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Japanese English a variety of English? An academic snapshot

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Abstract

It has been argued by some that the Japanese have their own variety of English and that it is expected to become more accepted and recognised in time (Honna, 1998). Many reasons have been provided for this progression including the Englishization of the Japanese language and people (Iwasaki, 1994), and the rapid acceptance of English into mainstream society, media and the education system (Tanaka, 1995). This paper looks at whether Japanese English is considered a variety of English from the academic perspective within Japan and more specifically at a particular institution.

From the onset, a brief overview of the applicable literature that suggests Japanese English may be viewed as a variety of English is presented (Yoshikawa, 2005). This is then followed by the presentation, analyses (quantitative and qualitative) and discussion of the results of the pilot forming the bulk of the paper. The study considers factors that may have influenced Japanese English as well as the attitudes of the participants. The data has been gathered via questionnaires given to the participants. The information presented has been gathered from both the students and teachers at a university in Japan. A distinction has also been made between the Japanese English teachers and the foreign English teachers as their attitudes may differ whilst international/exchange students have been excluded. The study may also be used as a means of contrasting any changes in attitudes to Japanese English in the years to come.

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Introduction

The idea of Japanese English as a variety of English is becoming more popular. Honna (1998) suggested that with time Japanese English as a variety will garner more recognition and acceptance. Tanaka (1995) saw no end to the rapid acceptance and integration of English into mainstream society whilst Iwasaki (1994) illustrated the Englishization of the Japanese language itself. However, most of the research conducted on the subject has investigated specific aspects of the variety using a single data source or group rather than all involved. This research paper will present the results of a pilot study conducted at a Japanese university that is concerned with obtaining an updated and holistic snapshot from an academic perspective (this includes both teachers and students) as to whether Japanese English is a variety of English and the supporting evidence. Initially, a brief overview of the general academic arguments regarding Japanese English will be presented, followed by the results and analysis of four appropriate studies in the literature review section. The paper will then present the methodology used in the pilot study as well as the results and analysis of the results.

Brief overview of appropriate literature

This review will focus on two aspects;

- (1) Briefly presenting the general literary perspectives on Japanese English as a variety of English.
- (2) Presenting an overview analysis of four appropriate studies addressing the perceptions and attitudes towards Japanese English as a variety of English within university academic settings. The order they are presented in is oldest to newest.

In the past it may have been true that language and ethnicity were virtually synonymous (Coulmas, 1999). However, this is no longer necessarily as valid especially in reference to languages that are known as ‘global’ or ‘lingua franca’ such as English. Wardhaugh (2010) suggests that this affiliation and interconnected identity can be of such strength that some Japanese claim they cannot understand the fluent Japanese spoken by a foreign person. There are also those that argue that Japanese English should be classified as a performance variety rather than a legitimate variety of English in its own right (Morrow, 1987). Some argue that it has not gone through Haugen’s (1966) four stages of intervention (selection, codification, elaboration of function, and acceptance) nor is it a ‘standard’ English as defined by Trudgill (2008).

However, Kachru (2005) claims that a paradigm shift has occurred whereby the initiative in planning, administration, funding and teaching has gone from the 'old' imperialistic guard into the hands of its predominant learners and users i.e. the outer and expanding circles. Kachru also notes the massive increased usage in arts and literature and explicitly places Japanese English in the expanding circle. MacArthur (1998) had already categorised it as an East Asian standardised English. Pennycook (2007) illustrates aspects of identification and personality association already well-established with Japanese English. Kirkpatrick (2007) argues that the intervention and developmental processes for new varieties in the expanding circle can be faster and may even skip the first stage. Honna (1998) says that it will become more accepted and recognised in time.

Takeshita (2000) presents the survey results of 337 female students whereby they evaluated their own proficiency, their purpose for studying English and their thoughts regarding Japanese English. More than 80% of the students were unhappy with their own proficiency in the reading, writing, listening, and speaking. By a substantial margin their two major reasons for studying the language were to be able to communicate with native speakers and/or be able to travel to native English speaker countries. Only 52 students expressed any interest in being able to understand a non-native speaker. They also expressed overwhelmingly pessimistic views regarding Japanese as a variety of English.

