

A Study of Components and Factors Constituting the Images of Japanese EFL Learners

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Recent studies have critically examined unconscious learning processes via English Language Teaching (ELT) materials. One recurring ideology seen in these ELT materials is the depiction of Japanese people as “bad speakers of English,” which may have a detrimental effect on Japanese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners’ learning motivation and learning outcomes. This study aimed to discuss and develop a model that illustrates the components and factors that constitute the images of Japanese EFL learners. The findings elucidate how participants internalize and reflect on their personal experiences to negatively shape perceptions of Japanese EFL learners’ English proficiency. These insights underscore the necessity of developing English education policies and ELT materials that avoid ideological constructions of images, such as stereotypical portrayals of Japanese people, native speaker-oriented ideologies, overly positive images of English, and overly high expectations toward English education in schools.

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1. Introduction

Since Jackson (1968) and Snyder (1970) highlighted the potential influence of hidden curriculum on students’ unconscious learning of certain values and beliefs, an increasing number of studies have cast critical attention on curricula and teaching materials that may promote such ideology reproduction. ELT materials are no exception and recent studies have critically examined them from different perspectives with reference to race (e.g., Kubota, 2015), gender (e.g., Selvi & Kocaman, 2020), and other standards.

One prevalent ideology within the context of English education in Japan is the perception of Japanese as “bad speakers of English.” Although previous research has proven that this ideology lacks scientific evidence based on statistical analysis (Terasawa, 2015), it has potential influences that

cause learners to see themselves as bad speakers of English, affecting their learning motivation and learning outcomes. This type of negative competence construction (Park, 2004) can be seen in the context of Japan, and since various factors, such as influences from the media, educational materials, and educational practices, reproduce and enforce these perceptions, more research should meticulously analyze the process of learners’ negative construction of the images toward their own English ability.

In taking an initial step toward elucidating the process of implicit learning in the context of English education in Japan, the present study aims to discuss the components of the images of Japanese EFL learners and the factors that promote such ideological construction. This study also creates a model depicting the components and factors constituting the images of Japanese EFL learners using the Modified-Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA). First, this paper reviews previous studies on ideology reproduction and representation through ELT materials and practices and discusses how the curriculum, textbooks, and media may function as factors promoting learners’ internalization and reproduction of certain values and beliefs. The second half presents an analysis of interview data about learners’ images and perceptions of Japanese EFL learners and their English ability and discusses the components and factors that constitute the process of forming such images.

2. Previous research on the ideology representation and reproduction in the field of English education

This section introduces previous research on ideologic representation and reproduction in English education, primarily focusing on the relationship between ideologies and educational materials, including curricula, textbooks, and media.

A. Students' implicit learning and hidden curriculum

The discussion of students' implicit learning via educational materials and practices was first vividly highlighted by the emergence of the concept of "the hidden curriculum." In Japan's English educational context, learners may unconsciously internalize certain beliefs hidden in various educational materials, such as "English ability is essential in a globalizing world" and "English skills will be a useful tool for Japanese workers." Although these beliefs have been scientifically refuted (Terasawa, 2015), they have persistent influences on Japanese society, and educational materials and practices would be sites for reproducing these beliefs.

While the primary focus of foreign language education research is the development of teaching methods and educational content and the examination of their outcomes, unconscious learning in the English educational context needs further investigation. The following are specific instances of educational materials that lead learners to particular ideologies.

B. Ideologies represented by textbooks

Since students may learn not only their content of its subject but also specific values and beliefs from class materials and teaching practices, educational materials should be carefully structured and produced. However, class materials, especially textbooks, have been criticized for not being value-neutral. For instance, Pennycook (1994: 178), a leading figure in linguistic imperialism research, argued that ELT materials are "never neutral" and "represent very particular understandings of language," which are "not merely random views but rather part of a broader range of discursive and cultural practices that emanate from the West." These criticisms have signaled the beginning of an

increasing number of studies that critically examined the representations of a particular ethnicity and its identity in ELT materials and practices (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Coffey, 2013; Ros i Solé, 2013).

