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Using Blogs in ESL/EFL Teaching and Teacher-Training

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Abstract

The use of the internet as a resource in language education is rapidly expanding, and Web 2.0 has opened up exciting avenues for developing collaborative communication skills in a foreign or second language. One of these avenues is the 'blog'. This article presents a case study of the use of blogs in a writing course in an IELP, as well as some innovative uses of blogs in the EFL/ESL classroom. It also outlines the use of blogs as a resource in TESOL teacher training. The authors argue that the introduction of any new media or technology needs to be weighed against its pedagogical value, and that blogs can add a relevant and rich learning platform for today's learners.

Keywords: blogs, TESOL teacher training, EAP reading, EAP listening, ESL/EFL writing, CALL, Web 2.0, observation, lesson plans.

Introduction

As EFL/ESL teachers, we have long been concerned about whether our approach is student-centred, task-focused, top-down, bottom-up, teacher-directed or theoretically principled. We focus on ensuring that our curriculum includes cross-cultural issues, environmental consciousness, political awareness, and critical thinking. Indeed, these are important aspects

of any EFL/ESL classroom, particularly in integrated language teaching contexts, and should not be ignored or passed over as unimportant or irrelevant. But now, gradually, new ways of communicating are also being added to this mix and are making a significant impact on teaching/learning situations. The use of the internet for researching and gathering information is well-entrenched in many language teaching/learning situations, and the plethora of sites in English makes the number and type of authentic English language resources more accessible than ever before. These resources are indeed helpful for language teachers and with the increasing use of portable handheld internet capable devices in various language teaching contexts, many teachers can count on 24/7 access to powerful technologies as part of their instructional design (Dede, 2004).

The internet is no longer only a place to research and gather information, it is a rapidly expanding place to communicate, network, publish, play and collaborate, and Web 2.0 has opened up exciting avenues for developing collaborative communication skills in a foreign or second language. It has also opened up the possibility of effective and accessible teacher-training on a global scale. Both trainee teachers and foreign or second language learners can have access to virtual classrooms and a depth and breadth of teaching/learning situations and materials that previous online learning or even physical classroom-based learning could not offer. It is recognizing this potential, and knowing what to do with it, that is key to developing effective EFL/ESL teaching and teacher-training. This point is important, and a critical examination of the introduction of new technology in the past can provide valuable lessons in that regard. Video, for example, was hailed as a wonderful new resource which had great potential to enhance the teaching/learning situation, and many teachers worked hard to apply video technology to effectively support their pedagogical approach. For instance, if utilising the Silent Way approach, a teacher might use a short scene from a video to demonstrate certain pronunciation points. If applying a Communicative Language Teaching approach a teacher might use similar scenes from different movies to show similarities and variations in the ways people interact in a given situation, thus exposing their students to different communicative options. But how many teachers simply inserted a video into the video machine and had students watch the video without any real teaching/learning focus?

Technology, alone, is not a panacea for effective teaching and learning. As teachers and teacher trainers we need to understand what we are doing from a theoretical standpoint: what teaching approach we are taking, and what type of learning we are encouraging. We need to grasp how the technology can fit with our understanding of language acquisition and how it

can best support our pedagogical practice. And we need to understand the technology itself and to know how to use it.

With these concerns in mind, we take a look at how blogs can be used in EFL/ESL teaching and learning, and in teacher training. We demonstrate how blogs can add value to a lesson, and how they can be effectively integrated into the “broader professional context” which includes an understanding of learner needs, the educational setting, available resources, syllabus, and teaching/learning goals (cf. McDonough & Shaw, 1992, p. 5). In the first part of this article we present a case-study of the use of blogs in an ESL classroom. In the second section, we offer several examples of how blogs can be used in the ESL/EFL classroom, as well as some suggestions for TESOL teacher training.

1. Blogs

The term “blog” is a contraction of two words: *web* and *log*. Blogs are a fairly new tool for written communication and interaction and appear in many different languages. Their global reach and collaborative nature are difficult to compare with any other type of pre-internet writing, such as personal journals, newsletters, or letters to the editor. These latter types of writing never reached the number or range of people that blogs can reach. The scope, variety, and reach of online blogs are a reflection of the times that we live in. While “facebook”, a form of internet social networking, and “twitter”, a social networking and micro-blogging service, bear some similarities to blogs, blogs have a different purpose and can provide a public forum for an individual’s thoughts, ideas, tips, commentaries or anything else that one would like to keep a regular written record of. They can be quite detailed, and their contents range from the highly intellectual to everyday stream of consciousness. They can be read and almost always commented on (some bloggers block comments) by anyone who happens to visit the blog. And their content and appearance can be enhanced by a combination of anything from text, music, podcasts, pictures, videos, or other types of visual or graphic design. Anyone wishing to begin their own blog can do so by simply joining a free blog site.

Prior to the days of internet, many language teaching syllabuses included materials that were commonplace in order to make classes meaningful and relevant for the students. Communicative language teaching approaches in particular attempted to incorporate authentic texts and commonplace materials, such as “signs, magazines, advertisements, and newspapers, or graphic and visual sources around which communicative activities can be built, such as maps, pictures, symbols, graphs, and charts. Different kinds of objects [were also] used to support communicative exercises, such as a plastic model to assemble from

directions.” (Richards & Rogers, 2001, p. 170). Blogs are an easily accessible online form of authentic written text that can be used as a resource in the language classroom, and they can also be used as a platform or interface for language learning and teacher training.

2. Case-Study – Using a Blog about High School Education around the World

The activity we relate here utilized a class-generated blog involving ESL students in an American community college. This is a two year college which enrolls three types of students: students who are taking classes that can later be transferred to a university or four year college, students who are working towards a particular occupation, and students who are preparing to take college/university level classes. Among those students who are preparing to take college level classes are those enrolled in the Intensive English Language Program (IELP). All of the students in this program are in the process of developing their general and academic English language skills and are adult learners; some have recently graduated from high school and some are returning to school. The program has three levels and at each level there are four courses: Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening, for a total of twelve courses.

The students in the IELP are from many parts of the world with the majority coming from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. About 40% of the program is made up of international students who intend to return to their first countries after studying in the U.S. The other 60% are residents of the U.S. and, for the most part, have only recently emigrated from their first countries. Students in the first level of the program are expected to be proficient in English at the low-intermediate level.

In the IELP the first level writing course focuses on writing at the paragraph level. Since the students in this level of the program are still developing basic grammar and vocabulary, the challenge is to provide them with “academic content” and at the same time make the tasks accessible, challenging, and achievable. To this end, the course focuses on several text organizational patterns, one of which is ‘contrast’. It was in the segment on teaching a contrast paragraph that the blog exercise was used. The next few paragraphs outline this segment with focus on the use of the blog.

2.1 Segment on Teaching a Contrast Paragraph

The overall aim of this segment of the writing course is for the students to learn how to write a coherent contrastive paragraph. The topic of the segment was “High Schools Around the World”. In order to develop authentic and relevant content that could be used for the basis of

a contrastive paragraph, blogs are an excellent real-life and up-to-date source. But rather than using information written by authors unconnected with the students, it was decided that the students could write about their own high school experience. This meant that the content for the paragraph writing exercise was directly relevant to the experiences of the students.

The segment moved through the following stages:

- 1) Introduction of contrastive structure, key transition words and phrases, deconstructing exemplar contrast paragraphs
- 2) Brief introduction to the “High Schools Around the World” topic including directions for using the blog.
- 3) Using Edublogs (<http://edublogs.org>), a blog was set up for the class activity. The blog, titled “High Schools Around the World,” was made easy to access by linking it to the course management system.
- 4) The students went to the blog site in their own time and wrote about their high school. Questions were provided on the blog as a means of guiding and focusing the content and general form of the students’ responses. Questions such as “Do high school students wear uniforms?” or “What do high school students wear to school?” provided students with ideas that they didn’t always think of as relevant to write about. Questions such as “Do teachers use corporal punishment?” provided vocabulary that not all students were aware of, which motivated them to check certain words in the dictionary and expand their vocabulary.
- 5) About a week before the paragraph was due, the class went to the computer lab to look at the comments on the blog. While this short reading exercise provided an opportunity for students to learn something about the other students in the class, the purpose was for students to place themselves into pairs by choosing someone who seemed to have had an experience in high school that was different from their own. After the students were paired, they were given some time to discuss their responses in more detail. The goal of the discussion was to get more information, examples, and details for the contrast paragraph. Note-taking was encouraged.
- 6) In class, students worked together to build a contrast paragraph using the structure and transition words previously covered in class, and the content from the blogs and their pair discussion.
- 7) Contrast paragraph was handed in for assessment.
- 8) Evaluation of the use of the blog within the contrast writing segment.