As with most studies this too has its own flaws. The major ones are

- They are not majoring in English and the majority have just started university.
- Only the one gender; female

Yoshikawa (2005) gives possible reasons as to why it had fared so poorly. Out of 97 high school English teachers, 80% affirmed the necessity of reviewing other varieties of English in class, however only 7.8% did so. This lack of exposure would help explain poor self-evaluations.

Despite the global spread of English as a language for wider communication, many Japanese still believe that English is the property of the U.S.A. and Britain. They are ashamed if they do not speak English the way native speakers do. (Takeshita, 2000: 7)

This study included 483 students (261 World Englishes (WE), 100 English majors and 122 non-English majors). It showed clear differences between all three groups and even within the WE group depending on whether they were first year, second year or third year students. WE in general had a more accepting outlook regarding varieties and Japanese English. Interestingly, second and third year students were more accepting of Japanese English teachers and their exposure to

Singlish. Whereas, first years upon exposure to Singapore and Singlish expressed more interest in standard inner circle varieties. Non-English majors preferred Japanese teachers.

The major flaws:

- Their own perception of their abilities and competencies can affect it (Bohner and Wanke 2002).
- The students had not had adequate exposure to other varieties of spoken English be it at school or at the university and as such Singlish may have been startling.
- The teachers themselves need to be speakers of other varieties of English and from other countries.

McKenzie (2008) sampled 558 students towards six varieties of English speech (Heavily-accented Japanese English, Glasgow vernacular, Southern US English, Moderately-accented Japanese English, Glasgow Standard English, Mid-West US English). The students perceived US accented English as most competent followed by UK with last being Japanese accented (heavy being worst implying the more 'Japanese' sounding the worse the rating). Surprisingly though, in terms of social attractiveness, the students related best to heavily accented Japanese and least to Mid-West US. Therefore it seems that the more Japanese you sound the less competent you appear, though the more you can be related to. This solidarity vs. status theme appears to be a common recurring theme in attitude studies.

Further analysis indicates that Takeshita's (2000) study could have been flawed for similar reasons. For example, 104 more females than males preferred Glasgow standard, Mid-West and Southern. Those that perceived themselves as more proficient were found to favour the more 'standard' accents as did those with travel experience to English speaking countries.

The major flaws:

- RP (Standard UK English) was not used.
- Society is changing and people are able to distinguish accents. This is reflected in Rivers (2011) study where university students are somewhat able to pick out accents though variables such as speech rate can skew the results. The preference in terms of perception of competency remains with native speakers.

Tokumoto and Shibata (2011) illustrated exactly how much self-perception in line with societal context can affect self-evaluations. 128 students from Japan, South Korea and Malaysia were surveyed. 84.4% of the Malaysians either agreed or strongly agreed that non-native speakers could understand them with ease as

opposed to the 41.3% of South Koreans and 22% of Japanese. Similar wide gaps were seen for native speakers except the Japanese participants perceived themselves to be even less understood than with non-native. The Japanese participants also strongly identified with their accent being non-native as opposed to the Malaysians and Koreans. The Malaysians also perceived themselves as being able to communicate in personal cross cultural situations by a factor of 2.5 compared to the Japanese.

The major flaws:

- Did not take cultural upbringing into account
- The Malaysians had more inherent exposure to world Englishes

Methodology

Participants

There were 36 participants in total including Japanese students, Japanese English teachers and foreign English teachers from a Japanese university. The students were all Japanese nationals and English was their second language. International and exchange students were excluded from the study. The students had been studying English since at least high school and were within a competitive English major program requiring a minimum TOEIC score of 730. The students had volunteered in the study after being made aware of the study during a number of classes. The students are taught in an English only environment by native English speaking instructors.

The teachers were from the same institution but were subdivided into Japanese English teachers and foreign English teachers. This distinction was made in order to better illustrate any potential differences in bias or opinion that may be inherent within each group. The foreign English teachers are all from inner circle countries predominantly the USA, the UK, Australia, and Canada.

Pilot Study Procedure

Participants were given a questionnaire to fill out in their own time and without feeling pressured. The questionnaire given was completely in English and participants were encouraged to explore any avenues in their responses. The questionnaire allowed for straight forward responses, as well as, ratings, ranges and explorative, more detailed responses (which could indicate the reasoning and logic behind responses as well as knowledge).