Since the 1990s, similar criticisms have emerged in Japan, where English education has been criticized for being oriented toward Western values (Tsuda, 1990; Erikawa, 2013; Se, 2015). Since these studies have theoretically examined the hegemony of English and its potential influence, more recent studies have focused on the ideologies represented in ELT materials. For instance, Tajima (2008: 226-227) analyzed the characters that appeared in English textbooks in Japan and discussed that the Japanese character, Hiro is depicted as a "passive" person who is "poor at self-expression," whereas Jenny, the character from the United States is depicted as an "active" person who is "good at self-expression" and "tends to fight for justice." These depictions represent the stereotypical images of Japanese and American speakers, reflecting a USA-centric orientation that overlook the diversity of English languages and English speakers' nationalities. Furthermore, Oishi (2022) noted that although more recent textbooks started to include a diversity of nationalities, assistant language teachers appeared in elementary school English textbooks are all from the countries that Kachru (1985) positioned in the "Inner circle" such as Britain and the United States, and the American accent was used throughout the textbook.

These representations and orientations toward Western values reproduced in textbooks can be a significant factor in promoting learners' unconscious learning of the stereotypical images of the native English community and their own Japanese community. Moreover, implicit learning may affect the learners' self-image, motivation, and learning outcomes.

C. Ideologies reproduced by the media

The media is also a significant factor in reproducing certain beliefs and ideologies about English and English language education. Terasawa (2015) noted that the English spoken by Japanese elites, such as politicians and business persons, appeared in the media as one factor that produces the ideology that sees "Japanese as bad speakers of English." Since many Japanese people see these elites struggling to speak English, most people may overgeneralize these images

to “the average image of Japanese as a whole,” promoting the naïve conception of the Japanese public (Terasawa, 2015). Consequently, the portrayal of English use by Japanese people in the media, may have a significant influence on the images of Japanese EFL learners.

Moreover, the portrayal of Japanese speakers’ English production in fictional media such as movies and dramas can also be a factor in reproducing this ideology. Park (2004) argued that Korean comedy shows depict Korean speakers as bad speakers of English to create self-deprecatative humor, which may lead Korean audiences to believe that they will never become good speakers of English. Kambaru (2024: 52) also pointed out that Japanese speakers in English educational TV programs are often depicted as “bad speakers of English” who “become timid when they speak with English native speakers” and in some cases, “try to escape from talking with native English speakers.” Since English educational TV programs produced by the Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) have had a persistent influence on students’ English learning outside the classroom for decades (Kamakura & Hirataka, 2017), the reproduction of ideologies via English educational media is another significant factor in enhancing ideological reproduction.

3. Data collection and analysis

Data collection and analysis were conducted using semi-structured interviews and an M-GTA, a qualitative research method that aims to examine the process of social interaction through two steps: *open coding*, the process of forming categories directly from transcribed data using analysis worksheets, and *selective coding*, the process of integrating concepts into categories and creating a model explaining the relationships between concepts and categories (Kinoshita, 2003). The present study aimed to examine the process of developing and reproducing the images of EFL learners, so the M-GTA was used for data analysis.

The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, and each interview lasted approximately one hour. The interview data were transcribed into Japanese and analyzed using the M-GTA, and the results were translated into English. The participants were four sophomore university students from two different universities. The background of each participant is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Background of participants

Participant	Gender	University	Years learning English
A	Male	University A	8
B	Male	University A	10
C	Female	University B	12
D	Female	University B	12

Each participant was asked open-ended questions in Japanese. Examples of open-ended questions in the semi-structured interviews were as follows:

1. What are some of the characteristics that come to mind when you think of Japanese people using English?
2. What do you think Japanese people are/are not good at when using/studying English?
3. What methods do you think Japanese people use to learn English?
4. What do you think are the Japanese people’s aims of studying English?

The interviewer also asked questions such as “Why do you feel that way?” and “Do you have any specific examples or episodes?” to elicit the interviewee’s additional explanations and detailed narratives. Moreover, if the interviewees discussed their personal experiences, questions such as “Do you feel that what you mentioned is an issue that applies to other Japanese people as well?” were asked to distinguish between their perceptions regarding their personal experiences and that of the Japanese people as a whole.

4. Results and discussion

According to the analyses of transcribed data using the M-GTA, 25 concepts that explain the characteristics of Japanese EFL learners and their learning environment, such as “lack of confidence” and “hesitant to speak English during a class” have been produced. An example of an analysis worksheet explaining the concept is presented in Table 2. These concepts are then grouped into eight categories, such as “lack of opportunities using English” and “lack of English learning models.”

Table 2 The analysis worksheet for the concept <Hesitant to speak English during a class>

Concept	<Hesitant to speak English during a class>	
Definition	People do not try to speak English fluently in front of others during English classes.	
Examples	Participant B	I also avoid speaking like English native speakers (...).
	Participant C	Even in classes, no one usually speaks out when asked, "What do you think?"
	Participant D	Other people often feel resistance to speaking English, even though they can convey the message with an effort (...).
Theoretical notes	This tendency to hesitate to speak out can be seen in other subjects as well, but it is especially evident in English classes.	