2.2 Incorporating Pedagogical Principles

In creating a class blog on the students' experiences of high school the following key aspects of EFL/ESL course design were incorporated¹:

1) Language:

- Lexical Level: Vocabulary connected with students' experiences at school.
- Grammar Level: Consolidation of sentence patterns used in previous writing classes, such as those on descriptive paragraphs and paragraphs on personal introductions.
- Textual Level: The blog writing was largely a descriptive paragraph on students' personal experience at school, and was therefore a means of consolidating what the students had previously learned in the writing class. This writing formed the content and basis for practice in writing a contrast paragraph, and in jointly constructing a paragraph using the new structure and transition words and phrases.
- Communicative functions: Through the task of writing one's own and reading others' blog entries, students were able to exchange personal school experiences. Students were also provided with the experience at writing a blog entry. As blogs are often forums for personal experience, the students were given an opportunity to use an up-to-date media available for this type of writing.

2) Learning and Learners: With a focus on the lives of the students themselves, the writing task became directly relevant to the students, and became a way of exchanging information with other students. The task was a means of developing online written interpersonal skills leading to in-class spoken interpersonal skills as students had the opportunity to read each others' blogs, choose partners to work with, and discuss their school experiences with the aim of writing a contrast paragraph. The activity also provided authentic written English texts and exemplars of English from non-English speaking background students – something that many EFL/ESL students do not get a chance to see.

3) Contextual Factors

- Sociolinguistic Skills: The blog exercise encouraged the use of appropriate language and behavior for the setting, purpose, and roles in the situation. For instance, students had to understand such things as what a blog is, the nature

of the task, their role in the situation – both as a student and as someone who would be explaining his/her experience for the purpose of someone else to understand.

- Socio-cultural Skills: The blog exercise and the follow-up writing exercises of choosing partners and writing the contrast paragraph provided an opportunity to read, talk and write about norms and customs with regard to their school experiences.
- Sociopolitical Skills: By reading and choosing a partner whose experience differed from their own, students were encouraged to think critically, to recognize points of similarity and difference, and to discuss such issues as the wearing of school uniform, forms of discipline, teacher-student relations etc.
- Intercultural Skills: The exchange of experiences provided an opportunity for intercultural and cross-cultural development through the various tasks and activities involved in developing the contrast paragraph.

2.3 Evaluating the Use of the Blog

The blog constituted only a small part of the writing course, but in order to gauge its effectiveness as a tool in the writing process, the students were asked to complete a very simple and informal questionnaire. The questions and responses to the questionnaire are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Responses to the Evaluation Questionnaire

	Question	Answers (Total No. of Students = 20)	
		Yes	No
1	Have you ever blogged before using the class blog?	9	11
2	Did you find the blog easy to use?	18	2
3	Were the teacher's instructions on the blog easy to follow? If not, what other instructions would you have liked?	18	2
4	How long did it take you to write your blog response? Less than 20 minutes – 9 students 21 to 40 minutes – 6 students One hour – 2 students More than one hour – 2 students No answer – 1		
5	Did you feel comfortable using the blog?	17	3
6	Did you feel that using the blog was a strange thing to do for the writing task?	0	20
7	Did you read the other students' blog responses <u>before or after</u> you wrote your own? Why/ Why not? BEFORE = 13 AFTER = 7 (2 students were the first to post, so they returned later to the blog to		

	look at what the other students had written)		
8	Do you think the blog was a useful part of writing the paragraph on school experiences?	20	0
9	How did you feel about the other students being able to read your blog response? Positive: 14; Negative: 6		
10	Did you check the dictionary while you were writing your blog response?	15	5
11	Did you write a draft of what you wanted to say before you submitted your blog response?	15	5
12	Would you like to use a blog for class again?	19	1
13	Do you have your own blog?	1	19

From the table we can see that even though only about half of the students had used a blog before the class blog exercise and only one student has his own blog, they responded positively to questions regarding the ease of use (Qs 2, 5 and 6) and usefulness of the blog (Qs 8 and 12). Of the three students who said no to Question 5 (feeling comfortable using the blog), two of them said that they felt more pressure because: "I have to think about what I want and worry about everyone would be reading my answer...; that is a hard thing to me." and "I felt more pressure because anybody could read it." These responses were interesting because as teachers we often believe that providing opportunities for students to read their peers' writing can be good, but for these two students this was felt to be a negative rather than a positive thing.

The majority of students still engaged in typical tasks associated with writing, such as drafting and checking the dictionary (Qs 10 and 11). This indicates that the students valued the task and wanted to post something that reflected their skill in writing. We were interested to see what the students felt about being able to read other posts as well as having other students read their posts. Almost three quarters of the students felt positive about the others reading their posts, and about two thirds said that they read the other posts either before or after they had written their own. Some further insights with regard to the issues of reading other students' writing are provided in the extended responses mentioned below.

Extended Comments on the Use of the Blog

The students were given the opportunity to write more detailed responses to the questions. Not all of the students did this, but the responses that were given were quite insightful with regard to the students' opinions. These are discussed below:

Comparing writing the blog with a spoken language exercise to gain information about high school experiences

Generally the responses to this question were positive, but a couple of students said they

would have preferred to speak about their experiences. One of those students suggested that the reason for this preference was that they could ask questions and receive answers instantly. This is, of course, one of the drawbacks of asynchronous technologies where we have to wait for a response. This is, of course, no different from more traditional forms of written exchange such as letters or emails – unless of course when emailing your addressee happens to be online at the same time. Nevertheless, the responses generally pointed towards a preference for writing the blog rather than speaking because the students felt ‘more comfortable’, or they did not feel that they were a ‘strong speaker’, or they felt their listening skills were not good enough. The responses are presented in the boxes below:

Preference for Speaking

“Speaking is better for me for getting new information.”

“No, if you have extra questions, you can ask and the person can explain it better to you.”

On whether students read the other students’ postings before they wrote their own response.

One of the features of a blog is that you can read any comments already posted. In an ESL class this can have both disadvantages and advantages. One disadvantage may be that more reticent and yet diligent students may want to wait until some of the more confident students have posted their responses prior to posting their own response. This could be somewhat frustrating to a student who wants to do the homework exercise but feels they have to wait for other responses before they go ahead. On the other hand, an advantage of being able to read other students’ responses is that students can get an idea of what other students have written, and feel more confident in getting started with their own response. These kinds of issues emerged in the students responses, as shown in the following box:

Reasons for reading post before writing one’s own.

“Maybe we don’t know how to start.”

“If I read the other students’ blog response before, because I get some idea.”

“Read others responses before writing because I didn’t know how long it should be.”

General Comments made by the Students about the Blog

The students were asked to make any other comments regarding the use of the blog in writing the contrast paragraph. These comments were generally very positive and indicate that the use of the blog was a motivating tool for the writing class. A couple of the comments

suggested that students felt proud of their responses and happy that they could share their high school experience.

Overall Positive Responses to Using the Blog.

“you can read all of the paragraphs when you have time.”

“I feel good because every blog were good and interesting for me and different.”

“I feel happy because I wrote and everyone can read my blog.”

“If I can learn something new from other people and find out things about their culture. I hope that someone may be interested in my opinion and culture.”

“I felt very good because I wrote a lot of information about Lithuanian education.”

“Yes, it was useful because I will know many other informations or traditions about high schools in other countries.”

“useful”, “fun”, “nice”

The students’ responses to the questionnaire indicate an overall positive view and outcomes of using the blog as a resource for teaching writing which suggest expanded uses for it in the future. Before using the blog, the information gathering stage of this activity was based only on spoken discussion in which students talked about their high school. Using the blog gave the students an additional and motivating opportunity to write while allowing students to “publish” their work in a non-judgmental fun environment. Using the blog rather than spoken discussion also provided increased and more balanced student communication. Previously in spoken discussions, more reticent students did not contribute as much as some of the livelier students. The asynchronous nature of the blog provided the quieter students time to consider what to write and to formulate their responses and as a result they were able to contribute equally. It also allowed everyone’s comments to be viewed by the class, and oral feedback as well as feedback from the questionnaire indicated that students enjoyed this opportunity.

An important by-product of the blog exercise was that students were able to see how non-native speakers from other parts of the world express themselves, bringing a general awareness that models of language use do not always have to be from native English authors. As indicated in the questionnaire responses, some students felt proud that other students could read their responses, and some students felt that it was a good opportunity to read about other cultures.

Reading through the responses in class also meant that the students had more control over their pairings. Previously, the students were paired based on the instructor’s intuition of

which countries would have the greatest differences in their educational systems – but that intuition was not always correct. Asking the students to use the blog comments to pair themselves resulted in better pairings, and was insightful for the teacher.

Because the students were able to look at the comments on the blog several times, many were already familiar with the contents of the blog comments when they came to class, and so although the amount of time spent discussing the differences between their high schools was decreased, the discussion itself was more focused and fruitful.

Finally, the contrast paragraphs that were handed in contained greater details than those that had previously been handed in, suggesting that the blog exercise had assisted in developing more details for the contrast paragraph.

3. Other Uses of blogs in the ESL/EFL classroom

Using blogs in educational settings is gaining in appeal and as language educators we have much to learn from our colleagues. There are wonderful examples of creative blogs on the internet as well as lists of ideas on how to use blogs. The Pembina Trails School Division lists five ways to use blogs taken from *Educational Blogging* by Stephen Downes. The suggestions are to replace the standard class Web page, to link to internet items that relate to the course, to organize in-class discussions, to organize class seminars and provide summaries of readings, and to ask students to write their own blogs as part of their course grade. Helena Echlin in her article *Digital Discussion: Take Your Class to the Internet* summarizes the ways in which several teachers are using blogs in their classrooms. Their ideas include using blogs for classroom management, personal expression, class discussions, and as learning journals or online notebooks.

