



Centring learner experiences and self-perceptions as users of Global Englishes: Japanese undergraduate students in focus

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Abstract

This paper explores Japanese undergraduate students' self-perceptions of their English learning experiences within the context of ongoing internationalisation endeavours and the expansion of English language instruction in Japan's schools and higher education. Drawing on survey data from two universities, the study examines undergraduate students' experiences of learning English at both pre-tertiary and tertiary levels, as well as their understandings of and sense of connection to Global Englishes.

Findings indicate that students' awareness of the pluricentric nature of English sat in tension with entrenched native-speakerist proficiency benchmarks. Furthermore, the paper discusses how survey respondents navigated their discursive positioning as Japanese nationals, English language users, global citizens, and the nation's future workforce in relation to their recent English language learning experiences. This study aims to contribute to current debates concerning English learners' experiences in Japanese universities by

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augmenting student voice, highlighting the need for further pedagogical engagement with students as on-the-ground curriculum actors in higher education.

Keywords: English language learning; Japanese higher education; language learner experiences; internationalisation; Global Englishes.

Introduction

As in many other non-Anglophone higher education contexts, Japan's university policies and reform agendas over the last three decades have been characterised by internationalisation endeavours focused on Englishisation, "the increasing presence, importance and status of English at all levels in the educational domain" (Lanvers & Hultgren, 2018, p. 1). This emphasis on Englishisation-as-internationalisation (Galloway et al., 2020; Sato, 2021) in Japanese education policy and reform has led to a significant expansion of programmes that teach discipline content in English, such as English Medium Instruction (EMI) (e.g., Bradford, 2020; Hino, 2025) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (e.g. Gilanyi et al., 2023; Ikeda et al., 2021). Moreover, it has contributed to policy stipulation of 'English Only' approaches to English language learning, such as 'Teaching English in English' (TEE) (Hashimoto, 2015) across all levels of education (Machida, 2019; Rubrecht, 2024).

In 2014, the Top Global University Project (TGUP) was launched to "enhance the international compatibility and competitiveness of higher education in Japan" (MEXT, 2014, p. 1), with an explicit emphasis on expanding EMI to improve English proficiency and promote internationalised education. However, the TGUP has been critiqued for its narrow focus on linguistic competence. In particular, it has been argued that framing EMI student challenges primarily as issues of English proficiency functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that privileges Western conceptions of English and marginalises learners' broader linguistic resources (Mirhosseini & De Costa, 2025).

Extant research has comprehensively examined the manifold complexities of English language education as a proxy for internationalisation in the Japanese education context, particularly the challenges of top-down policy (e.g., Rose & McKinley, 2018; Yonezawa, 2023) and ambiguous policy guidelines (Aizawa & Rose, 2019). Overall, current English language pedagogy and practice in Japanese higher education—specifically EMI—continue to be problematised for limited consideration of disciplinary literacy (McKinley, 2025), intercultural learning (Glasgow, 2023), and diverse Englishes (Suzuki et al., 2025). Much research highlights the need to redesign English language programmes and assessment practices, so they move beyond a sole focus on language proficiency and instead incorporate embedded (bilingual) disciplinary scaffolding alongside learners' experiential and affective factors (Aizawa, 2025; Nagao & Chen, 2025). Further, several recent studies emphasise the importance of renewed efforts to internationalise university English language curriculum (Radjai & Hammond, 2018, 2024) in a way that is representative of and responsive to diversity in education (Tasaki, 2020).

Within these broader debates, considerable research has investigated the perspectives and experiences of teaching staff and both local and international students regarding English language study in Japanese universities (e.g., Galloway & Ruegg, 2022; Murata et al., 2019; Shao & Rose, 2024). The study presented in this paper is situated within an emerging body of work that recognises university English language lecturers and students as key curriculum actors (Curle et al., 2023). In doing so, the study aims to respond to calls within the field for research examining stakeholder perceptions as fundamental for informing learner-centred pedagogy and practice (Fenton-Smith et al., 2026). Specifically, it focuses on undergraduate students' self-perceptions of their English language use, their understandings of the multiplicities of Global Englishes (Muroya, 2023; Turnbull, 2025), and their positioning within tertiary language instruction contexts, where the hegemony of standardised, 'native-speakerist' English remains persistent yet continually evolving for stakeholders (Galloway & Rose, 2018; Samuelli, 2024). These subjective language learner experiences are embedded within broader neoliberal discourses that rationalise education, English language study, and the attainment of English proficiency as a pathway to success in a global knowledge economy (Samuelli, 2026; Smith, 2022). Acknowledging the constitutive effects of education policy on institutional practices, curriculum, and pedagogy (Rizvi, 2017; Rizvi &

Lingard, 2009), this study foregrounds students' lived language learning experiences (McIntosh & Wright, 2019) as a critical lens through which to examine English education provision within a higher education system characterised by economic policy reforms and their influence on how success in English language learning is measured and evaluated (Ruegg & Yphantides, 2025).