Based on the analysis of the interview data, a model depicting participants' mental processes of developing images of Japanese EFL learners was produced (Figure 1). As shown in Figure 1, motivation and the opportunity to use English are stated as significant factors for English improvement, and the interrelatedness between the two factors is depicted by the two round arrows.

I think (Japanese EFL learners who are good at

English) first understand him/herself well, decide his/her aims, and actively challenge and engage in various experiences.

Since several participants had beliefs that motivation and opportunity to use English were significant factors for positive learning outcomes, many participants monitored and reflected on their experiences through these beliefs, identifying various obstacles to English learning in Japan. These analyses of their experiences are represented as six categories: "high hurdles when learning English," "lack of good English learning models," "difficulty of retaining motivation," "lack of opportunities using English," "national traits," and "feelings of resistance toward speaking English." Most participants developed these images based on inductive and subjective analyses of their own direct experiences and often reported somewhat negative images of the English learning environment in Japan.

These negative perceptions, based on their beliefs, lead many participants to form negative images of Japanese EFL learners. The category "Japanese EFL learners' English ability," illustrated at the bottom, shows that the images consist of six components characterized by their orientation

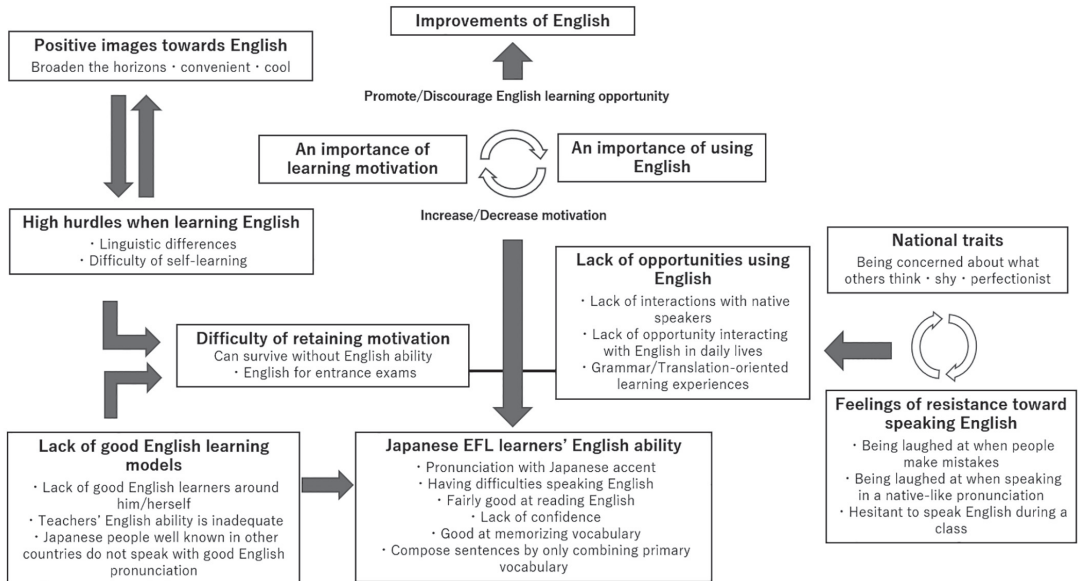


Figure 1 The model representing the processes of developing the images of Japanese EFL learners' English ability and their factors

toward reading skills and memorization, inability to speak fluent English, and lack of confidence.

The following section focuses on the four significant factors presented in Figure 1 and discusses the hypotheses derived from their analysis.

First, the category “high hurdles when learning English” on the left-hand side can be positioned as a factor increasing the difficulty of retaining motivation. The participants claim that many Japanese people have positive images of the English language, as can be seen in the remark that “we can broaden the horizons by acquiring English,” and this point itself can be a positive factor in promoting English learning. However, the participants pointed out that many Japanese EFL learners face high hurdles when learning English, such as difficulties due to linguistic differences. These findings led to the hypothesis that this significant gap between highly positive images of English and the difficult reality of English learning in Japan promotes the construction of a negative image of Japanese people struggling to study English with the desire to acquire English. Moreover, this image may constitute a process of self-deprecative perception of one’s linguistic community in contrast to the English linguistic community. These points are represented by two striking arrows between the two categories.