Again we would stress that no matter how blogs are used, their use needs to be based on solid pedagogical principles. Simply using blogs to do something ‘trendy’ or to add a ‘techno’ feeling to the course will fall flat. Students need to know that what they are doing is meaningful and of value to their language learning experience. For this reason, we outline a few uses of blogs in the EFL/ESL classroom that are based on clear pedagogical objectives. The potential uses of blogs obviously go far beyond those we present here, but we hope that these indicate some useful ideas for the ESL/EFL classroom.

Blogs for Developing EAP Reading/Listening Skills

English for Academic purposes is a major field of English language teaching as more and more students from non-English speaking backgrounds want to study in universities in

English-speaking countries. With the solid grounding of discourse analysis of different subject fields, such as science, economics, and the humanities (see for example Achugar & Schleppegrell, 2005; Halliday & Martin, 1993; Halliday, 2006; Schleppegrell & deOliviera, 2006), there is much that we can draw on for teaching English for academic purposes. One of the obvious features of learning academic English is the vocabulary of the subject field that a student wishes to major in. But discourse analysis has also shown that there are specific ways in which the language of certain subject fields is structured. There is also the matter of what students will be facing when they attend lectures or do courses online in a specific subject field. In order for non-English speaking background students to compete with their native English-speaking classmates, they need the linguistic and academic skills to do this. Some of those skills include: understanding general classroom language and instructions, how to catch the main ideas of a lecture or a reading, how to respond to a specific reading or lecture, how to write an essay, field report, critical response, or summary.

Blogs are a great way to develop listening/reading comprehension skills along with a means of introducing new ideas, new vocabulary or difficult concepts. In the past we might have used a written text such as a newspaper report, or a live, taped or videoed short lecture to develop listening and comprehension skills related to a specific topic, such as climate change or a cultural issue. Blogs can have text and embedded videos or podcasts of short lectures. These can be complemented by a set of guiding questions and vocabulary lists, another video of a short lecture explaining difficult points, or a video or podcast of the steps you wish the students to take in completing the comprehension task (thus adding the dimension of oral instructions as a form of authentic spoken language).

Where you wish to develop the skills of listening/reading for specific items of information, students could choose the questions they wish to answer with regard to the short lecture (or written text), and all of the responses form the complete answer. Alternatively, students can be asked to respond to certain pieces of information in the lecture and to back their answer up with reference to something in their own experience, or reference to a newspaper article they have found that covers the same or a related issue mentioned in the lecture.

Perhaps you are more interested in developing reading/listening for the general idea or 'gist' of the lecture or text. In a class geared for developing students' academic English language skills, a blog that uses a video clip on tectonic plate movement was developed. In the lead up to the blog exercise, some key vocabulary was given during class, along with a short reading on tectonic plate movement. Other materials included a tectonic plate map of the world, and diagrams of tectonic plate movements showing the different types of

movements, where these take place around the world, and what the consequences are (e.g. earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunami). Using such multimodal resources, and doing presentations in which scientific language, diagrams, and scientific arguments were part of the teaching/learning goals, were key to successfully mastering the language of the topic of tectonic plate movement for these intermediate level students. The blog was used as an extension of the topic – from earth tectonic plate movement to whether there is tectonic plate movement on Mars. A link to a YouTube video lecture of 2.28 minutes on Mars and Plate tectonics was used (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pny7hdafi5w>). The purpose of the exercise was for students to catch the gist of the lecture, to listen for words that the students had become familiar with in class, and to make a short comparison between earth and Mars.

Students were given a worksheet to be used with the blog. In this case, the students were not asked to post comments on the blog, but were asked to fill in the worksheet by using the information on the blog. This was an example of using a blog as an interface. It became a source of information that the teacher arranged in a certain way, and the worksheet, once completed, was used back in the classroom in a discussion about the lecture.

In assessing the ‘interface’ format, it was felt that the same information on the handout could have been provided in a web-form that the students could fill in online and that the teacher could access, thus making it wholly web-based.

For EAP, there are many online videos that can be linked to or embedded onto a blog, and each day more and more of these kinds of resources are made available. For very advanced students, there are also extended lectures in various humanities, science and engineering fields such as those at <http://www.nptel.iitm.ac.in/>, which are part of the National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning: A joint venture by Indian Institutes of Technology and Indian Institute of Science. These lectures are quite lengthy - each around one hour long – but students could be directed to certain sections. Teachers do need to always keep in mind the copyright guidelines for the use of online materials, especially for these materials in particular. However, YouTube supports the Indian project, and the lectures can be accessed via Youtube as stated at the bottom of the page (<http://www.youtube.com/iit>). Some of the lectures are more visually attractive than others, making the content easier to access, but they do represent what some students will face should they go on to study in the subject fields in an English speaking tertiary institution. So for that reason they are a particularly useful EAP resource.

A Blog as a Portfolio of Student's Written Work

In a writing class, keeping an individual record of each student's written work has several advantages and a blog can serve as a platform for this publication. Students can view their progress over the course of a term. This allows them to monitor their improvement as well as help them focus on areas for improvement. These areas might involve the basic building blocks of languages such as particular grammar points or higher level skills such as ways to hedge when presenting one's research findings. Blog entries can also provide a means of reflection. Mynard suggests, "foreign language students need to draw on previously learned language in order to write a blog entry, which means that they are very likely to be reflecting on their understanding of the language as they compose their log entries" (Mynard, 2007, p. 33).

A blog also provides a real world audience. Student work is no longer limited to exposure to the instructor and perhaps a few other classmates. The blog allows the student to publish written work, making it available to anyone who cares to access the student's blog. On the blog the students can also add media and link to other sites on the internet, making the blog more in tune with today's methods of communicating.

Later, students can use their blogs to showcase their language ability. This would be particularly useful when applying for further education or when applying for employment.

A Blog as a Forum for a Guest Lecturer

One of the overall advantages of blogs, particularly for online courses, is that they provide a forum for a community to exchange ideas. In actual classrooms the community develops through face-to-face contact, exchange, and social development. In a virtual classroom, a blog is a great way to focus the group on a specific topic, and to exchange opinions or ideas on that topic. One traditional way in which educators do this is to invite a guest lecturer to the classroom to talk and share ideas with the class. For online courses, this is not possible and in the case of face-to-face classes, distance and schedules may prevent an instructor from being able to invite a guest lecturer to a particular classroom during a class session. A blog can be used to provide an asynchronous forum for a guest lecture. The guest would contribute the main post. Students would then be assigned to read the post and add comments. The guest lecturer can view the responses and respond to them.

4. Blogs for TESOL Teacher-training

Both authors have extensive experience in training teachers and believe that the possibilities

that Web 2.0 technologies open up can enhance teacher training. Blogs in particular can provide an additional and valuable forum for teacher-training courses, particularly in the TESOL context.

In the past, online discussion and exchange of ideas was often done via chat rooms or email, and these can still be used. But a blog becomes a public record of discussion, opinions, ideas, teaching tips, and provides a variety of media through which these can be exchanged, returned to, and expanded upon. There are many ways that blogs can be used for teacher training and for teachers new in the field. For instance, previous research has found that developing an online support community “is an effective means of providing social, emotional, practical, and professional support to beginning teachers” (DeWert, Babinski, & Jones, 2003). Although this research involved the use of an online mailing group, a blog is a more up-to-date and more flexible means of providing such support. Our own experiences in blogging indicate that new and veteran teachers enjoy the opportunity to share ideas, and that blogging contributes to a collaborative and global forum, which can be particularly motivating for new teachers or for teachers who feel isolated or who may be in remote locations.

Using blogs in teacher training is also an excellent way of contributing to the development of technical literacy in new teachers (cf. Gomez, Sherin, Griesdorn, & Finn, 2008). It would be a disservice for pre-service institutions to not provide trainee teachers with how to use and apply a range of ‘traditional’ and up-to-date technology in their teaching practice. Through our experience in teacher training, we offer some ways that blogs can be used in teacher training courses.

Observation

An important feature of many teaching methodology and practicum courses is observation. Through observation, trainee teachers are able to see how others teach, and can receive feedback and teaching tips on their own teaching. Observation also provides opportunities for action research and for action plans to be put into place.

Although nothing really beats ‘being there’ in the classroom as a lesson unfolds, a video of a lesson, if done discreetly, minimizes the effect of having an actual person (or a group of people) in the classroom observing. In the past, videos were used particularly in situations where some members of the class were unable to attend an observation because of the distances involved or the inability to take time out of their own schedule. Using a video on a blog has the advantage of making it readily accessible to all of the trainee teachers and the

instructor at the same time and within the same 'location'; and short segments of the video can be placed on different blogs in order to get the trainee teachers to focus on specific aspects of a lesson.

The blog brings a well-organized forum for posting questions and feedback relevant to the observation that other trainees can easily see and respond to. These can be discussed in more detail in face-to-face class meetings, or can form the basis for research and/or projects on observation such as teacher/student talk, questioning techniques, classroom language, the use of multimodal resources, lesson segment transitions, etc. The range and scope of research and possibilities far exceeds what we can list here.