Gaps in Global Englishes integration and the learner experience

This study is theoretically grounded in research on Global Englishes (GE)—an umbrella framework encompassing World Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and English as an International Language (EIL) (Baker & Fang, 2022)—which foregrounds the heterogeneity of English as a set of pluralised and socially situated practices. It aligns with calls for a reorientation of English education based on shared linguistic ownership (Houghton et al., 2018), encompassing “the so-called native and non-native Englishes and the interactions between them” (Sadeghpour & D'Angelo, 2022, p. 5).

In the Japanese education context, it has been argued that recent government-led reforms have largely overlooked these perspectives and their potential to transform practice (Gurney & Michaud, 2024). Policies promoting EMI, TEE, and recent changes to university entrance English examinations (Butler & Iino, 2021) remain grounded in native-speakerist norms and standardised English proficiency benchmarks (Bouchard, 2020). Consequently, learners may have limited opportunities to engage in language learning experiences that foster a sense of connection to a community of Global Englishes users (Liu, 2021), contributing to students feeling “inferior and their English delegitimized” (Hiratsuka, 2025, p. 2).

A compounding challenge is the underrepresentation of diverse English varieties throughout English language teaching materials in Japanese settings. Research consistently highlights the dominance of standard, first-language (L1) varieties—particularly American and British English—across English as a Foreign Language (EFL) material (Galloway, 2013). It has been argued that this emphasis, often associated with perceived correctness, intelligibility, and utility of

so-called native English (Suzuki et al., 2025) reinforces unrealistic proficiency expectations and inadequate preparation of learners for practical interactions in English (Cavanagh, 2020). However, research in this area has also identified challenges associated with exposing students to the plurality of English, including the reinforcement of stereotypes surrounding “native” and “non-native” varieties and the privileging of English over other languages, which runs counter to multilingual conceptualisations (Funada & Rose, 2026).

Although research on Japanese learner perspectives and language learning experiences remains limited, some existing studies with student participants suggest that developing English proficiency is a common goal among learners in Japanese tertiary English classes. However, there is still a lack of research evidence regarding students’ specific support needs to reach their English language learning goals. As Sugimoto (2021) observes, “neither studies conducted in Japan nor those conducted overseas have comprehensively revealed the nature and types of support required by...students to succeed in their classes.” (p. 37). Moreover, Japanese undergraduate learners of English often perceive themselves as lacking linguistic competence and the lexical resources necessary for academic success and effective communication (Ball & Edelman, 2018; Uchihara & Harada, 2018).

A further implication highlighted in studies of internationalisation in Japanese higher education concerns the paradox within reforms that seek to elevate Japan’s global standing through the promotion of English language learning yet concurrently reaffirm national identity (Rivers, 2021). This tension leaves Japanese learners questioning their connection to English and “struggling to find alignment between their own individual interests and the explicit and implicit goals of the Japanese nation-state” (Gurney & Michaud, 2024, p. 19).

Considering these complexities, and in response to calls for further research centring Japanese university students’ learner experiences, the study sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1. How do current Japanese undergraduate students experience their English education?

RQ2. How do their learner experiences shape their awareness and understanding of Global Englishes and their self-perceptions as learners and users of English?

In positioning undergraduate students as ‘legitimate’ users of English (Ahn et al., 2023) and key curriculum actors in higher education (Weinmann et al., 2024), the research sought to generate new insights for student-centered pedagogy, curriculum, and learner engagement.

Context of the study

The data analysed and discussed in this paper was generated via an online survey disseminated across two sites, a national (public) university and a private university in a non-metropolitan city in Japan. These sites were selected to extend the proposed research beyond single-institution contexts and to reflect Japan’s dual system of public and private universities, which are characterised by considerable differences in governance (Breaden, 2024; Snowden, 2021). While a comprehensive discussion of these differences is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that government-funded public universities are expected to fully implement national education reforms (Arimoto, 2018), whereas private universities operate with greater autonomy in curriculum implementation. In terms of admissions, Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) mandates the assessment of English proficiency in national university entrance examinations (Paxton et al., 2022), while private universities retain discretion over the role of English proficiency in admissions decisions (Butler & Iino, 2021).

