

# Exploring and Promoting English Study Abroad Beyond the Inner Circle

Adrian WAGNER

## Abstract

As a university that prioritises second language education and international collaboration, study abroad programs have been a major part of both the curriculum and identity of Momoyama Gakuin University. Currently, the study abroad programs are going through a stage of transition, as we restart study abroad after two years of travel restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this stage, we have found that previous partners have cancelled their programs, and due to inflation and currency fluctuation, previously popular destinations such as the USA have become prohibitively expensive for many students. Therefore, English study abroad programs that offer more affordable high quality English education and chances to use English outside the classroom in Asian countries close to Japan are the most obvious and pragmatic option. However, questions still remain if students will be as eager to study abroad in countries outside the so-called *Inner Circle* English countries such as Australia, Canada and the USA. This paper reviews research on Japanese students' experiences and learning outcomes of studying English in *Outer Circle* and *Expanding Circle* countries in Asia. Insights from this research will be useful for the successful implementation and promotion of new study abroad programs at the university.

---

**Keywords :** Study Abroad, EFL, ESL, Concentric Circles of English

## Background and Introduction

In the decades since researches such as Kachru introduced the system of concentric circles (Kachru et al. 1985) to classify the use and status of Englishes in various countries, the use of and diversification of English around the world has continued to evolve and increase. Certainly, English is now the most universally used lingua franca of the world. Kachru's views three circle model has been criticized by many as being outdated and problematic, mainly because the model is preoccupied with "historical events rather than the sociological uses of English," (Galloway & Rose, 2015) and is no longer an appropriate way to categorise the varying and complex status and use of English around the world. However, the view of English being the exclusive possession of some countries still prevails, especially in the field of English education.

Although exact numbers of English speakers around the world are impossible to state definitively, the data available shows clearly that the number of people around the world who speak English as a second language far exceed that of native speakers. The World Economic Forum (2019) estimates that of approximately 1.5 billion speakers of English in the world, only about 400 million are what might be called "native speakers".

Momoyama Gakuin University is an institution that, in line with its motto of "Raising Citizens of the World", has been offering various study abroad programs, including language study, cultural study, volunteer

## Exploring and Promoting English Study Abroad Beyond the Inner Circle

programs and internships to countries in Asia such as Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam for many years. However, until recently Momoyama has with very few exceptions only offered English language study programs (both short and long-term) in what Kachru would call the *Inner Circle* countries of Australia, Canada, England, New Zealand and the USA. On the other hand, students who study in English medium courses as exchange students in European countries, especially Germany and France, have been increasing in recent years.

From the academic year of 2022 and continuing until the time of writing in 2023, Momoyama has been in the process of restarting various study abroad programs which were suspended for about two years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, some of our previous partners have cancelled or greatly changed the programs they had previously been offering. So, as it had become necessary for us to seek new study abroad partnerships and programs, it was decided to explore options for English language study opportunities in Asia. Considering the lower cost of tuition and living in some parts of Asia compared to North America etc., as well as shorter and cheaper flights from Japan we hope that these new programs will enable more students to improve their English ability and expand their cultural knowledge through study abroad. However, doubts remain if students and their parents would be receptive to the idea of studying English in Asian countries.

Perhaps an obstacle to students studying in Asia is that the para-

digm of *native-speakerism*, a vague concept that includes beliefs that the English language is the cultural property of certain citizens of certain countries and emphasises “standard language ideology” (Jenkins, 2015). Referring to an earlier work, Holliday describes the influence of native-speakerism and its pervasive influence on English language education as:

*...an ideology that upholds the idea that so-called ‘native speakers’ are the best models and teachers of English because they represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of English and of the methodology for teaching it. (Holliday, 2014, p. 1)*

Although the concept of native-speakerism has been strongly challenged in the academic world, the view is still prevalent in the worldwide English teaching industry and seems particularly pervasive in Japan. Researching the entrenched beliefs about native speakers in relation to English as a second language education through analysing posts made in Japanese on Twitter, Tsurii (2022) found that:

*The fact that neitibu and its derived words are used in many microposts by different people indicates that these terms are pervasive and have possibly been naturalised in discourse about English learning and teaching. (p. 27)*

In an earlier study, Tsurii (2019) also found that a kind of home-grown native-speakerism is not only ubiquitous in general discourse, but is a

major factor in university marketing. A textual analysis of prospectuses of 38 private universities in Japan showed that:

*All of the analysed universities used terms highlighting a certain group of their teaching staff: mostly, 'foreign' teachers. All but two universities used a term containing 'native' at least once. The noun, neitibu kyoin meaning 'native teacher', was used most frequently, although this phrase does not make sense in either English or Japanese. (pp. 22-23)*

Despite, the fact that the term “native teacher” may not make sense linguistically, the prevalence of its use in marketing materials certainly indicates that it is an established part of the zeitgeist of English language education in Japan.

