1. Introduction and Purpose

Years ago, I moved to Japan, to teach English. Describing two experiences I had when I first arrived in Japan will help contextualize this paper. The first was a simple question a Japanese professor asked to me while we were chatting casually. After we discussed my home country of Canada he asked me something that, at the time, I found quite odd. He asked whether I thought it was better to teach American or British English? This experience may reflect how many people view language learning in Japan. The second experience had a profound impact on how I viewed the English language. A few months after arriving in Japan, I attended a festival where Japanese, Chinese and Korean groups demonstrated their own unique versions of the tea ceremony. I had the opportunity to talk with members from all three countries. It felt exhilarating to talk with them in English. However, the biggest impact came not from my conversations but from seeing people from three different Asian countries communicating with each other in English. I was surprised and in awe because for some reason, it seemed unnatural to me. For the first time, I realized that non-native speakers (NNS) use English to communicate with not only native speakers (NS) but also other NNS. This was the moment I realized English is an International language.

It is estimated that there are now over a billion people are using English worldwide and increasingly English is becoming ever more important for communication between NNS (Graddol, 1997; Crystal, 1997). For me, the experiences above help to illustrate two major issues facing me as an English Language Teacher (ELT). First, which English(es) should I teach and why? Second, do changing circumstances of how English is being used warrant a new approach to teaching pronunciation?

Choosing a teaching model should be based on the needs and attitudes of students (Starks and Paltridge, 1996 as cited in McKenzie, 2008, p. 66). The purpose of this paper is to both review current research and to gain insight into my own teaching context so that appropriate decisions about how to teach pronunciation can be made.

2. Literature Review
In order to discuss attitudes towards various accents, and why attitudes matter, certain terminology will be defined. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 will define attitude, dialect, accent, pronunciation, standardization, intelligibility and comprehensibility. Section 2.3 will briefly discuss EFL and EIL. Section 2.4 will review past research studies about attitudes towards accents and pronunciation in Japan.

2.1 Attitudes

It is important to answer two questions in regards to attitudes.
1. What are attitudes?
   2. Why are they important?

For our purposes, an attitude is as a positive or negative, relatively stable evaluation of something (accents - in our case) that has most likely developed from direct experience or learned through individuals learning context or wider social context (Zimbardo, 1999). Gaining insight into learners’ attitudes is important because the potential attitudes have for influencing behaviours such as “motivation, learning practices and successful attainment of language” (Tukumoto & Shibata, 2011, p.392; Bohner & Wanke, 2002). There is wide support for the importance attitudes play in language learning and as will be seen later, there have been many attitude related research studies done in Japan.

2.2. Dialects, Accents, Standardization, Intelligibility and Compensability

Linguists often discuss language in terms of dialect, varieties and accent. In this paper, dialect, or language variety, refers to a subgroup of a language. A dialect can be defined as a regional variety of a language that is viewed as separate from other dialects based on how words are pronounced, syntax and word choice between speakers (Alford & Strother, 1990, p.479). Stated simply, what separates a dialect from others is words, how they are used, when they are used and how they are pronounced.

Accent is one component of language used to distinguish one dialect from others or one group from others within the same dialect. Accent refers to consistent patterns of pronunciation within a group. Specifically, accents are phonetic distinctions found in, and between different dialects (Alford & Strother, 1990, p.479). Within North America alone, it is possible to identify several different varieties of English and many different accents (Wells, 1982). Different dialects and accent varieties carry varying levels of prestige and acceptance (Montgomery, 1986). Standardization of language is known as the process of codifying a language and forming language norms. Standardization sets rules and goals for how English should be used. Today written Standard English (SE) “is codified to the extent that the grammar and vocabulary of written varieties of English are much the same everywhere in the world” (Wardhaugh, 2012). Having a standard written English is
certainly a good thing for NNS trying to undertake learning English. Unfortunately, for English language learners, there is certainly no SE pronunciation. When it comes to making educational decisions about English language teaching, often a variety thought to have the most prestige, or as Jenkins (2002) states, “the NS accent with the widest currency among the learners target (NS) community” is chosen (p.85).