Research participants were invited to take part in the survey by a bilingual (English and Japanese) recruitment letter that included a summary of the study’s purpose and a link to the online survey. The invitation was emailed to English teacher colleagues at the participating universities, with the request that they circulate the invitation among their students. The inclusion criteria specified that participants were undergraduate students who had entered university from 2020 under the new

university admission system and may have experienced instructional and assessment changes resulting from recent English education reforms during both their high school and/or university studies. Unlike many recent studies that have focused on EMI programmes (e.g., Itoi & Mizukura, 2024; Spencer Patterson et al., 2025), this survey is centred on students enrolled in general English classes, with a view to extending current debates on English language learner experiences beyond EMI contexts. As the primary focus of this research was on Japanese undergraduates, international students were not included in the study.

As the study involved human participants, ethics approval was obtained from Deakin University's Faculty of Arts and Education Human Ethics Advisory Group (HEAG) (Project ID number: HAE-22-026). Organisational consent was obtained from the two university sites prior to contacting colleagues to request they assist with the dissemination of the survey. Participant consent was established by the provision of a plain language statement on the landing page of the online survey. Participants were prompted to select either the response 'Yes I consent' (advancing participants to the first question of the survey) or 'No, I do not consent' (exiting participants from the survey).

Method

Survey research was adopted for the study as it offered the most feasible instrument to encourage participation and generate a sufficient response rate as well as allow for duplication in a future study of a larger scale (Junus et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2022). The anonymous online survey was administered through Qualtrics and comprised of demographic questions, along with open and closed questions to explore Japanese students' understanding and awareness of Global Englishes, and to gain an overview of their experiences of high school and tertiary English education. The inclusion of quantitative and qualitative items aimed to generate both an overview and contextualised explanations as well as insights into congruence or disparities in respondents' perceptions (Cohen et al., 2007).

Questions were provided in both English and Japanese. Both versions were developed by the lead author, who has working proficiency in Japanese, to provide respondents with greater flexibility and agency to read and respond in their preferred language (Goitom, 2020). Another factor informing the methodological choice was evidence that Japanese tertiary students tend to feel more confident in English writing than in spoken communication (Aizawa et al., 2020). Survey research was therefore considered advantageous to encourage participation among respondents reluctant to engage in face-to-face interviews while allowing time to articulate their experiences in greater depth (Braun et al., 2021; Cormier, 2018).

Quantitative items included multiple-choice questions (e.g., Do you belong to a public or private university?) and a 5-point Likert scale of inquiry to gain indications of degrees of agreement and disagreement with statements about English language exams for university entrance (ranging from 1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree). Qualitative data was derived from open-ended questions (e.g. How would you describe your experience of learning English at university?). The survey included 17 questions in total and took respondents 20 minutes on average to complete. Table 1 provides an overview of the data collected in this study.

Table 1: Summary of data collected in quantitative and qualitative survey items.

Quantitative Data	Qualitative Data
Demographic data	Student perceptions of their ability to communicate in English with English language users from other countries
Self-rated English proficiency	Differences between students' experiences of their high school English classes and university English classes
Experience of English education and assessment	Students' experiences of learning English at university
Perception of English as an international language and awareness of varieties of English	Students' connection to English and other speakers of English from different countries

Data collection and analysis

Benchmarking was carried out prior to survey dissemination to determine a response rate that was as representative as possible of the overall number of students who were enrolled in general English courses in the participating universities. Initially set at 150 respondents within a two-week response period, due to technical issues, the total number of usable responses was 104.

Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics. Of the qualitative responses, 90 participants responded in Japanese, nine in English, and two used a combination of both languages. Three surveys did not include responses to qualitative questions.

Qualitative responses were first read in their original language(s). Subsequently, machine translation (Abfalter et al., 2021; Rivera-Trigueros, 2022) was used to translate Japanese responses into English using the DeepL online translation application (Steigerwald et al., 2022), recognised for its accuracy and high reliability in Japanese to English translations (Takakusagi et al., 2021). Translations were then reviewed for accuracy and contextual nuance (Terasawa, 2025) by the lead author, with additional qualitative checking by a colleague whose primary language for communication and scholarship is Japanese (Ko, 2011). All translated responses were compiled alongside the original Japanese text. Congruent with multilingual research methodologies (e.g., Schönthaler et al., 2026; Singh et al., 2025) the survey findings and discussion sections below present qualitative responses originally provided in Japanese alongside their English translations (Thompson & Dooley, 2022).