Shifting from domestic second language English education to study abroad, although it is only a snapshot of a limited number of students in a relatively rural part of Japan, the study of Inoue, (2019) might provide some insight into how the paradigm investigated by Tsurii (2019, 2022) manifests in study abroad programs. When asked about an ideal one week study abroad program, the most common response of an attractive factor among the 62 participants was that it be in the “anglosphere” meaning, Inner Circle countries. The study does not go into great depth about the reasons behind these choices, but it is highly likely that the idealised native speaker as being the only reliable source of English education and the cultural clout of these countries would be a significant

factor.

So, as Momoyama seeks to educate students about the concept of English as a global language, and promote English study abroad in Asian countries, it makes sense that there could be some reluctance from students and their parents who value English language education from native speakers and presumably highly value an immersion experience surrounded by these native speakers. In the spring semester of 2023, approximately four month long study abroad programs in two Asian countries (Singapore and Philippines) as well as Canada were offered to Momoyama students. Overwhelmingly, the majority (all but one) of students chose to study abroad in Canada. While no formal investigation has been done to elucidate the reason for these choices, casual questioning by the researcher (before the students left Japan) resulted in variations of the following answers being repeated by numerous students:

1. *I want to learn clean English and I think Canadian English does not have a strong accent.*
2. *Canada is a safe country.*
3. *Canada is a multicultural country.*

Answers two and three come despite the fact that Singapore is reported to have a lower crime rate than Canada (World Population Review, 2023), and almost half of the residents of Singapore were born abroad (Hirschmann, 2022) making it an extremely multicultural country.

It is difficult to predict how the current world climate of considerable

## Exploring and Promoting English Study Abroad Beyond the Inner Circle

instability would influence Japanese students' choice of desirable study abroad destinations. In an increasingly globalised world and considering the development of the economy in Asian countries, it might seem more likely that more Japanese students would choose to study English in Outer Circle and Expanding Circle countries, especially in Asia.

However, Japanese perceptions of the value of native speakers and perhaps concerns about safety would be an obstacle to a fast paradigm shift. On the other hand, due to various factors such as political instability and conflicts, the Japanese public's perception of which are safe/unsafe countries to study in may also shift.

Then again, the most definitive factor could be price as the cost of living in many western countries compared to Japan continues to increase due to various factors such as inflation and exchange rates. The study of Cavcic (2017) into perceptions and concerns regarding safety and anxiety about studying abroad, found that cost was a far greater concern than worries related to crime, culture shock etc.

Over the 2023 and 2024 academic years, Momoyama Gakuin University will offer students English language study abroad programs in the following Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Of those countries Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore would be classified as Outer Circle countries, due to historical factors such as colonization, while Indonesia and Thailand would be part of the Expanding Circle.

Considering the factors mentioned above, opening these additional programs offers the following advantages:

1. Larger numbers of students enabled to study abroad due to reduced cost
2. A wider range of opportunities to experience foreign culture and intercultural communication
3. Sending less students to each partner institution, which will hopefully lead to less use of and reliance on Japanese inside and outside of the classroom
4. A greater understanding of Global Englishes and ability to communicate with a wider range of people in English

However, the largest impediments to achieving these goal will seemingly be the concept of native-speakerism, entrenched in Japanese English education, and possible concerns about safety, whether based on evidence or not.

### **Japanese Perceptions of English Language Study Abroad in Outer Circle or Expanding Circle Countries**

The following is a review of recent research that reports on the study abroad experience of Japanese students who went to study English in Outer Circle or Expanding Circle countries. It is hoped that these will provide insight into what sort of programs we should offer and how we can promote these programs amongst our students. As Ikeda (2020) remarks, “There is very little academic research focusing on English lan-



guage learning in study abroad contexts outside of Inner Circle countries and study abroad destinations in case studies on learners from Japan focus exclusively on Inner Circle countries” (p. 3). Therefore, it was quite difficult to find enough papers focusing purely on Japanese students’ participation in English language study abroad programs in outer circle or expanding circle countries. As a result, the following literature review will also include studies relating to English language medium study programs, internships, and culturally focused programs in which increased English proficiency or opportunities for intercultural communication in English are stated goals of the program organisers and/or participants.