The questionnaire takes into account the following:

- Participant attitudes: biases, self-evaluation, and differing needs.
- Linguistic knowledge: reasoning and evidence behind their responses

taking into account their backgrounds.

- Exposure to World Englishes: their own backgrounds, how they view other varieties in contrast.

As such the data requires both quantitative and qualitative analysis with the results presented in the following section. The analysis was carried out in line with fulfilling the core purpose of this pilot study; academic perspective as to whether Japanese English is a variety of English and presentation of any supporting evidence.

Results and Analysis

There were a total of 36 participants. Figure 1 below shows the overall breakdown of the participants in response to Question 1 from the questionnaire. The overall composition of the sample is important to note as there is a much larger proportion of foreign English teachers (47%) than initially anticipated and therefore it created the need to analyse each group independently and in relation to each other as opposed to a single collective.

The participants were asked in Question 2 to self-evaluate their proficiency level on a scale of 1 to 5 and the overall results are shown in Figure 2. All 17 of the Foreign English Teachers evaluated their English proficiency levels to be at '*Expert*' whereas one of the Japanese English teachers responded as being '*Advanced*'. Collectively, the 24 teachers account for the extremely high rating of '*Expert*'. Further analysis (Figure 3) of the students' self-evaluations indicated that none of them assessed their proficiency to be at '*Beginner*' and perhaps understandably nor at '*Expert*'. However, given their high TOEIC entrance score requirements and the competitive nature of this English major program, it would seem logical to assume that perhaps most would have assessed their abilities to be at