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2020) was used to analyse qualitative responses for shared meaning across common topics. The lead author organised data into domain summary themes to capture how meaning was simultaneously shared and distinct in each area of focus (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Thereafter, results from both quantitative and qualitative data were integrated to build coherent justification for themes identified. Considering that RTA is centred on “the researcher’s reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process” (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594), the data analysis

approach engaged for this study aimed to “achieve richer interpretations of meaning, rather than attempting to achieve consensus of meaning” (Byrne, 2022, p. 1393). Following this premise, we engaged Braun and Clarke’s (2012) six-phase process of analysis in a non-linear manner to sense-check and explore multiple interpretations of the data and to further review the translations of Japanese survey responses at the writing up stage, during which the second author provided additional input in the data analysis and the overall framing of the paper.

Survey findings

This section presents the data analysis and findings from both quantitative and qualitative survey elements. Following an overview of participant and institutional demographics, the data is then analysed and discussed across three themes: Participants’ self-perceptions of their communicative ability and implications for their engagement with Global Englishes; learner experiences in high school and tertiary English education; and students’ sense of connection to Global Englishes and other English users.

Participant and institutional demographics

Of the 104 respondents, 64 students were enrolled in the public, and 40 in the private university in which the survey was disseminated. Degree courses studied by the respondents covered a broad range of disciplines, including English, Education, Dentistry, Environmental Science, Engineering, and Psychology. Business and Economics majors constituted the largest group of respondents (15%), followed by English majors (11%). The majority (n=73) respondents were in their first year of undergraduate study at the time of data collection; 18 and 13 respondents were second and third-year students respectively.

Self-perceived communicative ability and implications for learner engagement with Global Englishes

The survey sought to elicit respondents' self-perception of their English language proficiency across a series of questions. A multiple-choice question prompted survey participants to self-evaluate their current English proficiency across three levels: basic, intermediate, and advanced. These levels had been further contextualised with descriptors provided in terms of both common English proficiency test score range and language skill competencies. Over half of respondents (54%) rated their proficiency as basic, 26% as intermediate, and just under 4% as advanced; 15% reported being unsure of their proficiency level. Subsequently, a qualitative item on students' self-perceptions of their English ability (Question 5) asked participants to reflect on their ability to communicate in English with people from other countries, including both dominant-language English speakers and users of English as an additional language.

These responses were analysed and grouped into three overarching categories:

- negative self-perceived English ability;
- positive self-perceived English ability;
- neutral.

Forty-six percent of the responses suggested negative self-perceived English ability, highlighted by terms as *difficult* (難しい), *lacking* (不足している), and *scary* (怖い). Conversely, responses that were categorised as positive used language such as *I am able to* [communicate in English] (出来ます), *I am capable* (力はある), or *it is possible* (可能である); for example: *I feel [confident] that I can express my opinions in everyday conversation* (日常会話程度なら意見が言えると感じている). However, responses indicating positive self-perceived English ability were the minority (n=11). They also tended to start with a positive statement, often to be qualified by a reference to what respondents perceived as a deficit: *I am able to communicate in writing, but not very well in conversation* (文字でのやり取りは可能であるが、会話はあまりうまくできない). Arguably, this pattern could be present because of Japanese cultural and societal expectations to be self-critical rather than self-enhancing (Gobel et al., 2011).

Several responses included statements that did not refer to the participant's individual English language proficiency but provided commentary about limited communicative ability of Japanese English language learners more broadly. For example, it can be argued that statements such as *Japanese are inferior in their ability to speak* (日本人の方が話す能力で劣っている) (emphasis added) and *Japanese people struggle with conversation* (日本人はなかなか会話がでて来ない) reflect established discourses about Japan's perennial national English proficiency 'crisis' (Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000; Matsuda, 2021).

Interestingly, a small number of responses framed the 'ability to communicate in English' in more general terms rather than as an individual skill, for example: *I feel this [communicative English ability] is becoming essential in an era of deepening diversity* (多様性が深まる時代において必要不可欠とされるのではないかと感じている). Others stated: *I think that it [English] is necessary to go abroad* (海外に行きたいため、必要だと考える), or: *If you are able to talk to people from other countries, it will open up more options for your future* (他の国の人達と話す能力があれば、将来の選択が広がるし). These statements suggest that respondents value English language skills for global mobility and participation (Baker & Fang, 2020), potentially echoing familiar globalisation and internationalisation rhetoric in education and employment (Aizawa & Rose, 2019), yet may remain uncertain about how they are positioned, and position themselves, as agentive learners and users of English (Vennela & Kandharaja, 2020). However, what may appear as a lack of confidence in students' responses requires further contextualisation through closer examination of how their previous and current learning experiences may have been shaped by such deficit discourses (Loo & Sairattanain, 2021).