The study of Kimura (2017) focused on a second year Japanese student who studied abroad in Thailand. Although the student was attending courses taught in English rather than English language classes, the stated goal of the student was to, “to use and improve her English in an international environment” (p. 189). Through 10 interviews conducted throughout her time in Thailand, the researcher gathered information about the participant’s changing perceptions about English as a lingua franca. After initial interactions with other students in the program, the participant broadly classified other speakers of English into two groups, “good speakers” and “nonnative speakers” (p. 189). As to be expected, most of the group of “good speakers were L1 speakers of English from countries such as Australia and the USA, however, L2 users of English with a high degree of fluency and what was perceived to be a native-like accent were also classified into this group. Interestingly, the participant in the study remarked that they found it much easier and less requiring

of effort to communicate with the nonnative speakers. In terms of receptive understanding, the participant, “portrayed good speakers’ English as difficult owing to their rate of speech, use of slang, and lack of accommodativeness, and nonnative English as basic and easier to understand” (p. 190). Also, she found that she could make herself understood more easily by the nonnative speakers because they, “tended to understand her English without adjustments” (p. 190) especially in terms of pronunciation but also in terms of grammatical construction etc.

The change in her perception that the researcher found most remarkable was the pragmatism that developed over the course of study abroad, which seem to enable the development of communications strategies when dealing with various interlocutors:

*Whereas she used to strive to speak like native speakers of English, here she no longer regarded them as objects of admiration. Rather, she celebrated the utilitarian side of English (as a lingua franca) that allowed her to “communicate with people,” “study new things,” and “know about the world...” (Kimura, 2017, p. 192)*

The opportunity of studying abroad in English in an Expanding Circle country, particularly the experience of interacting with both L1 and L2 users of English with a range of abilities seems to have altered her perceptions of English as a lingua franca. The urge to perfectly assimilate to the L1 English norms of a particular country or particular group were replaced by a more egalitarian view of English as a communication tool

Exploring and Promoting English Study Abroad Beyond the Inner Circle  
available to anyone.

The study of Kobayashi (2022) focused on the order of English language study abroad destinations and the motivations for studying abroad among 85 Japanese who had studied abroad more than once. To avoid biases in the data, the author avoided the use of terms such as “native” and “non-native” by using the Japanese terms 欧米の国 (denoting western countries such as the Australia, Canada, USA, England etc. and アセアンの国 (denoting Asian Outer Circle countries, primarily Malaysia, Philippines and Singapore) in the survey.

Of the respondents, first studying in Asia, before studying in western countries was the slightly more common pattern, with 46 people, compared with 39 people who studied in western countries first. There was not a clear distinction between the two groups in terms of reasons for choosing this pattern as some of the reasons seemed contradictory and overlapped. Common answers for the reasons in the “Asia first” group were that they perceived it would be easier to live in countries that were closer culturally to Japan, and that it would be easier to interact in English with speakers who also used English as a second language.

Of the group who chose western countries first, their choices seem motivated by wanting to learn “real English” and interact with so-called native-speakers. Then, the choice to study in Asia afterwards was primarily related to interest in other cultures and wanting to “use” the English ability acquired through studying in the West. For example, one

respondent wrote that they did not want to study in Asia first to avoid developing “peculiar pronunciation” (p. 37). However, in contrast, a student who studied in the Philippines and then in Australia, also noticed that their Australian teacher had a strong accent (p. 38). From reading this research, one gets the impression that learning English from native speakers is considered to be superior among some Japanese, but those who do study English in Asia report increased awareness of the wide variation in English use and the importance of English as a lingua franca.

Overall, the study indicates that there is a paradigm shift occurring, in terms of the desirability or necessity of learning English from native speakers in an Inner Circle country.

Seemingly, the research did not analyse reasons related to cost. Another interesting point brought out by this research was the divergent goals of Japanese and other East Asian learners (such as from Korea and China). Even those Japanese who studied abroad multiple times, tended to maintain the position of “English learners” in case of their goals and self-perceptions, in contrast to students from other countries who primarily first studied English abroad, before going on to obtain degrees from universities in English speaking countries (p. 36), displaying a transition to “English users”.