The images of Japanese people struggling to study English with a solid desire to acquire English have also been discussed in previous literature (e.g., Torikai, 2011). Although these images are shared among many Japanese people, their motivation and the necessity of learning English do not increase, according to statistical analyses (Terasawa, 2015), indicating that overly positive images of English do not correspond to the reality of the English learning situation in Japan. Since the findings of present study imply that overly positive images of English promote the development of negative perceptions toward difficult English learning situations in Japan and the images of Japanese EFL learners, the process of socially constructing these misconceptions should be further examined in future research.

Second, the category “lack of good English learning models” also constitutes a factor in creating images of Japanese EFL learners. The participants mentioned that the Japanese people around them, such as friends and family members, are not good at English, and even English teachers and Japanese people who are well-known in other countries do not speak English very well. The reality that

even Japanese people who are expected to have a high command of English do not seem to be good Japanese learning models further promotes the negative construction of images of Japanese EFL learners. However, these images are often constructed based on naïve comparisons between fluent English production by native speakers and Japanese people’s good English production with Japanese accents. For instance, Participant D stated:

I have often wondered if Japanese English teachers are good at English. (...) I have an image that English teachers do not speak with very good pronunciation.

These points show their images of English pronunciation as the significant indicator of determining English ability, implying that the images of EFL learners are developed through people’s naïve analyses of experiences based on personal beliefs. These findings indicate the hypothesis that Japanese people’s beliefs about the necessity of speaking with native-like pronunciation foster feelings that they lack good English learning models around them, leading to the construction of negative images of Japanese EFL learners.

As mentioned before, Terasawa (2015) revealed, using statistical analyses, that the ideology of “Japanese as bad speakers of English” is not based on scientific analyses; instead, it is provoked by overgeneralization of people’s naïve comparisons between high-class Japanese elites and high-class elites from other countries. Since many Japanese develop images based on naïve comparisons and generalizations, a good English learning model is essential for constructing positive images for Japanese EFL learners. However, as aforementioned, several textbooks (e.g., Tajima, 2008) and English educational TV programs (e.g., Kambaru, 2024) depict Japanese people based on stereotypical images, indicating the necessity of presenting Japanese models of English learning through ELT materials and practices. Moreover, the belief in the necessity of speaking with native-like pronunciation indicates a sense of native-speakerism, restricting learners from focusing on English abilities other than pronunciation and promoting the negative construction of images toward Japanese EFL learners. Future research should explore the process of developing these beliefs and discuss instructional materials and practices to avoid the construction of these beliefs.

Third, most participants point out the interrelatedness between “the feelings of hesitance toward speaking English” and “national traits,” illustrated as two round arrows on the right-hand side. For instance, Participant B stated:

In junior-high and high school, everyone laughed at a person when he/she spoke in native-like pronunciation. I recalled that when someone tried to speak in native-like pronunciation with an effort, people around him/her said, “What is that?” when we were in junior-high and high school.

Participants noted that many people hesitate to speak out, particularly in English classes, due to concerns about being laughed at by their classmates for their English production. This discourages many students from speaking English in front of others. In addition, some national traits, such as Japanese people being “shy” and “concerned about what others think,” were pointed out in relation to the sense of resistance toward speaking English. These comments led to the hypothesis that the experience of hesitating to speak English in front of others allows people to construct or strengthen a sense of national traits, while these imagined national traits also allow learners to analyze their experiences negatively, skewing the images of Japanese EFL learners toward negative ones.

These national traits have often been claimed as factors causing English learning difficulties for Japanese speakers; however, Japan’s national traits, such as “homogeneity,” are empirically refuted (e.g., Aoki, 1990). Yoshino (1997) also argued that overgeneralized Japanese culture is often conveyed by stakeholders in the field of foreign language education, leading to the spread of overgeneralized depictions of Japanese and English cultures in English education (Terasawa, 2015). Future research should focus on the process of constructing these imagined national traits in the context of English education in Japan and how these images affect the construction of negative images of Japanese EFL learners. As aforementioned, ELT materials and practices may constitute the factors causing the construction of stereotypical images of Japanese people, indicating the necessity for future research analyzing ELT materials through these lenses.

Finally, the factor “lack of opportunities using English,” illustrated on the right-hand side, affect the construction of

negative images toward Japanese EFL learners. One significant image of the Japanese public is that they lack the opportunity to use English in their daily lives, leading to the image of English classes in schools as a crucial opportunity for practical use of English. However, the images of English education in schools are their orientations toward grammar and translation exercises, regarding this point as a factor in decreasing opportunities to use English. Moreover, in relation to the third point, a school atmosphere in which people’s good English pronunciation is being laughed at discourages their opportunity to use English in schools, and most Japanese people miss the opportunity to use English during classes. From these analyses, we hypothesize that: the image of many Japanese people lacking the opportunity to use English in their daily lives leads to the assumption that English classes in schools are the only opportunity to use English. This leads to another hypothesis, that this perception further promotes the image of grammar instruction and school atmosphere as negative factors restricting their communicative chances, leading to the perceptions that Japanese EFL learners are unable to speak English well despite their decent English grammatical knowledge due to the failure of English education in Japan.