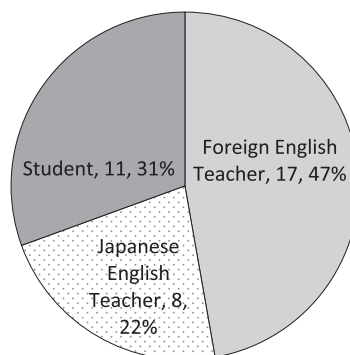


Figure 1 Overall Composition of the Participants

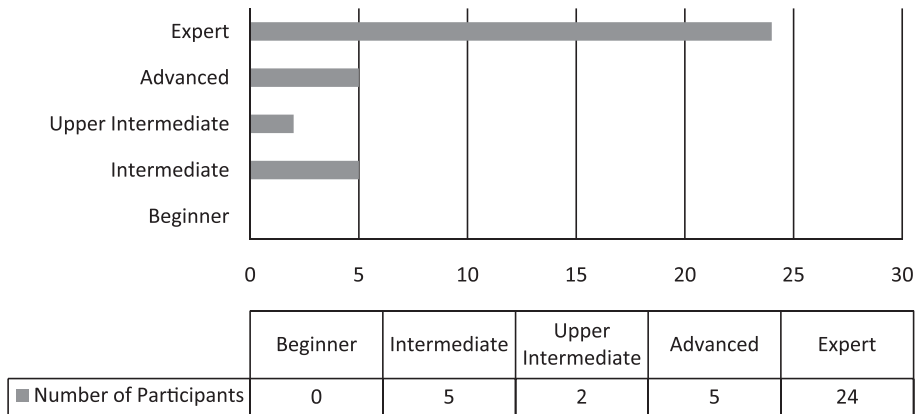


Figure 2 Overall participant proficiency level

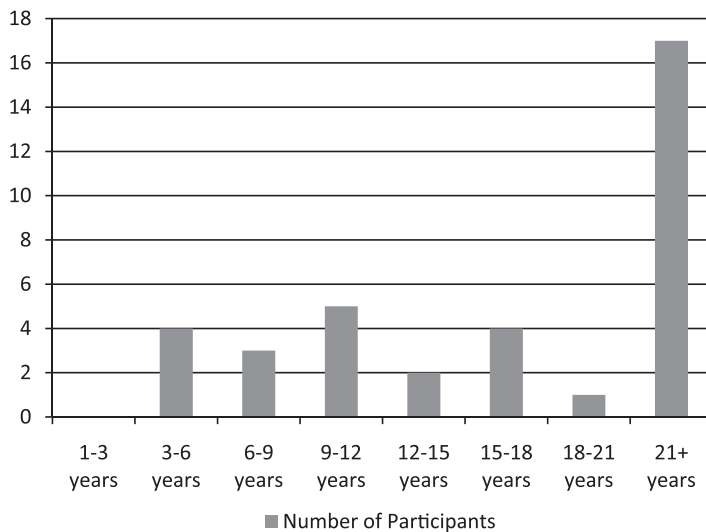


Figure 3 Overall participants length of English usage

‘Advanced’. However, the results indicated that whilst 36% responded as ‘Advanced’, a significant 46% responded at the second lowest rating of ‘Intermediate’ with the remaining 18% as ‘Upper Intermediate’. This coincides with similar discrepancies in other studies where self-perception and self-evaluation components were involved with Japanese students’ attitudes affecting their confidence even when compared to other Asian students (Tokumoto & Shibata, 2011). As such their own perception of their abilities and competence can be negatively affected by their attitudes (Bohner & Wanke, 2002).

The discrepancy in the results for Question 3 required further investigation into the possibility of whether the amount of time using the language may have had an impact on the participants’ self-evaluation of their proficiency. Figure 4 illustrates

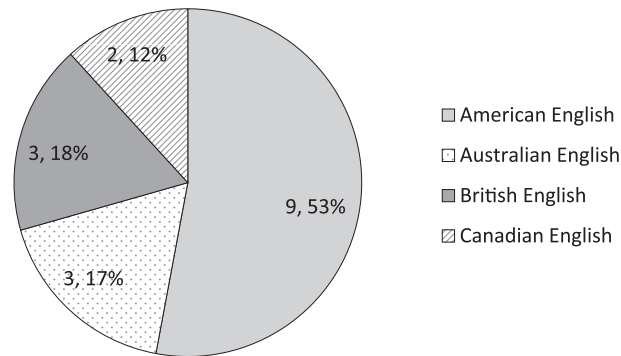


Figure 4 English variety used by the Foreign English Teacher

the overall length of time (in year ranges) using the English language. The outlier *21+* bar was excluded as that almost exclusively represents the foreign English teachers. However, in comparison the Japanese English teachers (bar one) in spite of their '*Expert*' self-evaluation ratings mainly centred in the 15–21 year ranges. A possible explanation for this difference may be the point in time from which they might have started counting e.g. University onwards only. In relation to the students it revealed a slight relation when accounting for the 36% '*Advanced*' rating as three students had chosen the 9–12 years range and one had chosen the 6–9 years range. However, there was no other discernible strong relationship shown.

Question 4 then tries to account for their purpose in using and or learning the English language. Both categories of teachers unanimously stated their purpose was for teaching and or working. However, the students collectively had different reasons for their use of the English language and by relation why they were in fact studying it; 46% for their current studies, 27% out of personal interest and as a communicative tool, and 27% for future endeavours and employment.

Overwhelmingly, 82% of the Japanese students considered themselves as users of Japanese English. However, there appeared to be a distinction between what they classified as Japanese English. Some expressed the opinion that Japanese English is the unique vocabulary, pronunciation and grammatical structures that a Japanese person may use which gives it its inherent form. Others added that it also encompasses the English spoken and understood by the general Japanese public. One student's opinion echoed that of one presented in Takeshita's (2000) study in that it simply does not exist as Japanese people do not use it as a first language.

From the Japanese English teachers, 75% ($n=6$) stated they used Japanese English whilst 87.5% were of the opinion that it existed in some form or another. There were also two outlier Japanese English teachers that evaluated their personal varieties as being American English and Standard English. Interestingly, the teacher associating their variety as American English was of the opinion that Japanese

English simply did not exist and all attempts at it were a failure. Whereas, the teacher associating with Standard English was of the opinion that Japanese English does indeed exist but whether it's correct and appropriate is the question. There is a definite correlation between the opinions of the Japanese English teachers and the Japanese students in so far as to what classifies Japanese English as a variety. Is it as suggested by participants of Yoshikawa's (2005) study that the 'imperfect' form that non-native speakers use as a communicative language to native speakers of English surmises the form used daily by the general population in everyday life. As one teacher pointed out 'native' English is not necessarily understood by Japanese English speakers regardless of how you classify Japanese English.

The composition of the varieties of English the foreign English teachers associated themselves with varied. For the purposes of this study certain generalisations were made to paint a simpler picture. For example though some of the foreign English teachers stated specific variations of American English such as Mid-West, Southern and Standard American they were all categorised for simplicities sake as American English.

