accents, granting them higher status and authority in English language education. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) (2011) proposed a Course of Study that mandates English language instructors at junior and senior high schools in Japan to teach students contemporary standard pronunciation. While no specific pronunciation model is mentioned, several studies (e.g., Matsuda, 2002; Orikasa, 2016) show that the other "non-native" English accents have little to no place in English language classes in Japanese junior and senior high schools and that there is implicit support for the use of the "native" English speaker pronunciation model, particularly GA and RP (Ito, 2019).

There has also been research on the perceptions of "non-native" English speakers regarding different English accents. Numerous studies have examined how English accents are perceived by Japanese EFL learners (e.g., Muroya, 2023). The majority of studies have

shown that Japanese EFL students generally hold biases against "non-native" English accents in favor of "native" English accents. Furthermore, a number of studies have looked at how different English accents impact the comprehensibility and intelligibility ratings made by Japanese EFL learners (Orikasa, 2016). For example, in contrast to research focusing on "native" English speakers' judgments of English accents, Japanese EFL learners did not seem to find the speech samples generated by "native" English speakers the most comprehensible in Orikasa's (2016) study. The results indicated that different English accents have varied effects on "native" and "non-native" English speakers' evaluations of intelligibility. While many studies have looked at how English accents affect "non-native" English speakers' perceptions of intelligibility and comprehensibility, there does not seem to be much research on "non-native" English speakers' perceptions of credibility and grammaticality (Ito, 2019).

Methodology

Aim of the Research

Through the use of a variety of activities, recordings, and data collection techniques, the study was able to get insight into how native and non-native accents affect the language learning capacities of Japanese primary school pupils. The results improved the knowledge of the function accent variety plays in language acquisition and guided the development of diverse instructional strategies.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

For the current research, the following question and hypothesis were posed:

RQ1. What are Japanese elementary students' listening comprehension abilities when exposed to native and non-native English accents?

H1. Japanese elementary students exposed to a native American or/and British accent during listening tasks will demonstrate higher accuracy in native accent comprehension questions than non-native comprehension questions.

Participants

The participants in this study were Japanese elementary students ranging from grades 2 to 5, totaling 148 students. The school's Early Learning Center (ELC) follows an international curriculum, while the Elementary School, encompassing grades 1 to 6, operates under an Article One system. This Article One school structure entails a balanced curriculum with 50% Japanese and 50% English instruction. Each grade level was supported by two homeroom teachers, one Japanese and one English, ensuring a

comprehensive approach to language learning and fostering a supportive learning environment for students at varying proficiency levels.

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The data collection instruments and procedures encompass several materials and tasks to gather data for comprehension. iPads were used to collect data.

Two types of listening comprehension tests were conducted,

1. Native-accented listening comprehension test
2. Non-native-accented listening comprehension test

The native-accented test consisted of two listening tracks. First track, Using colors to do homework (A2), and the comprehension questions were derived from the British Council website. There is one speaker, and she uses an American accent. The track is 2 minutes and 25 seconds long. The questions consisted of eight True/False questions, six Fill in the blanks and two open-ended questions. The second track, renting a Car (A2), was driven from a website called Test-English. It is a dialogue between American and British accented speakers. The track is 2 minutes and 43 seconds long. The test consisted of eight multiple choice questions.

Non-native-accented test consisted of three different accents: Indian (0:25), Japanese (0:38) and Korean (0:38). Each track (A2) consisted of the same number and type of questions; three multiple choices, three true/false, and three open-ended questions.

Data Analysis Techniques

Students' answers from listening were numerically categorized and entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, v. 26) software as such. An independent sample t-test and one-way ANOVA tests were used to show the differences between the study groups regarding their listening comprehension levels. Furthermore, a Pearson product-moment test was obtained to ascertain if a significant correlation was reported between certain studies grouped variables.

Results

The study investigated the effects of native vs. non-native accents on the listening comprehension abilities of Japanese primary school pupils. The results will expand knowledge of the value of a variety of accents in language acquisition and guide instructional strategies to improve students' language competency in multicultural settings.

Descriptive Analysis of Native Accent Listening Comprehension

In analyzing native accent listening comprehension across different tasks, varied levels of performance were observed.