If the purpose of learning a language is to use it to communicate with others, a focus on intelligibility, or how intelligible ones’ speech is, would be the logical goal when teaching pronunciation. When discussing pronunciation, the term comprehensibility is also often used. Munro and Derwing (1995) describe comprehensibility as perceived ease of understanding.

2.3 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as an International Language (EIL)

Within the EFL model, teaching pronunciation tends to adopt a standard language variety and learners are encouraged to try and replicate the pronunciation of the model variety. General American (GA) and Received Pronunciation (RP) are the 2 varieties most commonly taught in Japan (McKenzie, 2008). Quirk (1988) postulates that this is important because being exposed to varieties of English could cause confusion for L2 learners. Perhaps it is hoped that mastering a model variety, say GA or RP, learners will ensure intelligibility with a wide audience of NS and NNS because of the popularity and prestige associated with those two language varieties.

However, there has been growing support for a move away from the use of the EFL model in some contexts. SLA research into the Critical Period Hypothesis has shown that NNS rarely achieve native-like accents (Scoval, 1988). If few NNS ever achieve native-like accents, is adopting a model that is unattainable setting up both teachers and students for failure and all the consequences failure brings? For example, Honna (1995) postulates, that for Japanese, fear of making pronunciation mistakes create anxiety and hesitation in using the language they have acquired. Next, does and EFL model propagate a NS-NNS dichotomy that is harmful to NNS users of English? A closer look studies in in section 2.4, provides some evidence that a potentially harmful dichotomy does exist in Japan and that different approach to teaching pronunciation should be explored.

Many have called for a move away from setting goals of native-like mastery found within the EFL model towards a focus on intelligibility or comprehensibility (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin, 1996; Jenkins, 2002; Honna 2008; 2001; Kenworthy, 1987; Morley, 1992). What has prompted this call for change? One reason is that NNS now outnumber NS of English and English is now being used in more interactions between NNS and NNS than between NS and NNS or even between NS and NS (Crystal, 1997). According to Jenkins (2002), changing circumstances and empirical research support the assumption that new appropriate pronunciation goals should be created and that NNS should no longer should feel like they are studying a foreign language in order to facilitate communication with NS of inner circle countries. Honna (2008) also urges to teach English as
International language, not as an American or British Language.

Within the EIL model, learners should be exposed to a variety of accents. In contrary to Quirk, Matsuda (2003) feels that not exposing students to varieties of English will result in confusion and leave students unprepared for international communication. There are many possible benefits of exposing learners to varieties of accents. Doing so may both help increase comprehensibility of various accents and help to create more positive attitudes towards them (Morrow, 2004 as cited in Imura & Kimizuka, 2011).

Then, how should teachers address accent or pronunciation in in the EIL classroom? Jenkins (2002) has tackled this problem and argues for her Lingua Franca Core. She claims that Lingua Franca Core is more appropriate because it is based on the mutual intelligibility between NNS and NNS rather than NS and NNS and that it is more “teachable” than GA or RP (Jenkins, 2002, p. 83). In debate of the Lingua Franca Core, Doel (2007) argues, based on his research findings, adopting the Lingua Franca Core may in fact result in pronunciation with poor intelligibility and acceptability. Also, Wells, (2005) argues that Jenkins errors in removing NS from the equation completely because NNS may still want to interact with NS. Certainly, Jenkins’ attempt to identify “which errors seriously threaten phonological intelligibility” between interlocutors of different L1 is noteworthy and worth consideration (Jenkins, 2002, p.99). In the end, whether one ascribes to an EFL or EIL model, focus should be “on matters that most impede intelligibility” (Wells, 2005, p.10).