Lesson Plans

Lesson plans or lesson outlines are an important part of teaching. Teaching language is not just a matter of stepping in a classroom and talking in the target language, and yet there are many people outside of teaching who seem to think that that is all that is involved. A well-planned curriculum can fall apart if it is not supported at the classroom level by well-planned lessons, and teacher and student satisfaction is often first experienced in the classroom on a lesson by lesson basis. A blog can be a particularly useful media for presenting and discussing lesson plans. The lesson plan can be placed on the blog. Issues such as content, pacing, realistic objectives, follow-up activities, and appropriate level, can all be discussed via the blog giving both the author of the lesson plan and other trainee teachers a valuable professional resource.

Once the lesson plan has been implemented, teachers who followed the lesson plan can discuss how it worked in practice, including what aspects of the plan differed in their classrooms and why.

One important issue that is often raised in regard to lesson planning is flexibility. As experienced teachers, we all know that there are times when the best laid out plans simply fall flat when put into motion, and some quick thinking and on the spot designing can save the lesson. It is just as valuable as a teacher training exercise when a trainee teacher finds that his/her well-planned lesson just didn't seem to be working. How that situation is dealt with by the trainee teacher brings another dimension to the blog discussion.

Because the blog can be viewed over and over again, and because it provides a readily accessible resource of all student responses, trainee teachers can return to the blog several times for inspiration or to add further insights into lesson planning and implementation.

Theories and Methodologies

Much teacher-training involves an understanding of the development of language teaching theories and methodologies, their influence and their application in current syllabuses. The internet provides a wealth of information that can be accessed and discussed via a blog. Aside from saving an enormous amount of paper from copying articles and other references, links to websites, pdf files, access to online journals (if available), can all be added to the blog. For instance, let's say we are studying the development and influence of Wilkins' notional syllabus. One can first upload key pages of Wilkins' book in pdf to make the original available to the students. This alone, could form the basis of a blog discussion. Much, however, has been written about notional syllabuses, and the blog could link to sites such as Ted Powers' English Language Learning and Teaching <www.btinternet.com> which gives a brief overview and some other links to relevant resources, or Henry Widdowson's (1979) chapter in *Explorations in Applied Linguistics* on notional syllabuses available at <http://fds.oup.com> or Keith Johnson's (2006) article, "Revisiting Wilkins' Notional Syllabuses" from the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*.

Key questions on notional syllabuses, how they have been used, criticisms of notional syllabuses etc. can form the basis of a lively and worthwhile blog discussion. Students have time to read and digest the readings, post their response(s), look at what other students have written, raise questions etc. The blog can then become an excellent resource for more research or projects on theories and methodologies in language teaching.

Conclusion

At a recent lecture a speaker commented on his reservations regarding online learning in general. His feeling was that online learning would increase the isolation he believes technology imposes. This fear of technology is not new and it seems that at each step along its progression, it is natural and perhaps prudent for reservations to arise. In the case of blogs and other Web 2.0 technologies, however, the concern that technology increases isolation appears to neglect the inherently social aspects of Web 2.0. Blogs, rather than isolating learners, have the potential to create even more interaction. Jeffrey Felix in *Edublogging: Instructions for the Digital Age Learner* pointed out "four communication patterns teachers perceived as a result of blogging: (a) increased peer interaction among students, (b) increased teacher interaction with the students, (c) students exhibiting more positive emotions about learning, and (d) an increased sharing of ideas among students and with the teacher" (Felix, 2007, p. 2).

As early as 1995, Dede suggested that new media would “add to the pedagogical repertoire of teachers”, and Web 2.0 has opened up a vast range of possibilities in this regard. Across the globe the use of personal computers and mobile devices linked to the internet is steadily increasing. And as more and more people use the weblog as a forum for expressing their views, the faster and larger the international community of bloggers grows. As for the use of blogs as a pedagogical tool, Felix (2007) sees blogging as a possible “indicator of the teaching profession in transition.” He warns that if educators do not at least consider using this tool (where it is available), they will have difficulty relating to today’s learners (Felix, 2007, p. 7). The effective use of up-to-date technology in a well-informed curriculum, whether that be in EFL or ESL, teacher training is a key to successful development in the ELT profession.

Notes

1. These principles are adapted from Graves’ (2000, pp. 42-52) framework for developing the content of a language learning course.

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Adult Japanese Learners' Ranking of Six English Accents

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Abstract

British and American English teachers originally dominated the Japanese EFL landscape. Although teachers from other Inner Circle countries, Outer Circle countries, and even some teachers from the Expanding Circle are now employed by both private and public schools across Japan, this paper investigates the attitudes held by a group of thirty adult *eikaiwa* students toward five of the most common native English accents found in *eikaiwa*, and one Japanese English accent. Students rated the speakers on familiarity, comprehensibility, personality, nationality, and fitness as an English teacher. Intelligibility was gleaned from a cloze test administered at the end of the survey. The data show that although students ranked the American speaker rather highly across all categories, the British speaker was ranked at or near the bottom. The Scottish accent was preferred among all accents surveyed, narrowly edging out the Canadian accent. The investigation also found that students' proficiency had the largest effect on intelligibility and nationality identification. In addition, familiarity and comprehensibility did not play a large role in students' attitudinal ratings, perhaps signaling openness to unfamiliar accents.

Keywords: Accents, attitudes, native speakers, Japan, *eikaiwa*, English conversation schools.

Introduction

The world would be quite drab and dreary if English were spoken in the same manner across the globe. English now belongs to at least 750 million people, with less than half using it as their mother tongue (McCrum, MacNeil, & Cran, 2002), and as such, is continuously being altered to suit the needs of individuals and groups who rely on it for daily communication. For the purposes of this paper, it is important to distinguish between *accent* and *dialect* from the onset. Montgomery (1995) describes *accent* "as a term (that) is exclusively reserved for whole patterns of pronunciation typical of a particular region or social group (p. 69)", and *dialect* as "including not only matters of pronunciation, but also distinctions in vocabulary and sentence structure (p. 69)." Throughout the storied history of English, lexical items have been added and syntax altered to form unique local dialects. Other forms of English spoken in the world by "competent language users" (Lee, 2005) are simply pronounced with different accents.

However, is it the case that simply pronouncing lexis with different accents among the ubiquitous native speaker (NS) is something that is seen more as style than substance? Do learners attach values to accents, and what implications would this have for ELT in venues such as Japan? This paper seeks to explore these questions by examining the attitudes of a group of intermediate and advanced level Japanese students from a private English conversation school (called *eikaiwa* in Japanese) in Japan toward the accents of instructors from five native English speaking countries (America, Canada, England, New Zealand, and Scotland), and one interpreter who is a non-native English speaker (NNS) from Japan.

After reviewing some recent sociolinguistic studies which reveal the attitudes both NSs and NNSs hold toward different English accents, with special attention paid to EFL in Japan, a detailed description of the research methodology employed in this paper will be presented. The results will then be given, showing that preferences to accents do not always correlate with accent familiarity, comprehensibility or intelligibility. In addition, the students' English proficiency will be shown to be more of a factor in intelligibility and nationality identification than in the attitudes students hold toward different accents. Finally, the pedagogical implications of the results are discussed with specific regard to EFL in Japan and across Asia.

English as a Social and Political Force

“Between 1600 and the present, in armies, navies, companies and expeditions, the speakers of English ... traveled into every corner of the globe, carrying their language and culture with them” (McCrum et al., 2002, p. 9). In the EFL world, it may appear as though the former British Empire has simply “given way to the empire of English” (Philipson, 1992, p. 1). By adding America and Australia, two other Inner Circle countries, we have what Campbell (2002) refers to as the “center of EFL power and influence” (p. 62). This is paramount to the discussion on English accents as this power and influence results in status and prestige for these varieties of English. Nonstandard accents or dialects frequently have negative connotations and are “often thought of as standing outside the language” (Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 28). In England, British Received Pronunciation (RP) is seen as the prestige form by speakers and non-speakers alike (Holmes, 2008); whereas in Glasgow, the local accent is evaluated negatively by both locals and non-Glaswegians (McKenzie, 2008). These kinds of polar attitudes are also present when a NNS uses English. Gatbonton (1975, as cited in Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000) found that French speaking Canadians judged fellow francophones to be more pro-English and less pro-French as their proficiency in

English increased.

To maintain solidarity with their compatriots, some language learners are more obliged to speak English with a noticeable local accent, one that they can wear like a badge of honor. Linicome (1993, as cited in Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000) encountered a phenomenon he described as “peeling-off of foreignness” (p. 228), where Japanese children returning from an extended stay abroad were “persuaded” to speak English with a distinctive Japanese accent during class. In contrast, many other Japanese English learners have repeatedly been told and have come to accept that NS English is the most attractive form, one which to strive for in their own English learning (McKenzie, 2008). However, teachers and EFL professionals in Japan may agree that typical Japanese-accented English is a more realistic and sufficient goal for Japanese students to attain (McKenzie, 2008). Instead of making NS pronunciation the objective, teachers can use it more as a classroom resource from which to consult in order to avoid major deviations in pronunciation leading to unintelligibility (Jenkins, 1998).