Task A: True/False Questions: For true/false questions, performance was generally high. The highest accuracy was in Q4, with 133 students (89.9%) answering correctly and only 15 (10.1%) incorrectly. In contrast, Q5 showed the lowest correct responses with 88 students (59.5%), indicating a significant 40.5% incorrect rate. Notably, about three-quarters of the students answered Q3 correctly, with 108 correct responses (73.0%) and 40 incorrect (27.0%). Overall, more than two-thirds consistently provided the correct answers, indicating a strong comprehension of the material in this task format.

Task B: Multiple Choice Questions: Multiple choice questions revealed a different pattern. The most challenging was Q3, where only 24 students (16.2%) answered correctly while a substantial 124 (83.8%) got it wrong. Conversely, Q2 had the best performance, with 115 correct responses (77.7%) compared to 33 incorrect (22.3%). This task showed greater variability in performance, with some questions being significantly more difficult for the students.

Task C: Open-ended Questions: Open-ended questions, like Q1 and Q2, both had less than half of the students answering correctly. Q1 saw 65 students (43.9%) correct and 83 (56.1%) incorrect, while Q2 had 59 correct responses (39.9%) and 89 incorrect (60.1%). These results suggest that students struggled more with open-ended questions, possibly due to the lack of guided choices compared to multiple choice and true/false formats.

Task D: Fill in the Blank Questions: Fill in the blank questions had mixed results. Q1 and Q3 showed better performance with 86 (58.1%) and 83 (56.1%) correct responses, respectively. However, Q2 had a lower success rate, with only 43 students (29.1%) answering correctly and 105 (70.9%) incorrectly. Similarly, Q4 and Q5 had less than half of the students providing correct answers, at 41.9% and 37.8%, respectively. These results indicate that fill-in-the-blank questions posed a moderate challenge, with some questions proving particularly difficult for the majority of students.

In summary, students demonstrated the highest comprehension in true/false questions and faced the most challenges with multiple choice and open-ended questions. Fill in the blank questions had varied outcomes, with some questions being significantly more challenging than others.

Descriptive Analysis of Non-native Accent Listening Comprehension

The analysis of non-native accent listening comprehension across different tasks reveals distinct performance patterns in true/false questions, multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions.

TASK A: True/False Questions: The performance in Task A varied significantly across different questions. For instance, Q1 showed a relatively high comprehension rate, with 69% (100 participants) answering correctly, while 31% (45 participants) were incorrect. In contrast, Q6 exhibited the poorest performance, with only 22.8% (33 participants) answering correctly and a substantial 77.2% (112 participants) getting it wrong. Questions Q4 and Q5 were among the best understood, with 77.9% and 73.1% of participants answering correctly, respectively. Notably, Q9 had a much lower correct response rate at 35.2%, indicating that nearly two-thirds struggled with this question.

TASK B: Multiple Choice Questions: Participants generally performed better on multiple-choice questions compared to true/false questions. For example, Q7 was answered correctly by an overwhelming 95.9% (139 participants), showcasing the highest comprehension rate in this task. Conversely, Q3 was the most challenging, with only 42.8% (62 participants) answering correctly and 57.2% (83 participants) getting it wrong. Q5 and Q8 also had high correct response rates at 75.9% and 82.1%, respectively, highlighting that more than three-quarters of the participants understood these questions well.

TASK C: Open-Ended Questions: Task C, consisting of open-ended questions, proved to be the most challenging for participants. Q5 had a 100% incorrect response rate, indicating that none of the participants answered it correctly. Similarly, questions Q2 and Q4 had very low correct response rates of 6.2% and 6.9%, respectively, meaning more than 90% of participants answered these incorrectly. On the other hand, Q7 was the best understood in this task, with 47.6% (69 participants) providing correct answers, though still less than half of the participants. Q11 also saw relatively better performance with 44.1% correct responses.

In summary, participants demonstrated better comprehension in multiple-choice questions, struggled considerably with open-ended questions, and showed varied performance in true/false questions. The analysis reveals specific questions within each task where participants excelled or faced difficulties, providing insights into areas that may require targeted improvement.

The hypothesis proposed that Japanese elementary students exposed to native American or British accents during listening tasks would demonstrate higher accuracy in native accent comprehension questions than in non-native accent comprehension questions.