2.4 Attitudes towards English and Varieties of English in Japan
There have been several studies conducted into the attitudes of Japanese towards English. It will be helpful to briefly look at some of the researchers conclusions as the findings of my action-research study have found similar results.

In a large-scale research study involving 11 Japanese universities and 558 students of English, McKenzie investigated recognition and attitudes towards 6 varieties of English. He found that his informants rated “native/inner circle Englishes significantly higher that speakers of non-native/expanding circle varieties” and that a “clear hierarchy emerges where US English is preferred, followed by speakers of UK English with Japanese speakers of English being the least preferred” (2008:114-115). Matsuda (2003) and Fraser (2006) found similar results and reported that informants chose American English over other varieties. A study by Jenkins (2007) found that NS also have negative attitudes towards non-native varieties of English. Interestingly, McKenzie (2008) describes “incorrect pronunciation” as one frequent manner informants distinguish NS and NNS. These research studies show strong evidence that many Japanese view NS pronunciation, especially GA and RP, as correct or real English and that NNS pronunciation, including their own, is deficient and less valued. Furthermore, Matsuda (2003) and Fraser (2006) claim that Japanese students want, and think it is important, to have NS -like pronunciation. Matsuda (2003) found that a large majority of Japanese
students had negative attitudes towards Japanese English pronunciation and that 45% of students felt their English was unintelligible. Conversely, Fraser (2006) found that 94.7% of her Japanese respondents found Japanese English as being easy to understand. This however, is not surprising as Japanese English is most likely the variety of English in which they have had the most exposure with. This finding says nothing about how comprehensible they feel their speech is to other English speakers. In a study on Asian varieties of English Tukumoto and Shibata (2011) conclude that

...the dichotomy of NS vs. NNS still affects learners of English when they judge the value of the English they use: the NNS tend to endorse a native variety of English and be reluctant to accept their own and other non-native varieties (p.393).

An undercurrent in much of the research has shown that a familiarity with a NS variety often resulted in a more positive attitude towards that variety. I have seen this in my own teaching. Students whom return from study abroad programs in inner circle countries such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand often return and express positive attitudes towards that countries’ accent. However, in contrast familiarity with a NNS variety does not guarantee positive attitudes towards that variety as was found in this research study (see section 4). Overall, these research findings clearly demonstrate the polarized attitudes between NS and NNS varieties of English in Japan. These findings are not overly surprising in an expanding circle country that has largely approached English Education with an EFL model. Explicitly, L2 learners developed strong attitudes towards NS varieties as correct. Faced with the near impossible task of mastery of the model accent, learners often develop dissatisfaction in their own English accent because it is not native-like.

3. Action Research Study

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the attitudes of my students. Although, my teaching context is found within the expanding circle, it is important that each context should be viewed as unique. By taking a closer look at the findings of this research study, previous research on Japanese students and from a review of the literature discussed above, some insights may be gained to help guide my teaching.

3.1 Participants and Instrument

Current students and graduates from a junior college (2-year) English program in rural Japan were asked to participate in this study. Both students and graduates were sent an email and/ or contacted via a social media site and asked to complete a survey via a well-known online survey Website. The survey consists of 16 items. Items 1 through 4 are multiple-choice questions designed to collect demographic information about the participants. Of the 30 respondents, 28 are female and 2 are male. This ratio is roughly representative of present and past student
gender distribution. 29 respondents are between the age of 18 and 25 and one between 26-35. 29 respondents reported Japanese as their L1 and one Korean. 19 respondents are current students and 11 are graduates. Items 5-16 were designed to collect data about attitudes towards different accents. Respondents were asked to respond to 9 opinion statements (items 5-14) on a 5-Point Likert Scale. The Likert Scale responses were: completely disagree, slightly agree, somewhat agree, mostly agree or completely agree. Also, for items 15 and 16, respondents were asked to select one or more preselected responses to two questions about which accents they felt would be useful for them to study. Items 15 and 16 also included and open ended option if students wished to choose an option that was not available. Items 5-16 and results can be seen in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2.