The study of Ikeda (2020) focused on the affect that a short-term (4 weeks) intensive study tour to the Philippines had on first year Japanese university students. The study is qualitative, adopting an ethnographic

approach. The 103 students travelled to the Philippines with extrinsic motivation of achieving specific goals on language tests (TOEIC 600 or IELTS 5.0~6.5) that would allow them to participate in other study abroad and exchange programs in the following year. Despite this, the researcher did not focus on empirically measurable ability gains, but more on the students' perceptions of their own communicative ability and their attitudes towards English study and use in general. Data was collected through interviews and questionnaires (both administered before and after the study abroad period) and observations by the researcher who accompanied the students to the Philippines.

The program was very intensive with the weekday schedule consisting of, "six hours of one-on-one classes, two hours of group classes, and two hours of self-study time" (p. 5).

Firstly, in terms of improvement of English ability, the author writes that there was a noticeable increase in TOEIC achievement, claiming an increase in the "average of students' highest achieved scores to 650.6, with 39 more students having reached the 600 point benchmark compared to pre-departure". Despite the author not providing details of the pre-trip scores for comparison, it can be said that students' scores did increase.

According to the post-trip questionnaire, the most outstanding point was, "students collectively responded that their English communication skills improved more than their general English ability" (p. 7) (and

test-taking skills) with all but one of the respondents claiming this to some degree.

*Rather than looking up a translation and using words that were difficult for them, they started to use simple words to try to explain. Students considered such communicative strategies different from improvement in acquiring grammatical accuracy or range of vocabulary. (p. 7)*

This conscious use of communication strategies to compensate for ability echoes that claimed by the subject of the study of Kimura (2017) mentioned above. The realisation that users of English as a second language could obtain high levels of proficiency (as exemplified by the local teachers) was another positive perceptual shift that participants reported.

Overall, we can gather from this study that due to the affordability and accessibility of the program, the 4 weeks spent in the Philippines enabled a large number of students to improve their English, and hopefully inspired them to continue studying in the future.

The study of Nowlan (2020) focused on five Japanese university students who went on internships/study abroad programs in Malaysia, Vietnam and Cambodia. The primary goal of the research was to gain insight into how the participating students “perceive the value of their experiences – linguistically, professionally, and culturally – during and

Exploring and Promoting English Study Abroad Beyond the Inner Circle after their internships in three Southeast Asian countries” (p. 9). The researcher hoped to use the understandings gleaned to better promote the programs and encourage more students to take the opportunity to study in Southeast Asia.

Data was collected primarily through weekly journals, written by the participants during the period abroad. Upon returning to Japan, students answered a questionnaire and participated in a group interview/discussion.

In terms of linguistic gains, although some students expressed initial troubles understanding local varieties of English that they were not accustomed to hearing, they generally returned with a positive assessment of the affect the experience had on their communicative ability:

*The data indicate the value of expanding-circle students (e.g. from Japan) studying in the outer-circle, as participants often used words such a “improvements,” and being “impressed” and “motivated” by the L2 aptitudes of their local interlocutors. (p. 14)*

In line with the positive influences that interacting with competent and confident users of L2 English observed by Kimura (2017) and Ikeda (2020), Nowlan writes that, “Having interactions with others who also do not speak English as a first language (i.e. English as a lingua franca) proved to be motivating for many of the five participants, as it enhances their future ideal L2 self (2020, p. 14).” That is, interaction with these

speakers makes their goal of also becoming a competent communicator in L2 English more realistic and is a strong motivating factor. Perhaps for this reason, none of the participants in this study expressed regret at the lack of opportunity to interact with native speakers of English.

As for ways to promote the opportunities for both English language acquisition and opportunities for intercultural Nowlan offers practical suggestions.

First, he suggests that the most impactful method would be to provide a platform for returning students to share their positive experiences of study abroad in Southeast Asia with other students. Especially, the fact that study abroad in Outer Circle countries seems to allow, “interactions using English as a lingua franca have resulted in lower anxiety and a realization that one does not need to assimilate native-level English skills in order to communicate effectively,” (p. 15) may help encourage students whose lack of confidence in their own English ability prevents them from studying abroad.

The author also suggested creating opportunities for Japanese students to interact with other students from Southeast Asia (both on campus and online) as a way to attract more students.