Comparing and analysing the data of the foreign English teachers against those of the Japanese English teachers brought to light some interesting contrasts: Collectively, nine of the foreign English teachers (53%) were of the opinion that Japanese English is indeed a legitimate variety of English. Their collective opinions were overall based on two major points:

- 1– Japanese English, irrespective of definition, is a legitimate variety of English in the expanding circle just as are Hong Kong English and China English.
- 2– It has all the makings of a valid variety such as pronunciation, lexicon, grammar, feedback, gestures, articulation etc. whilst also having the ability to express oneself in it.

The following example excerpts illustrate these two points:

- *“Japanese English is a variety of English just as Hong Kong English or Arabic English or Australian English are valid forms of communication.”*
- *“Japanese English exists as it has its own unique pronunciation, vocabulary, phrases and borrowings . . .”*

In contrast, eight of the foreign English teachers (47%) expressed the opinion that Japanese English is not a legitimate variety of English. Their collective opinions were overall based on the following three major points:

- 1– Japanese English is merely a “common set of errors” and though its pronunciation and vocabulary may be distinctly Japanese it is viewed as an

imperfect form by the Japanese themselves.

- 2– It is not generally used to communicate within Japanese society and its people.
- 3– It cannot be used to effectively communicate with ‘native’ speakers of English nor in other countries.

The following example excerpts illustrate these three points:

- *“Exists as a common set of errors.”*
- *“. . . it’s not generally used as means to communicate within native Japanese people.”*
- *“. . . I don’t think Japanese English is another form of English such as the ones spoken by Singaporeans, Indians, and etc.”*
- *“. . . and the need for English as a lingua franca grows, there will be an intelligible but distinct Japanese variety of English.”*

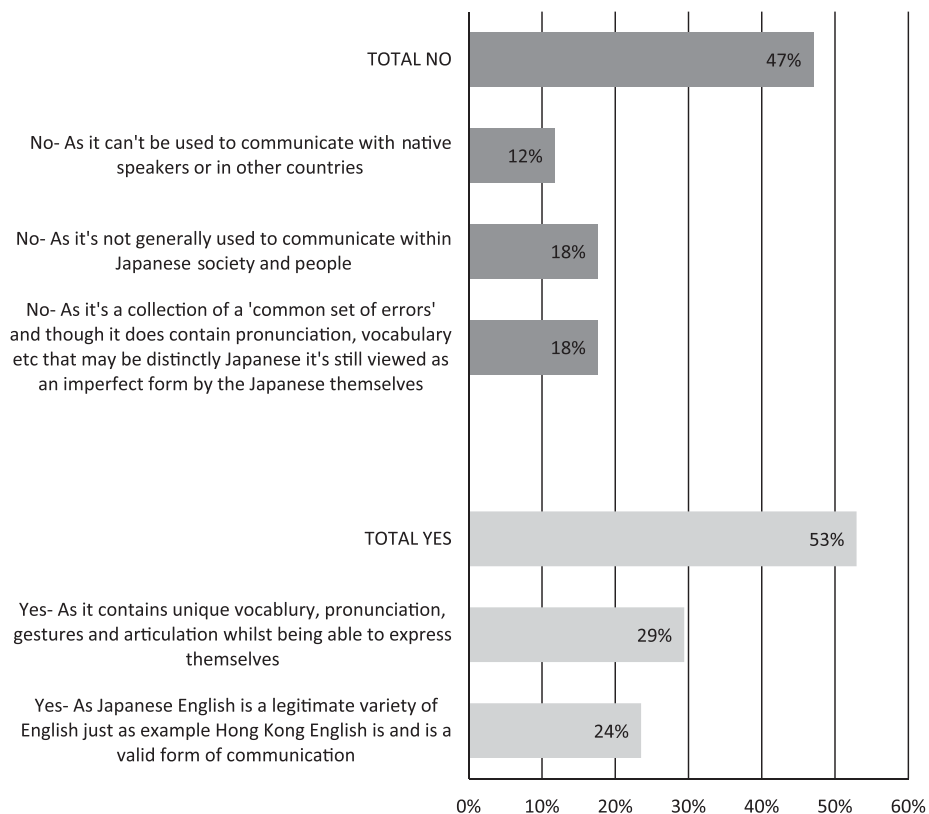


Figure 5 Foreign English Teachers generalised reasons as to whether Japanese English as a variety exists

Table 1: Is Japanese English a variety of English?