Many English learners in Japan and across Asia will have more frequent English contact with other NNSs, rather than bona fide NSs, throughout their lives. One might think that this would dampen the desire to achieve native-like pronunciation and instead focus NNSs on lexis, syntax, and getting their message across. Of course, vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation work together to affect intelligibility (Derming & Munro, 1997), and many English learners strive for accurate and beautiful pronunciation alongside a good command of grammar. However, Jenkins (1998, p. 124) advises teachers to focus on “the comfortable production of core sounds and nuclear stress, and on the rules governing nuclear replacement” instead of the NS goal.

If language teaching were purely linguistic in nature, teachers and learners would not hesitate to embrace the suggestions made thus far, but language is also extremely social and political. As such, people make judgments, and often pre-judgments, based solely on accent. Rubin and Smith (1990, as cited in Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2002) found that NNS college instructors with strong accents were perceived by NS students as being inferior teachers. Negative perceptions based on accent are not exclusively held by NSs, but in fact, studies have shown that ESL learners also look down on speakers with NNS accents (Major et al., 2002). Even Japanese English teachers were less accepting of NNS accents than American teachers (Matsuura, Chiba, & Fujieda, 1999).

The attitudes that learners have toward English accents has a major impact on ELT management, influencing such areas as hiring practices, syllabus design, and teaching

materials (McKenzie, 2008). Although one assumes mutual intelligibility among NSs, accents which both NSs and NNSs are unaccustomed to can cause comprehension problems. For example, Wardhaugh (2006) posits that a Cockney speaker may have serious trouble understanding a person from the Ozark Mountain region in the southern United States. If two NSs cannot understand each other, what chances does a NNS English learner have with nonstandard accents? Major et al. (2002) found a positive correlation between attitude and comprehension (i.e., when attitudes were positive, comprehension increased), reinforcing the importance of accent choice in the classroom.

Attitudes toward English Accents in Japan

In their study on Brazilian attitudes toward English accents, El-Dash and Busnardo (2001) define *attitude* as “a disposition to react favorably or unfavorably to a class of objects” (p. 59). They discovered that the increasing English symbolism in Brazilian society has increased not only the status, but the solidarity young Brazilians feel towards American and British English. Their findings highlight the fact that attitudes change from generation to generation, often due to existing social and political pressure (Holmes 2008).

Prior to World War II, English education in Japan was based on RP, however, after 1945, American English became the standard. As a result of these historical influences and other social and political factors inside of Japan, Japanese students remain positive toward both American and British English (McKenzie, 2008). Matsuura et al. (1999) assert that Japanese students have few opportunities to be exposed to English varieties other than American. Although American English is the dominating force within the Japanese English education system, the situation is likely to improve in the coming years as the government-sponsored Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme continues to add international English teachers to its public schools. Today, according to the JET Programme’s website, they employ teachers from 41 participating countries including the Inner Circle (e.g., America, UK, and Australia), the Outer Circle (e.g., Kenya, Ghana, and Malaysia), and even some from the Expanding Circle (e.g., Indonesia, China, and Korea).

The number of participating countries is quite impressive, however in 2008, 57% of JET participants were from America, followed by 11% from Canada, 9% from the United Kingdom, 6% from Australia, and 4% from New Zealand. Japan’s *eikaiwa* also show a propensity to hire English teachers from these Inner Circle countries, evidenced by the fact that worldwide hiring offices are usually only found in North America, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand.

As accent familiarity has been shown to affect comprehensibility, intelligibility, and attitudes listeners have to different accents (Gass & Varonis, 1984; Derwing & Munro, 1997; Matsuura et al., 1999; Major et al., 2002; Holmes, 2008), it seems clear that the current state of English education in Japan would have a major impact on the attitudes students hold toward different English accents.

English Education in Japan

English education is a compulsory component of secondary education in Japan. However, as most English teachers would concede and many students would admit, the majority of Japanese students produced by this system are not communicatively competent, even after six years of schooling. Aside from the often criticized teacher-fronted, uncommunicative methods employed in the classroom, what are more relevant to the study at hand are the English accents students are exposed to.

Matsuura et al. (1999) found that generally Japanese students' familiarity with a particular English accent affected their perceived comprehension (i.e., the less familiar the accent, the less they felt they comprehended). Matsuda (2003) also asserts that familiar English accents are easier to comprehend for students. What may seem like an intuitive finding, likely influences Japanese students' favorable attitudes to American English as the "prestige form of speech" (McKenzie, 2008, p. 74).

Although the benefit of exposing Japanese students to a variety of 'Englishes' from the Outer and Expanding Circles is well supported (Wilcox, 1978; Matsuura et al., 1999; Matsuda, 2003; Canagarajah, 2006; Holmes, 2008; McKenzie, 2008), the current study focuses solely on the most common English accents from the Inner Circle found in Japan and a Japanese English accent, however the implications and consequences of ignoring other varieties will be discussed later.

The Research Study

Subjects

Thirty Japanese adult students from an *eikaiwa* in Japan completed the survey between September 29, 2008 and October 30, 2008. The average age of the students was 47, and 77% were female. Students had all been taught by the same Canadian male teacher (different from the informant in the survey) for at least one year. Half of the students were categorized as advanced, and half were placed in the intermediate cohort. Groupings were made based on grades received on EIKEN and/or TOEIC tests (see Appendix 3 for grade explanations).

According to the invented grading scale below, seven students were labeled ‘D’, eight students were labeled ‘E’ and together were grouped under ‘intermediate’. ‘Advanced’ students consisted of seven ‘F’ students and eight ‘G’ students.

Beginner	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	Advanced
EIKEN	5	4	3	Pre-2	2	Pre-1	1	EIKEN
TOEIC	10- 215	220- 465		470- 725		730- 855	860- 990	TOEIC

Materials and Procedures

The survey lasted approximately one hour, encompassing an entire English lesson, and was constructed around the verbal-guise technique (VT). The VT is a modification of the widely-utilized matched-guise technique (MT), developed nearly 50 years ago at McGill University (Lambert, Hodgeson, Gardner, & Fillenbaum, 1960), which employs the same individual speaking in a multitude of languages, accents or dialects. The idea of the MT is to hold the speaker, and hence the personality, constant so the results obtained will indicate informants’ attitudes to the language, accent or dialect and not to the individual (Holmes 2008).

The VT was chosen for the current study mainly for practical reasons: finding a speaker who could produce the six selected accents was not even considered, as the ultimate goal of the survey was to capture the attitudes of Japanese students toward genuine native English accents. The VT has previously been used to attain the attitudes Danish EFL learners have towards American and British English (Ladegaard & Sachdev, 2006), to examine the attitudes and stereotyping Australian adults have to children’s ethnic accents (Nesdale & Rooney, 1990), to assess U.S. listeners attitudes towards NNSs living in the U.S. (Linderman, 2003), to observe both NS and NNS attitudes toward regional accents in the U.S. (Alford & Strother, 1990), and more recently to investigate the attitudes Japanese university students hold toward standard and non-standard English accents (McKenzie, 2008).

Speech Sample Collection

Speech samples were originally collected from instructors from six native English speaking countries (America, Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand, and Scotland). The English teachers were all living in Japan, with the exception of the Australian who was teaching in Korea. The speakers were chosen because they represented the nationalities most sought after by both *eikaiwa* and the JET Programme in Japan.

After the six audio files were recorded and put on CD, a pre-pilot study was conducted

with three former students to ensure that the recordings were clear and audible. As a result, it was determined that the quality of the Australian speaker's recording was so degraded that it was distracting and the listeners would surely have trouble understanding the content.

Due to the poor quality of the recording and the difficulty in obtaining an improved re-recording, the decision was made to remove the Australian's sample and replace it with one from an advanced Japanese speaker of English instead. The individual was selected based on his TOEIC score of 910, the fact that he lived and studied English in America for seven years, and that he worked part-time as a professional interpreter. The decision to include a Japanese accent altered the original intent to assess the attitudes of Japanese students to six varieties of Inner Circle English, but was seen as an improvement over the original design as it allowed for insight into the attitudes Japanese students have toward other Japanese speakers of English. In essence, a chance occurrence helped to correct an initial oversight.

In order to collect a short, 'authentic' speech sample from each speaker the collection technique eventually developed and employed for this study was the 'Family Photo ID Task'. The speakers were each sent a different family photograph and instructed to record themselves describing it in detail for about sixty seconds, speaking as 'naturally' as possible. From the transcripts (See Appendix 1) it is evident that five of the six speakers described the families in a more detailed manner, focusing on clothing and appearances, whereas the informant from England talked about the family as if it were his own, narrating a fictitious vacation scenario. Although students were instructed to focus solely on the speakers' accents, this different genre may have confused some students and negatively influenced their attitudes toward the speaker. However, no comments were made following the exercise and the decision to use different photographs for each speaker was still considered preferential to having each speaker read the same script as a means to achieve 'natural' listening material, avoid listener fatigue, and inject some variety into the exercise.