## **Conclusion**

There is a great deal of literature to suggest that when Japanese think of studying abroad to learn English that the default ideal destinations of choice are still firmly limited to the Inner Circle countries. However, as a growing amount of research is suggesting, that paradigm is being



challenged and more Japanese are beginning to have a more open mind about this. Whether, this represents an actual paradigm shift or simply a practical reaction to the relative increase in cost of studying and living in traditionally popular destinations like the USA is still unclear. What is clear though from the literature reviewed in this paper is that those Japanese who do choose to study abroad in the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle do report gains in both linguistic competence and intercultural awareness.

Considering the findings of the research above, I propose the following things to increase the popularity of the new study abroad programs in the Outer Circle and Expanding Circle.

1. Explicit instruction should be given to students about concepts of English as a Lingua Franca and World Englishes. This instruction should include explanation of the role English plays in societies in Expanding Circle and Outer Circle countries. Also, students should be made aware of the variation of Englishes including in Inner Circle countries.
2. Students returning from study abroad in Expanding and Outer Circle countries should be given a platform to share their experiences with students planning to study abroad in the future.
3. If possible, representative students from each of the countries in which the new programs are offered should attend the study abroad explanation session and introduce their country of origin and make themselves available to answer questions from other students. As Momoyama welcomes a large number of international students each

year, this is feasible.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As mentioned above, there is comparatively little research regarding the experiences and linguistic improvement of Japanese students who have gone to study English in countries outside of the Inner Circle. Moreover, these studies tend to be small case studies, based on a limited number of respondents. Perhaps as a result of this, most research tends to focus on only the perceptions of the students, with little attempt to measure changes in linguistic competence through standardised tests. As far as I can find, there are no (or very few) studies that compare the experiences of students coming from the same institution and compare the experiences, perceptions and improvements of students who go to study in Inner Circle countries and Outer and Expanding Circle countries. The semester study abroad program at Momoyama would offer a good opportunity to do this as students travel abroad after taking the same preparation programs, go for a similar amount of time and attend the same number of classroom hours while abroad. Providing that a sufficient number of students choose to participate in the new study abroad programs in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand etc. such a study will be possible in the coming years.

### **References**

- Cavcic, A. (2017). Addressing “anshin anzen” anxiety: Tackling issues in studying abroad in an age of insecurity. *Ryūgaku: Explorations in Study Abroad*, Vol. 10 (1), 2-13.

## Exploring and Promoting English Study Abroad Beyond the Inner Circle

- Galloway, N., & Rose, H. (2015). *Introducing global Englishes*. Routledge.
- Hirschmann. (2022). *Number of immigrants in Singapore 2005-2020*. Statista.  
Retrieved from: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/698035/singapore-number-of-immigrants/>
- Holliday, A. (2014). Native speakerism.  
Retrieved from: <http://adrianholliday.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/nism-encyc16plain-submitted.pdf>
- Ikeda, R. (2020). Learning Outcomes and Self-Perceived Changes among Japanese University Students Studying English in the Philippines. *TESL-EJ*, 23 (4), n4.
- Inoue, N. (2019). Japanese university students' views on and interests in studying abroad. *Ryugaku: Explorations in Study Abroad*, 12 (1), 25-34.
- Jenkins, J. (2015). *Global Englishes: A resource book for students*. Routledge.
- Kachru, B. B., Quirk, R., & Widdowson, H. G. (1985). Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism. *World Englishes. Critical Concepts in Linguistics*, 241-270.
- Kimura, D. (2017). Changing orientations to English during English-medium study abroad in Thailand. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Transformation in Language Education*. Tokyo: JALT.
- 小林葉子. (2022). 日本人英語学習者による欧米とアセアン (準) 英語圏への留学順序と目的. *Artes Liberales= アルテスリベラレス*, 110, 33-45.
- Nowlan, A. (2020). Japanese university student experiences with internships in Southeast Asia. *The Journal of Worldwide Education*, 13 (2), 4-19.
- Tsurii, C. (2019). How 'native speakerism' manifests in Japanese university prospectuses. *Journal of Humanities Research*, 11, 1-42.
- Tsurii, C. (2022). Twitter posts on English language learning in Japan: Attitudes towards 'Neitibu' ('native speakers'). *Journal of Humanities Research*, 16, 1-38.
- World Economic Forum. (2019, November 15). *Which countries are best at English as a second language?* <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/11/>

countries-that-speak-english-as-a-second-language/

World Population Review. (n.d.). *Crime rate by country 2023*.

<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/crime-rate-by-country>