	Yes	No
Japanese Students	90.9%	9.1%
Japanese English Teachers	87.5%	12.5%
Foreign English Teachers	53%	47%

Figure 5 illustrates this contrast in opinions.

Further analysis, refinement and integration of all the segregated sections information so far provides us with an answer as to whether or not Japanese English is viewed as a variety of English at this institution. The data is tabulated and presented below in Table 1. As can now be seen, the Japanese English students and the Japanese English teachers overwhelmingly indicate that Japanese English is a variety of English. The Foreign English teachers are not as decided though but it does indicate a slight favour (53% vs. 47%) of Japanese English being a variety of English.

The overall collective factors that have been identified by the participants as having influenced Japanese English are:

- Early influence of Portuguese and Dutch languages and cultures in 16th and 17th Century.
- German language, educational and cultural influences during Meiji era including misuse.
- Western Media in general including TV shows, movies, music and print.
- American Culture.
- Pop and Hip Hop Culture.
- English language including romanisation of Japanese, loan words, misuse, etc.
- Japanese language including articulation, pronunciation, grammar, misuse, katakanisation of English etc.
- French language including misuse.
- Industry/sector adoptions and its permeation into society.
- Japanese media and its perception, imagery and use of English as being cool and trendy.
- Educational system.

The following are some specific examples from the participants that illustrate such influences:

- ‘*Don’t mind*’ implying never mind.
- ‘TPC’ implying time, place and circumstances.

- Back channelling such as gestures, sounds, pauses, repetition of sentences and nods imported from Japanese e.g. ‘*desune*’ (that’s right) and over use of ‘*sō*’ (to show agreement).
- Loan words that never existed in the Japanese language.
- Examples of industry/sector adoptions and subsequent permeation include ‘*conference*’ (implying a *meeting*), ‘*office lady*’ (a generic term applicable only to females working in an office) and ‘*salary man*’ (office worker on a salary).
- ‘*me-ru*’ (mail) but specifically implying e-mail only.
- ‘*pan*’ (bread) from the French ‘*pain*’ or Portuguese ‘*pao*’.
- ‘*manto*’ (cloak) from Portuguese or the ubiquitous ‘*tempura*’ from ‘*tempero*’.
- ‘*arubaito*’ (part time job) from the German ‘*arbeit*’ (work) as well as ‘*natalium*’ (sodium) from German.
- ‘*baikingu*’ (buffet) from the English ‘*viking*’.
- ‘*arukoru*’ (alcohol) from the Dutch ‘*alcohol*’ as well as ‘*kari*’ (potassium) from the Dutch ‘*kalium*’.
- American cultural icons such as ‘*baaga*’ (burger).
- Trendy or cool eg ‘*paapuru*’ (purple) as opposed to ‘*murasaki*’ which is seen as more traditional and old fashioned.
- Pronunciation of *F*, *V*, *R* and *L* eg. *V* and *B* ‘*terebi*’ vs TV.
- Carry on grammatical constructs/expressions e.g. ‘*sushi almost don’t eat*’ which is a literal translation from the Japanese ‘*sushiwa hotondo(almost) tabemasen*’ which would actually mean ‘*I barely eat sushi*’.

Conclusion/Discussion

The pilot study has holistically examined the academic perspectives at a Japanese university. It considered the opinions of both teachers and students alike. Through the use of the questionnaire and the subsequent detailed analysis of the data an overall picture emerged. An overwhelming majority of Japanese English students and Japanese English teachers alike are of the opinion that Japanese English is a variety of English. However, the foreign English teachers are not nearly as convinced and this may have something to do with their prejudice and bias as ‘native’ teachers of ‘proper’ English (Jenkins, 2009). The study also reconfirmed the importance of attitudes and its effects on questionnaires of this nature.

As with Rivers (2011) a concern that remains is the relatively small sample size of 36 participants. Also, though the results of the pilot study are relevant and accurate for that particular university and that calibre of students it may not be the

same everywhere. It is recommended that going forward a much larger and more diverse sample be examined and that the questionnaire be more targeted and detailed to allow for much larger collection of quantitative and qualitative data. It should also allow for more demographical data such as university year, overseas travels, home stays, gender and age.

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