The photographs were selected from the Internet and included in the study only if they contained a father, mother, and at least one child. To make the task a little more challenging for listeners, a 'decoy' photograph was selected for each 'target' photograph that was sent to the speakers, resembling the photograph in some way. The 'decoys' were not meant to confuse listeners, but instead focus them on the task at hand (see Appendix 2 for the target photographs).

Survey Listening Tasks

The survey was divided into the four main listening tasks described in Table 1.

Table 1

Listening Task 1: Comprehensibility Evaluation
Comprehensibility was evaluated using a seven-point semantic differential scale with “very easy to understand” at one end and “very difficult to understand” at the other. Students were asked to circle one number for each of the six speakers, labeled ‘Speaker 1’ to ‘Speaker 6’ while listening to the audio files for the first time.
Listening Task 2: Attitude Assessment
Attitudes were assessed using a seven-point semantic differential scale with bipolar adjectives on either side, arranged in random order with positive and negative adjectives alternated to avoid “an unthinking reaction” (El-Dash & Busnardo, 2001, p. 63). The following eight adjective pairings gleaned from the pilot study and listed here as positive/ negative were included: <i>friendly/ unfriendly; formal/ informal; soft/ hard; intelligent/ unintelligent; positive/ negative; natural/ unnatural; patient/ impatient; and professional/ unprofessional</i> . Students completed this section while listening to the speakers for a second time.
Listening Task 3: ‘Family Photo ID Task’ and Nationality Selection
The photographs were attached to the classroom whiteboard (one photograph per A4 sheet of paper) and students were asked to select a letter from A to L corresponding to the twelve photographs (six ‘targets’ and six ‘decoys’), indicating which photographs the speakers were describing. After selecting a photograph, the students were asked to write down the nationality they thought matched the speaker. Nationality selection was included after the comprehensibility evaluation and attitude assessment tasks in an attempt to reduce potential bias by removing focus from the speakers’ nationalities based on the claim made by Major et al. (2002) that respondents tended to categorize a speaker upon recognition of the accent.
Listening Task 4: Intelligibility Assessment
Intelligibility was assessed using a cloze test. Every ninth word was deleted, ignoring filled pauses like ‘uh’ or ‘um’, and replaced with a blank space. Due to the slightly varied lengths of the speech samples, only the first twelve spaces were left blank on each transcript. Before the survey was constructed, the transcripts were sent to the speakers to confirm their accuracy.

The listening tasks were all completed while the students were listening to the descriptions of the photographs. Therefore, the students listened to each speaker a total of four times. The last task students were asked to complete was a simple ranking of the six speakers indicating ‘the best English teacher for me’.

The Speakers

The five male native English speakers were all long-term residents of Japan (average length of stay was 8.4 years); all were English teachers, with an average age of 31. The Japanese speaker had lived and studied in America from 1995 to 2002. He was 37 years old and a professional interpreter. Table 2 shows summary self descriptions of the accents. It is

interesting to note the number of times that ‘neutral’ or ‘typical’ were used alongside the adverbs ‘pretty’, ‘fairly’ and ‘slightly’ to describe the accents. This can be seen as further proof of the difficulty in finding a truly representative speaker.

Table 2

Speaker	Personal Accent Description
Speaker 1 (AMR)	“A <i>pretty</i> ‘ neutral ’ American accent.”
Speaker 2 (NZL)	“ <i>Slightly</i> different from the typical Kiwi sound. A mixture of British cockney and New Zealand Maori, from my parents.”
Speaker 3 (JPN)	“A typical Japanese accent.”
Speaker 4 (CND)	“A <i>fairly</i> ‘ neutral ’ accent with a slight east-coast vowel distinction.”
Speaker 5 (ENG)	“An English accent. Southerner: London but <i>fairly</i> ‘ neutral ’.”
Speaker 6 (SCT)	“A <i>fairly</i> typical west-central Scotland accent.”

At the outset of this research, native English speakers from outside of Japan were initially sought. The reason being was that years of living in a foreign country undoubtedly has an effect on one’s natural accent. This notion was supported by two of the speakers, both of whom had been living in Japan for more than eleven years, when asked to describe their accent:

NZL: “Another factor influencing my accent is Japan. I’ve been living in Japan now for over a decade with mainly British, American, and the occasional Canadian as my English speaking friends. Last time I returned home many people were surprised that I was a local. Some said that I had adopted a slight Canadian twang.”

SCT: “... perhaps slightly modified by living overseas for such an extended period of time.”

To take advantage of the knowledge and experience these speakers possessed, they were asked to recall feedback, either positive or negative, they had received about their accents while living in Japan. All five instructors had received positive comments from students

indicating that their accents were ‘clear’ and ‘easy to understand’. AMR was often told that his accent was easier to understand than a British or Irish accent. NZL, CND, and SCT expressed some slightly negative reactions to their accents over the years. NZL was told by a Japanese co-teacher that his accent “was not correct” and insisted that he speak in a “strong American accent.” He respectfully refused. CND was told by a group of students at a company that primarily did business in Thailand, that his English was “too clear” and they wanted practice with Thai accented English. SCT was praised for his “easy vowel sounds” but received some negative comments about his “r sounds”. JPN was told by his American friends that he had a typical Japanese accent during his seven years in California, but that they could easily understand him. JPN admitted that he preferred American or Canadian English because he was more familiar with it, and said he had trouble understanding British and Australian accents.

The six speakers were each given a different family photograph and asked to describe it naturally for about sixty seconds. Of course, attempting to be ‘natural’ and adhering to a time limit is difficult, so there were bound to be some variations in speech length. However, in their study on NS attitudes towards NNS accents, Dewing and Munro (1997) found that the length of the speech sample did not affect the results. Table 3 summarizes the length (seconds), speed (words/ second), and the number of filled pauses associated with each speaker.

Table 3

Speaker	Time (seconds)	Words	Words/ second	Filled pauses	Filled pauses/ second
AMR	58	139	2.40	8	0.14
NZL	46	110	2.39	6	0.13
SCT	46	108	2.35	2	0.04
CND	72	153	2.13	9	0.13
ENG	59	121	2.05	5	0.09
JPN	77	107	1.39	22	0.29

AMR was the fastest speaker, although not by a significant margin, and JPN was the slowest by a noticeable gap. In his study on attitudes to NS accents, Wilcox (1978) also found that the American informant spoke faster than the other speakers.

SCT had the fewest filled pauses while JPN had the most. Since “stutters and hesitations

have a huge influence on people's judgments" (Holmes 2008, p. 419), it was interesting to observe students' positive attitudes to SCT's accent. SCT was rated as the most formal, professional and intelligent of all the speakers. Further findings will be discussed in the following section.

Results

The results are presented here in the same order as they appeared in the survey, with pre-listening familiarity rankings described first, followed by comprehensibility rankings. Attitudinal rankings, made during the second listening, will then be presented followed by the 'Family Photo ID Task' results and nationality selections. The results from the intelligibility cloze test, completed during the fourth and final listening, will then be presented followed by the students' rankings indicating the ideal teacher for them.

Familiarity

Twelve nationalities were initially presented to students, based on pre-pilot/ pilot study predictions. The countries, along with the average familiarity, based on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = very familiar; 7 = not at all familiar), are listed in Table 4. These rankings were made before students listened to the speakers.

Table 4

Rank	Nationality	Average Familiarity
1	Canadian	1.17
2	American	1.43
3	Japanese	1.57
4	British	3.03
5	Australian	3.73
6	New Zealander	4.60
7	Singaporean	4.90
8	Indian	5.07
9	Scottish	5.10
10	Thai	5.53
11	Irish	5.57
12	South African	5.83

Unsurprisingly, Canadian, American and Japanese varieties were the most familiar to

students, followed by British, Australian, and New Zealander; very similar to the distribution of JET Programme participants. Among the accents included in the survey, the Scottish accent was the least familiar to students.

Comprehensibility

The students listened to each of the six speakers in turn. After each speaker, they were asked to circle a number from 1 (very easy to understand) to 7 (very difficult to understand). Overall, CDN was the most comprehensible (mean = 1.50, SD = 0.68), followed closely by JPN (mean = 1.7, SD = 1.06) and AMR (mean = 2, SD = 1.31). NZL (mean = 2.07, SD = 1.28), SCT (mean = 2.43, SD = 1.25), and ENG (mean = 3.83, SD = 1.56) were rated the lowest. Comprehensibility was ranked differently than familiarity, with the notable exception of CND, who was ranked the most familiar and comprehensible.

The same rankings are observable when distributed by level. Both the intermediate cohort and the advanced cohort listed the speakers in the same order with CND, JPN, and AMR as the most comprehensible. The overall comprehensibility ratings given to the speakers by the advanced group (mean = 1.81, SD = 0.73) were lower than the Intermediate group (mean = 2.70, SD = 0.95), indicating that the perceived comprehension of the speakers as a whole was better among the advanced students.

Student Attitudes

The students rated the six speakers on eight positive characteristics. The average overall ratings are presented in Table 5, with the rankings in parentheses. Characteristics were deemed positive based on informal post-survey interviews indicating students' general wishes for an *eikaiwa* teacher.