Students' experiences of English language learning and assessment in high school and tertiary education

The second theme synthesises respondents' experiences of high school and tertiary English education, including assessment of English for university admission. This was considered an

important area of inquiry, as recent English education policy reform coincided with participants' transition from high school to tertiary English education.

Several survey items (Questions 6–11) were used to elicit participants' views on the language of instruction used in the classroom, English assessment in tertiary entrance examinations, and the transition from high school to university English teaching contexts. The majority (72%) of respondents stated that their high school English classes were taught in both Japanese and English. Almost a quarter (24%) reported that their high school English classes were mainly taught in Japanese with little use of English, while 4% stated that their high school English instruction was mainly in English as the target language.

Concerning English language assessment for university admissions, 65% of respondents reported that their proficiency was assessed directly by the university through entrance examinations, while 17% indicated that English was not assessed. A further 10% reported that assessment was undertaken via an external proficiency test; 8% met the English language requirement through alternative routes, such as high school recommendation or a national standardised test 'Centre' exam. A 5-point Likert scale was used to elicit respondents' views on the effectiveness of the English university admission test in assessing their language ability:

- The English test for my university entrance exam/s did assess my true English language ability.
- The English test for my university entrance exam/s didn't assess my true English language ability.
- The English test for my university exam/s assessed English used in the real world.
- The English test for my university entrance exam/s did not assess English used in the real world.

Most respondents (52%) somewhat or strongly agreed that their university entrance exams accurately assessed their English ability. In contrast, perceptions of whether the exams reflected

real-world English use were more ambiguous, with 35% selecting “neither agree nor disagree” and a combined 39% indicating some level of disagreement.

A set of qualitative responses (Questions 10 & 11) were posed to elicit brief accounts of participants’ overall experiences of English language learning in high school and university. A common experience reported by 42% of respondents was a grammar-focused approach in high school English classes. In contrast, university classes were perceived as more oriented towards communication: *In high school, the focus has been on grammar and vocabulary, but in the university, I feel that I learn more through actual conversation.* The impact of high-stakes exams was evident in 18% of responses, which emphasised the washback effect of university entrance examinations in shaping high school learning, as this response shows: *High school [English class] is for university entrance exams. University is for everyday life.* (高校は大学受験のためのもの。大学は日常生活のためのもの). This shift towards more communicative, everyday use of English at university was supported by quantitative responses, with 71% of respondents agreeing that their classes prepared them for communication in applied contexts. Around 40% also reported increased exposure to English-medium instruction and more opportunities to use English, particularly with teachers whose dominant language was English: *There has been an increase in English [lessons] taught by foreign teachers* (外国の先生が担当する英語が増えた) *and There are more opportunities to speak with teachers in English* (先生と英語で話す機会が増える). Notably, one respondent remarked *since it [the teaching] is done entirely in English, it is reliable* (全て英語で行われるため、信頼できる). The phrase *reliable* is noteworthy, as it may reflect a perception of ‘native speaker’ norms (Hino, 2021) as the highest attainable level of proficiency and the ultimate goal for language learners (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014; Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2024).

As discussed in recent research (e.g., Aizawa, 2024, 2025), it was not surprising to see that some respondents pointed out challenges in transitioning from high school to tertiary English classes when describing their English language learning experiences. While some expressed that they felt dissatisfaction with the level of English taught in their university classes as *it was easier than in*

high school so I thought it might be good to raise the level a little (高校よりも簡単だったのでもう少しレベルを上げて良いと思った), others suggested that *at university, the content became more difficult* (大学では、内容がより難しくなった). One respondent further highlighted difficulties related to the medium of instruction:

The university classes are not that difficult in content, but the classes are conducted only in English and high school classes are conducted in English and Japanese, so I am in a situation where I can translate English but cannot speak it.

The experience described in the quote above is particularly noteworthy considering that recent studies have consistently highlighted significant differences between high school and tertiary English programmes, as well as differences in medium of instruction and classroom practice, which have been found to be critical factors for students' transition to university-level English courses (Aizawa & Rose, 2020).