As previously mentioned, the necessity and opportunity to use English in Japan have not increased, according to the statistical analyses (Terasawa, 2015). Consequently, English education has been considered as a significant opportunity for Japanese EFL learners to use English. However, the present findings suggest various other factors that constitute the image of Japanese EFL learners, indicating that English education in Japan shoulder too much responsibility for Japanese EFL learners’ inability to speak fluent English. Moreover, this misconception has led to another misconception: grammar and translation exercises negatively influence English learning for Japanese EFL learners, although recent English education policies have shifted to the development of communicative ability (MEXT, 2018). These findings imply an overestimation and overly high expectations toward English education in schools, placing most of the responsibility for the Japanese’ lack of English skills on the educational system.

5. Conclusions and future directions

The present study aims to discuss the components and

factors constituting the images of Japanese EFL learners by analyzing the interview data using the M-GTA. The findings of these analyses reveal that the images of Japanese EFL learners are mainly composed of negative components characterized by their lack of English production skills, despite their decent grammatical knowledge. The findings also imply that these images were mainly developed based on inductive analyses of personal experiences, resulting in naïve conceptions rather than careful reflections on their experiences. Four hypotheses elucidating the factors and processes that foster the development of negative Japanese EFL learner images were formulated, and the following factors characterize each hypothesis:

- 1) Overly high images of English in contrast to negative images of Japanese EFL learners
- 2) A belief in the necessity of speaking with native-like pronunciation in relation to the feelings of a lack of good English models in Japan
- 3) The imagined national traits being the factors in negatively constructing the images of Japanese EFL learners and ELT materials as one factor spreading these images
- 4) The image that English education in Japan is oriented toward grammar instruction and overly high expectations toward English education in schools

Although these hypotheses should be examined and validated in future research, these findings imply the necessity to develop English education policies, educational media, ELT materials, and practices that avoid ideological constructions of images; specifically, there should be a focus on eliminating the stereotypical images of Japanese, native speaker-oriented ideologies, overly positive images of English, and overly high expectations toward English education in schools. The results of the present study, along with previous research, indicate that English educational media, ELT materials, and practices often fail to present effective Japanese models of English learning. Consequently, they risk perpetuating stereotypical ethnic images and native-speaker orientation. This underscores the necessity of analyzing current ELT materials and developing ELT materials to avoid ideological reproduction.

Moreover, the findings show that overly high images of English and overly high expectations of English education in schools promote Japanese people to view the present English learning situation in Japan negatively, leading to

negative conceptions of Japanese EFL learners. Since the construction of an overly positive image of English is often linked to the economic benefits and motives of business stakeholders (Phillipson, 1992), the increase in expectations toward English education will be promoted, owing to the increasing influence of business stakeholders on English education policies in Japan (e.g., Se, 2015). Therefore, English education policies in Japan should be developed based on an academic examination of English educational situations rather than relying on ideologies spread throughout Japanese society, avoiding the construction of overly positive images of English and overly high expectations toward English education.

Due to the limited number of participants, the model developed in this study cannot be over-generalized, highlighting the need for further investigation. Future research should conduct additional interviews with a more diverse set of participants using the model produced in this study. This approach will allow future research to validate the model and hypotheses developed in this study and present more detailed analyses of the factors shaping the images of Japanese EFL learners.

Moreover, since the participants' images of Japanese EFL learners were derived from reflections and analyses of their direct experiences, the present study was limited in investigating learners' implicit learning factors, such as unconscious learning via media and ELT materials. Eliciting detailed explanations to elucidate these implicit learning processes requires considerable interview time. Therefore, as mentioned before, conducting extensive interviews using the model produced in this research will allow the validity of the model to be checked and promote its sophistication, while also examining the factors promoting such ideological constructions by pinpointing the images and the hypotheses presented in this study.

Finally, to elucidate learners' implicit learning processes, future research should analyze learning materials such as textbooks and educational TV programs, using the model developed in this study. This process will allow for improvements in teaching materials and practices, thus avoiding demotivation and negative ideological constructions among Japanese EFL learners.

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