Table 5

Characteristics	Speakers					
	AMR	NZL	JPN	CND	ENG	SCT
Formal	3.17 (5)	4.37 (3)	3.67 (4)	4.53 (2)	3.07 (6)	5.00 (1)
Natural	5.17 (2)	4.60 (3)	3.30 (6)	5.67 (1)	4.03 (5)	4.57 (4)
Patient	4.50 (1)	4.33 (3)	4.33 (3)	4.20 (4)	4.10 (5)	4.47 (2)
Professional	3.63 (4)	4.07 (3)	2.70 (6)	4.57 (2)	3.00 (5)	4.73 (1)
Friendly	5.27 (1)	3.67 (6)	4.33 (3)	4.30 (4)	3.70 (5)	4.47 (2)
Soft	5.17 (1)	4.20 (2)	3.60 (6)	4.00 (3)	3.70 (5)	3.93 (4)

Intelligent	4.00 (4)	4.83 (3)	3.93 (5)	4.93 (2)	3.80 (6)	5.13 (1)
Positive	4.50 (3)	3.93 (5)	3.93 (5)	4.73 (1)	3.97 (4)	4.67 (2)
TOTAL	35.41 (3)	34.00 (4)	29.79 (5)	36.93 (2)	29.37 (6)	36.97 (1)

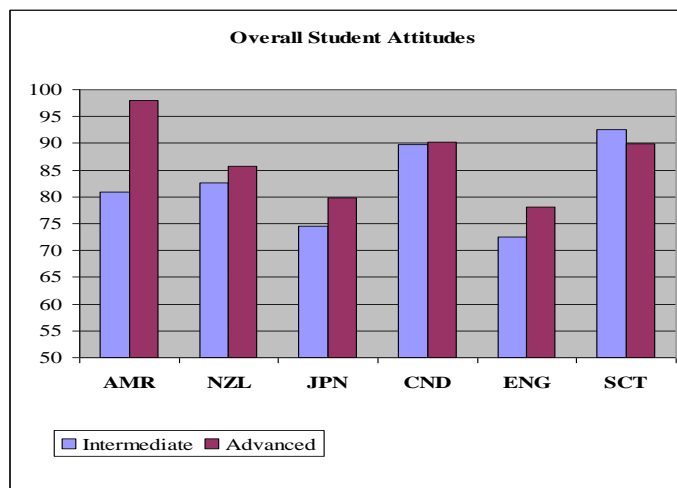
Overall ratings indicate that students were very positive towards Scottish and North American varieties of English, but rated British English the lowest, even rating the NNS higher overall. This runs counter to other investigations claiming Japanese have positive attitudes toward British accents (Matsuura et al., 1999; Matsuda, 2003; McKenzie, 2008). The low ratings may be due to the low familiarity and comprehensibility scores, the narrative style family descriptions, or it could simply be related more to this particular British speaker than to the accent.

Students' attitudes towards JPN were slightly better than those recorded for ENG. Although JPN was ranked at or near the bottom in five out of the eight categories, he was ranked highly in 'patience' and 'friendliness', validating Holmes' (2008) assertion that "local accents generally score highly on characteristics such as friendliness and sense of humour" (p. 413).

The Proficiency Effect

When the results are divided into the two proficiency groups (see Figure 1), it appears that the advanced students are generally more charitable overall, rating all but one speaker (SCT) higher than the intermediate group. Advanced students also show a much greater preference toward AMR, possibly due to the extended exposure they have had to American English over the years.

Figure 1



The Familiarity Effect

Although students were not very familiar with Scottish accents, SCT was rated most positively overall (including both intermediate and advanced cohorts); first or second in 6 out of 8 categories. He was rated as the most formal, professional, and intelligent speaker. This is likely due to his ‘sanitized’ speech sample, evidenced by the fact that he only had two filled pauses, the low ‘natural’ rating he received from students, and from his own admission that he used his “mid-Atlantic accent for dealing with non-Scots native English speakers”.

The Comprehensibility Effect

The comprehensibility ratings follow the same order as the students’ attitudinal rankings, with two notable exceptions: 1) JPN, rated second in comprehensibility, was ranked second to last in overall positive attitudes held by students; 2) SCT was rated second to last in comprehensibility but rated most positive overall by students. The findings suggest that comprehensibility influences attitudes but the two factors are not always positively correlated.

‘Family Photo ID Task’

The ‘Family Photo ID Task’ was not meant to be overly difficult, but more as a means to focus students. As such, most students did not have any problems successfully identifying the correct photographs. The one notable exception was with ENG’s photograph and the overwhelming selections of the decoy over the target by students. This was simply a case of the decoy matching the speaker’s description more closely than the target, in addition to the speaker’s description being less descriptive and more narrative than the others. Also interesting to note is that the same ‘D Level’ student made three incorrect selections, most likely due to self-proclaimed listener fatigue.

Nationality Selection

Table 6 shows the overall results, with the number of correct selections highlighted.

Table 6

Nationalities	AMR	NZL	JPN	CND	ENG	SCT	TOTAL
American	10	3	1	10	1	2	27
Australian	3	6	1	1	9	0	20
British	0	4	1	6	3	6	20

Canadian	6	6	0	7	0	0	19
Indian	4	3	0	0	5	6	18
Irish	0	0	1	0	6	3	10
Japanese	0	1	20	0	0	0	21
New Zealander	0	0	3	1	0	0	4
Scottish	1	0	0	1	2	5	9
Singaporean	2	3	2	1	1	4	13
South African	2	4	0	3	0	2	11
Thai	2	0	1	0	3	2	8
TOTAL	30	30	30	30	30	30	180

The variation in students' predictions is quite evident with each of the twelve possible accents chosen at least four times. The number of Outer Circle selections (i.e., Indian and Singaporean) for Inner Circle speakers is quite intriguing, indicating a lack of familiarity for both varieties. The most identifiable speaker was AMR, chosen correctly ten times, but also selected incorrectly ten times for the Canadian speaker, indicating the inability of students to distinguish between the two similar North American accents. This is further evidenced by the fact that seven students correctly identified CDN as Canadian, and six students thought AMR was Canadian.

It was also quite interesting that no students identified NZL's accent. This is likely due to a combination of factors: 1) the students' unfamiliarity with New Zealand accents; 2) his parents' influence; a British father and Maori mother; 3) his own acknowledgement that he has picked up a Canadian 'twang'. NZL admitted that many local New Zealanders cannot place his accent when he returns home, so it is somewhat unsurprising that the majority of students recorded NZL as either Australian or Canadian.

Possibly least surprising was the overwhelming number of correct selections for JPN. This is likely due to the familiarity students have with Japanese English, yet ten students were still incorrect. The following two sections will discuss the effects of proficiency, familiarity, and comprehensibility on accent selection.

The Proficiency Effect

When the results are broken down by level (intermediate vs. advanced), as in Table 7, it seems quite clear that proficiency plays a major role in nationality/ accent selection with the

advanced group choosing correctly 33 times to the intermediate group's 12 times.

Table 7

Level	AMR	NZL	JPN	CND	ENG	SCT	Correct
D	1	0	3	0	1	0	5
E	2	0	5	0	0	0	7
Intermediate Total	3	0	8	0	1	0	12
F	4	0	7	3	2	0	16
G	3	0	5	4	0	5	17
Advanced Total	7	0	12	7	2	5	33

The Familiarity Effect

Nearly 34% of students who rated the accents as 'very familiar' were correct. They fared better than those who rated the accent as 'somewhat familiar' (about 14%), and 'not at all familiar' (about 6%).

The Comprehensibility Effect

The three most comprehensible accents (CND, JPN, and AMR) were also the easiest to place for students, though in a slightly different order (JPN, AMR, and CND). SCT and ENG were rated low in comprehensibility and students found it more difficult to identify their accents. NZL's accent stumped students who had actually rated him fourth in overall comprehensibility.

Intelligibility

As stated earlier, a cloze test was employed to determine intelligibility of the different speakers. Every ninth word was removed, ignoring filled pauses like "um" and "uh". There were a total of 12 blanks for each speaker. The overall results from 2160 blanks (12 blanks X 6 speakers X 30 students), were 1301 correct, or 60.23%. When divided into proficiency levels (see Table 8), the results suggest that cloze test scores are closely related to proficiency levels.

Table 8

Level	Correct
D	39.88%
E	60.42%
Intermediate Total	50.83%
F	66.47%
G	72.40%
Advanced Total	69.63%

The intermediate students scored highest on JPN (70.00%), followed by CND (58.33%), SCT (57.78%), ENG (41.67%), NZL (40.00%), and AMR (37.22%). The advanced students scored equally high (84.44%) on JPN and CND, followed by SCT (74.44%), ENG (63.33%), NZL (56.67%), and AMR (54.44%).

The ratio of lexical to grammatical words, as well as the average length of the words removed was fairly consistent among the six transcripts, so it was somewhat puzzling to observe the low scores associated with AMR's cloze test, especially considering the high comprehensibility and familiarity rating he received.