3.2 Action Research Survey Results

The results from the online survey for items 5 through 13 can be seen below in Table 1. The rating average for items 7 - 14 has been highlighted and will be addressed in the section 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Completely disagree</th>
<th>Slightly agree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Mostly agree</th>
<th>Completely agree</th>
<th>Rating Average</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item 5</td>
<td>speak English with a native-like accent.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 6</td>
<td>I think it is easy to understand native speakers English accent.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.04</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 7</td>
<td>I think it is easy to understand non-native speakers English accent.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 8</td>
<td>I think native speakers can easily understand my English.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 9</td>
<td>I think non-native speakers of English (but who have a different 1st language than me) can easily understand my English.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 10</td>
<td>I use (or will use) English to communicate with native speakers of English.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 11</td>
<td>I use (or will use) English to communicate with non-native speakers of English.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 12</td>
<td>I think that it is most useful to learn native speakers accent.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 13</td>
<td>I think that it is most useful to learn non-native speakers accent.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 14</td>
<td>I am confident in my English pronunciation.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For item 16, 86% of respondents selected America, 56.5% selected England and 73% selected Canada as useful for me to study the accent of the native English speakers from the following countries. For item 16, 33.3% of participants selected Korea, 28.6% selected China, 23% selected none of the above and 0% selected Myanmar as useful for me to study the accent of non-native English of speakers from the following countries as can be seen in Figure 1 and 2.

![Figure 1: Native accents selected as most useful to study expressed in % of the total number of participants.](image1)

![Figure 2: Non-native accents selected as most useful to study expressed in % of the total number of participants.](image2)

4. Discussion and Conclusion

In many ways, analysis of the data collected from this survey echoes previous research.
Respondents have more positive attitudes towards NS accents and feel that they are more useful to learn than NNS varieties. *I think it is most useful to study native speakers accent* received an average score of 4.20 (out of a possible 5) while *I think it is most useful to study non-native speakers accent* scored considerably lower with 2.92. In further support, when asked to select which accents would be useful for them to learn in Items 15 and 16, respondents selected NS accents 65 times but only selected NNS accents 23 times. Also in support of previous research, respondents overwhelmingly see GA (82.6% of all respondents), and RP (56.5% of all respondents) as useful for them to study. 73.9% of all respondents selected Canadian accent as useful so this finding will be addressed. Up to one third of respondents either visited or participated in a 16-week Study Abroad program in Canada. It may be tempting to conclude that time spent in Canada and/or a desire to interact with a teacher has resulted in a positive attitude towards Canadian English. However, caution should be issued for this finding, as a Canadian administered this study. This undoubtedly influenced responses.

Of the NNS accents selected, *Korea (7 times), China (6), none of the above (5) and Myanmar (0)* will be discussed briefly. Throughout their 2-year program, respondents participate in daily English conversation classes. These classes are often mixed-classes with Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Myanmar students (and occasionally other national) all studying together. It is not surprising then that Korea and China were selected as useful to study. It seems logical that studying their variety would be useful. In contrast, it does however seem odd that 0 respondents selected Myanmar as most respondents have most likely had some interaction with Myanmar English. Not enough information is available to make any conclusion about why this might be. However, one may venture that personality, social, and or cultural differences perhaps play a larger role in developing attitudes towards accent than simply being exposed to them. Also, as 5 students selected *none of the above* it supports that some respondents believe strongly that studying NNS varieties are not valued.