The analysis of listening comprehension across different tasks for both native and non-native accents reveals several important findings that help test this hypothesis. For true/false questions, participants showed generally higher performance with native accents. For instance, in native accent tasks, Q4 had an accuracy rate of 89.9%, while the highest accuracy for non-native accents was 77.9% in Q4. Conversely, non-native accent tasks like Q6 showed the poorest performance with only 22.8% correct responses, highlighting a significant struggle with non-native accents compared to native ones, where even the

lowest performing question (Q5) had a 59.5% correct rate. This supports the hypothesis that comprehension is higher with native accents.

In multiple-choice questions, participants again performed better with native accents. The most challenging native accent question, Q3, had a 16.2% correct response rate, which, while low, was comparable to the most challenging non-native accent question, Q3, with a 42.8% correct rate. However, the best performance in native accent tasks, Q2 with 77.7% correct, was still lower than the best performance in non-native tasks, Q7 with 95.9% correct. This suggests that while participants perform better overall with native accents, some non-native tasks are understood well.

Open-ended questions proved challenging for both accents, with neither showing a clear advantage. In non-native tasks, questions like Q5 had a 100% incorrect response rate, while native tasks like Q2 had 39.9% correct responses. Despite the difficulty, native accent tasks generally had slightly better performance in some questions, indicating a marginal advantage.

The fill-in-the-blank questions, analyzed only for native accents, showed mixed results. Questions like Q1 and Q3 had over 50% correct responses, indicating moderate comprehension, though some questions like Q2 had lower success rates at 29.1%. This variability highlights that fill-in-the-blank tasks pose significant challenges regardless of accent type.

Overall, the findings support the hypothesis that Japanese elementary students demonstrate higher accuracy in listening comprehension tasks involving native accents compared to non-native accents. True/false and multiple-choice questions particularly show better performance with native accents, whereas open-ended questions remain challenging across both accent types. This analysis confirms that while students have better comprehension with native accents, some tasks involving non-native accents are understood well, indicating areas for targeted improvement in listening comprehension skills.

Discussion

The significance of the study's findings is examined in this section, with particular attention paid to how they may affect Japanese elementary students' listening comprehension skills.

Native vs. Non-Native Accent Listening Comprehension

The results demonstrate that native-accented tracks were comprehended more than non-native-accented tracks on listening comprehension tests. This appears to be the result of their increased exposure to native English through a variety of media, educational resources, and textbooks. They are probably simpler to comprehend since they are

accustomed to the rhythm, intonation, and phonetic patterns of native accents (Jenkins, 2000; Yildiz, 2019). This familiarity likely facilitates better understanding and processing of native accents compared to non-native ones.

However, open-ended questions pose a problem for both types of accents, implying that these questions need more sophisticated language processing abilities that young learners may not yet have completely acquired (Baker & Westrup, 2003). This challenge underscores the need for more sophisticated teaching strategies to address the complex nature of open-ended questions and improve students' overall language processing abilities.

These findings highlight the areas where students' listening comprehension still needs work as well as their areas of strength. Though the issue with open-ended questions draws attention to the areas that require more targeted education, the improved performance with native accents implies that the existing teaching approaches are at least partially successful. For educators who wish to improve their pupils' hearing abilities, particularly in distinguishing between different accents, this is crucial (Field, 2008).

The findings support previous studies demonstrating that mastering an accent might enhance understanding. The assumption that greater exposure to non-native accents might be beneficial is supported by the fact that students usually find dialects they do not encounter regularly to be more challenging (Munro & Derwing, 1995). This reaffirms the need of varied listening exercises for language learners.

Conclusion

This research delved into how well Japanese primary kids understood English accents, both native and non-native. Important results show that students with native accents do better overall, with difficulties being especially noticeable in open-ended questions.

Limitations

Several potential limitations could affect the outcomes and generalizability of the research and they can be : sample size and representativeness, teacher variability, English proficiency, cultural bias, time constraints, measurement tools, and other external factors. By addressing these constraints with a strategic approach to study design, thorough data collecting and analysis, and result interpretation, it is possible to enhance the validity of the research and further our understanding of how teacher accents affect student learning outcomes.

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