Best English Teacher

The final component of the survey was to rank the speakers' accents on their desirability as an English teacher (1 = "Best teacher for me"). The results mirror the overall attitudes students held towards the speakers, although here SCT (mean = 3.37, SD = 1.69) is third, preceded by CND (mean = 1.77, SD = 1.07) and AMR (mean = 2.73, SD = 1.39), and followed by NZL (mean = 3.63, SD = 1.10), JPN (mean = 4.60, SD = 1.43), and finally ENG (mean = 4.90, SD = 1.37). Choosing a 'best teacher' was admittedly difficult for students and the results indicate that a combination of factors went into the selections.

Limitations of the Study

There were three noteworthy limitations of the study which need to be addressed. Firstly, the small sample size (N = 30) provided only a glimpse into the attitudes Japanese students studying at *eikaiwa* hold toward different English accents. However, the subjects can be seen as a very representative group of learners that one might encounter in Japanese *eikaiwa*. This could be regarded as one important study that invites follow up and replication.

Secondly, only students from the same *eikaiwa*, studying under the same teacher were surveyed. In order to examine how strong the suspected influence of the regular teacher is on students' attitudes, students with teachers from other countries represented in the survey need to be tested. There is specific interest in testing learners who study with a teacher from Britain or New Zealand to see if the attitudes they hold to ENG and NZL would improve.

Finally, as Wilcox (1978) states, "... it is next to impossible to find a truly representative speaker of any accent" (p. 125). The difficulty of finding a prototypical accent is compounded by the individual personalities of the speakers; every speaker had what Webster and Kramer (1968, as cited in Alford & Strother, 1990) labeled, their own "personality cue value" (p. 486). Thus, it is important to replicate the study with the same students and different speakers representing the same countries of origin.

Discussion

Based on the findings from the current study, one might conclude that a general North American or Scottish accent is best for EFL learners in Japan, or that British teachers should be avoided at all cost, but such judgments would be misinformed and would ignore thousands of qualified teachers from around the globe. It is unfortunate that labels like "nonstandard", or even "substandard", have been used to describe different world Englishes; these labels bring with them suggestions of inferiority to both language and language user (Wardhaugh, 2006). In a perfect world, English learners would have exposure to a rich variety of world Englishes and speakers, valuing each one equally. This, of course, is not a perfect world and learners, as well as school administrators, have certain preconceptions regarding how English should sound, how it should be taught, and who should teach it. When *eikaiwa* owners design and select teaching materials, make staffing decisions, or attempt to place a student in a suitable class, they must consider their unique context before selecting a path for students.

The implications for private *eikaiwa* owners regarding students' attitudes to various Inner Circle accents are significant. Just as Holmes (2008) says, "There is no universal consensus about which languages sound most beautiful and which most ugly" (p. 406), there is also no general agreement about which accent is best for *eikaiwa* teachers. Whether it is a Japanese businessman studying English to communicate with his Thai counterparts; a Japanese college student preparing to enter an Australian university; a Japanese high school student studying for the university entrance examinations in Japan; or even a Japanese housewife who wants to better understand American music and movies, context should dictate which

accent is most appropriate for the English student. *Eikaiwa* owners should also take heed of the lessons learned by Jarvie (2007) who interviewed *eikaiwa* students in Japan and found that regardless of the school size or lesson structure, the quality of the teachers was essential to student satisfaction.

Conclusions

Although the accents involved in this study represented five Inner Circle varieties and just one Expanding Circle variety of English, it is important to expose students to many different accents during the course of their English learning lives. As Wilcox (1978) astutely pointed out more than 30 years ago: “With the world getting smaller all the time, more and more importance will be attached to the understanding of information communicated orally in a host of different accents” (p. 127). Teachers and learners alike should be weary of the blind value placed on the “native speaker” and search for “alternative terms in the field of language teaching to eliminate the native speaker-nonnative speaker dichotomy which perpetuates exclusion, rather than inclusion of all individuals who are users of a language” (Lee, 2005).

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Appendix 1: Speech Sample Transcripts

Speaker 1 (American)

You've got a pretty happy looking family here. Everyone's focused on the little baby. Uh, on the left there's a girl with long brown hair, who looks like she's probably 5 or 6. Uh, then you've got the baby, I think it's a boy, whose eyes match, uh, his shirt pretty well. And then Dad's next to him. Dad's got, uh, black hair with, uh, a little gray and a black and gray moustache. And on his left is mom, looking over his shoulder. She's wearing some dangly earrings and has, uh, medium length black, black or brown hair, it looks like. Uh, everyone's looking right at the baby, who's holding up his right arm and covering his left ear for some reason. Uh, and if you ask me, Dad looks kind of old to be having kids at that age, so maybe he's a grandpa instead.

Speaker 2 (New Zealander)

Ok, let's see. Uh, I can see a family. They're sitting in the backyard. Uh, behind them I can

see some trees and other plants. There's, I think it's a bench, and maybe the side of a terracotta pot. And, there's the back of a wooden, maybe patio chair, of some kind. Uh, there's a mother, father and two children. The daughter and son and the father are giving the peace sign. Uh, everyone's smiling. The daughter's got long hair and she's wearing a red sweater, I think it's a turtleneck sweater, and, uh, blue jeans. The son's wearing a blue polo shirt and khakis. Uh, they're all happy. It's a sunny day ... and they're outside.

Speaker 3 (Japanese)

Here you go. Uh, I'm looking at one picture. I see, uh, four people, look like, looks, looks like a family. And dad, and mom, and two boys. Uh, dad, uh, he is wearing the black, uh, sunglasses. <laugh>, most of sunglasses is black, but, <laugh>, black sunglasses. And also, uh, wife is also wearing the, uh, sunglasses. And dad, he's wearing the, uh, green shirt, dark green shirt and, uh, short pants and holding, uh, his son. Uh, also, uh, mom, uh, uh, from, uh, her right, right side huh, right side, uh, she's also, uh, holding their, their son, too. Ok, and, uh, let's see, uh, they are walking on the beach, and looks like uh, uh, very fine day, nice weather and looks like, uh, they are so happy.

Speaker 4 (Canadian)

This is a picture of a family of four. It's a good looking family, everyone's smiling. Uh, the father has short brown hair. He looks to be in his late thirties or early forties. He's wearing a short-sleeved, checkered, button-up shirt. And he is, uh, kneeling behind his son and, uh, hugging him. The, uh, his wife, the mother of the family, has short blond hair. She is, uh, wearing; she looks to be in her mid to late thirties. She's wearing a long sleeved, uh, beige button-up shirt. And she is, uh, hugging her daughter, their daughter, who is between the mother and father. Their son looks to be between 8 and 10 years old. He has short brown hair. He's wearing a yellow t-shirt. And his younger sister could be between 6 to 8 years old. She has, uh, brown hair also, it's pulled back. And she's wearing a striped, uh, green and white shirt, and white pants or shorts.

Speaker 5 (British)

So, this is a picture of us on holiday last year in Ireland. That's my wife Kate and our daughter Linda, who's nine, and our son Josh, who's just turned seven. Uh, as you can see, it was a beautiful day. Uh, we're very lucky, uh, because the weather forecast had said it was going to rain, uh, pretty much for the whole week. Uh, on this day we were able to get out

and go into the countryside, and have an absolutely wonderful picnic. And, the kids were very happy because they'd been stuck inside for the last few days and, I think they'd had enough of going to museums. Anyways, so, here we were just after lunch, and enjoying our time in the park.

Speaker 6 (Scottish)

There are 4 people in this photograph. Uh, it looks like a family. There's a father, a mother, a son, and a daughter. The father and the son are wearing white. The mother is wearing black, with a blue undergarment. And the daughter is wearing a bright orange dress. The family look to be Middle Eastern. The, uh, father, mother and the son all have their hair covered. Although interestingly the daughter's hair is not covered. Also the mother's hair looks to be dyed brown and she's wearing quite a lot of make-up. The family all look very happy and the picture looks to have been taken in a park.

Appendix 2: Family Photo ID Task: Target Photographs






<p>Photo A</p> 	<p>Photo B</p> 
<p>Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://catedraldemaceio.com.br/portal/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/family_vacation1.jpg</p>	<p>Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://www.superstock.com</p>
<p>Photo C</p> 	<p>Photo H</p> 
<p>Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://www.mycaliforniaestate.com/global_pictures/Stock%20Family%20Photo.jpg</p>	<p>Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://www.superstock.com</p>

Photo J	Photo L
	
<p>Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://www.harrycutting.com/photos_people/baby-photo-171-JC5033.htm</p>	<p>Retrieved September 4, 2008, from http://www.fotosearch.com</p>

Appendix 3: EIKEN and TOEIC grade explanations

EIKEN

EIKEN Grade	Ability Level	Japan Academic Level
Grade 1	Advanced ↑	College/University
Grade Pre-1		
Grade 2	↑	High School Graduate
Grade Pre-2		
Grade 3	↑ Beginner	Junior High School Graduate
Grade 4		
Grade 5		

(Retrieved October 13, 2008 from <http://stepeiken.org/about/eiken-grades.shtml>)

TOEIC

The TOEIC® certificate exists in 5 colors that correspond to different score levels:

Orange	10 – 215
Brown	220 – 465
Green	470 – 725
Blue	730 – 855
Gold	860 – 990

(Retrieved October 13, 2008 from <http://www.eu.toEIC.eu/index.php?id=3080>)