This survey perhaps contradicts Matusda’ s (2003) finding that 45% of her Japanese respondents found their English to be unintelligible. Respondents reported positively that NS (3.42 or 81 % of respondents selected somewhat, mostly or completely agree – see Appendix Table 2) and NNS (3.15 or 73% respondents selected somewhat, mostly or completely agree- see a Appendix Table 3) could understand their pronunciation, which seems to indicate they feel positively that their English is intelligible. Again, however, caution should dictate that any conclusions be made. Participants in the Matsuda study were high school students enrolled in compulsory English
classes and the respondents of this study were college students and college graduates who chose to participate in an English program. If anything, this points to the need to look at each teaching context as unique. What is perhaps of value, is that participants reported a lower score (2.91) for confident in my English pronunciation than they did for how intelligible they feel their English is to NS (3.42) and NNS (3.14). This leads one to believe that for respondents of this survey, confidence in their pronunciation may be related to sounding native-like rather than being comprehensible. However, upon review, item 14 (I am confident in my English pronunciation) is problematic. Most likely, students’ confidence is related to their individual pronunciation goals. It is unknown whether sounding native-like or being comprehensible is of more import to respondents thus more care in devising the survey would have been beneficial.

Then, what information of value can be taken from this survey? Respondents reported that they do (or will) use English to communicate with both NS and NSS. It would then be of value to the students to be exposed to both NS and NSS accent varieties. The next paragraphs will discuss my opinions, based on my experiences as an ELT in Japan over the past 7 years.

I concur with Honna (1995) and often I feel my Japanese students are hesitant to speak for fear they will make mistakes or won’t be understood. Then, real problem is of course the negative feedback cycle that occurs when they are not understood because they become even more hesitant the next time. Thus, as a teacher, a very important, and practical way to aid students be intelligible it to ensure that they are intelligible. The previous sentence may unintelligible without further clarification.

If when talking with a student, their speech is unintelligible or incomprehensible and the teacher does not take some action to make the communication act mutually intelligible, the teacher may be potentially harming that and the other students in the class by both reinforcing their fears and not providing them the tools necessary to make themselves understood. Engaging in negotiation of meaning with the student may help the student (or teacher or other students in the class) identify and rectify the feature of the speech act that negatively impacted intelligibility. In this way, the teacher is benefitting the student(s) in many possible ways. First, the teacher is helping the student(s) to identify the problematic features of their speech. This may help the student to make the necessary adjustments necessary to make their speech more intelligible. Second, the negotiation of meaning process is modeling to students a strategy that they can benefit from. Thus, when they encounter intelligibility issues in the future, inside and outside the classroom,
they have a strategy that will help them both identify and hopefully overcome their errors. Thirdly, and perhaps of most value, negative experiences or feelings of failure may be replaced with positive ones. Jenkins (2002) has found that NNS can "work out for themselves which features of their pronunciation are potentially unintelligible for NNS interlocutors, and endeavour to replace them but I do not see any reason that this strategy could not be used with NS and NSS alike (p. 95).

However, the irony is, the longer I teach in Japan, the more accustomed I become to how Japanese students speak English, and the more comprehensible their speech becomes. Also, I have also learned the parts of my speech are problematic to Japanese speakers of English and may, consciously or unconsciously, alter my speech to make it more comprehensible to my students. In essence, because of hundreds or thousands of hours spent interacting with Japanese speakers of English, I am no longer and authentic NS. In a positive light, if my students are incomprehensible to me, they will most certainly be incomprehensible to others that have less exposure with Japanese English. In that way, my interactions with students could be seen as a pilot program for their pronunciation. To use an analogy, the teacher then could be seen as a bicycle with training wheels. For many learning to ride, a bicycle with training wheels is far less threatening than an authentic one. Once enough skill and confidence is gained, the training wheels can come off and the real fun can begin.

4.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, English is playing an ever more important role in the world. When making educational decisions it is vital that the learning context be considered. Few ELT are trained phonologists. Certainly, if the teachers value intelligibility, endeavouring to learn about which features of speech harm the intelligibility of their students is a worthwhile pursuit. Gathering information from research literature, from your students and from practical experience are all steps that educators can take to help make appropriate decisions that will benefit their students.

References


Appendix

Table 2. Response % and Response count for item 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>America</td>
<td>82.6%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>26.1%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none of the above</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Response % and Response count for item 16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holland</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of the above</td>
<td>23.8%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>