Overall, participant responses suggest that students generally experienced their university English classes as engaging, with 60% reporting that they felt encouraged to study English: *I believe that studying English in greater depth can enhance one's motivation to learn* (英語をより深く学ぶことは、学習意欲を高めることができると私は信じています). In addition to increased exposure to *everyday* English, 79% agreed that their classes also included a range of English varieties, although nearly half (47%) stated that a focus on American and British English remained strongly represented. 71% reported that their university English classes included diverse contexts of English use, which they felt supported the development of linguistic and intercultural skills for international settings. However, some respondents noted that a strong focus on assessment could negatively affect engagement and progress: *If the criteria for awarding credits are made too strict, learning English becomes boring. I think if learning English while having fun you will pick it up faster* (単位を与える基準を厳しくすると、英語学習がつまらなくなる。楽しみながら英語を勉強したほうが、習得は早くなると思う).

Although the limited number of responses precludes generalisation, they offer valuable insights into students' lived experiences of transitioning from secondary to tertiary English education.

Their comments highlight significant differences in pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment, which shape students' language learning experience overall. Such discrepancies may shape how students navigate their own expectations alongside course and instructional goals, raising important considerations for the effectiveness and sustainability of English programmes in Japanese universities.

Connection to English and understanding of varieties of Global Englishes

The survey items on participants' sense of connection to English and other English users provided valuable insights into their perceptions of and engagement with Global Englishes. In response to Question 16 asking how respondents would describe their connection to English and other speakers of English, results showed that almost half (49%) of the participants perceived English as a global language for sharing information and forging international connections: *English is a language that acts as a bridge enabling English speakers from different countries to understand each other* (英語は、他の国の英語話者同士が理解しあうための橋渡しになる言語である). Several participants also emphasised the importance and necessity of being able to communicate in English, as described in this statement: *You can interact with many people and broaden the range of information you can access* (多くの人と交流することができ、取り込める情報も広がる). While small in number, 14% of respondents described their connection to English positively, highlighting its role in fostering cross-cultural relationships and a sense of belonging to an international English-speaking community, as illustrated by the following response:

I am very happy to be able to connect with people from all over the world, whose mother tongues and races are different, through one common language, English, and in the future, I want to work with people from all over the world, not just in Japan.

To explore students' perceptions of Global Englishes and their sense of belonging to a global community of English users (Bosio, 2023), participants were asked to choose between two statements: "English belongs to native speakers of English" or "English belongs to everyone." Almost all respondents (n = 98) answered this question, with approximately 91% indicating that

they view English as belonging to everyone. Participants were also asked to identify the English varieties they were aware of from a provided list (e.g., Australian English, Japanese English, Indian English, American English, British English). American English was the most recognised variety (n = 95), followed closely by British English (n = 91). Japanese English ranked third (n = 65), followed by Australian English (n = 59).

Using the same list, when asked which English varieties respondents considered ‘correct’ forms of English, the majority (n=68) indicated that they thought all the listed varieties were ‘correct’, followed by an equal number of respondents giving preference to American English (n=39) and British English (n=39). Nearly 87% agreed with the statement that variations of English could be used in many ways to effectively communicate in international contexts, as opposed to the perceived necessity to use standard English in international communication.

Students’ perceptions of the role of English varieties in transnational communication offered insight into how they view meaning-making. Some respondents prioritised mutual understanding over notions of ‘correct’ English use, as reflected in responses such as: *I think it’s fine to be wrong to some extent if it gets the message across* (伝わるならある程度間違っているでも良いと思う), and *I don’t think it matters if your English pronunciation is a bit off, as long as I can convey what I want to say* (自分の伝えたいことが伝われば、英語の発音が多少違っていてもいいと思う). Others expressed scepticism about their connection to English, describing themselves as *not truly connected* (心からつながれているような気がしない) and using terms such as *awkward* (ぎこちない) to characterise their communicative ability with other speakers of English. Further, there was an expression of language anxiety (e.g. Inada, 2022; Yu, 2024), as highlighted in the following response: *I often find myself unable to speak fluently because I become overly conscious of trying to speak perfect English* (完璧な英語を話そうと意識してしまい、うまく話せないことが多い). Overall, these responses suggest that beliefs about the need for standardised English to ensure mutual understanding persist, and that some learners may lack confidence in their own English varieties to achieve this successfully.

Discussion

The discussion presented here aims to provide an integrated analysis of the findings reported above, bringing to light how the respondents' learner experiences and self-perceptions as speakers and users of English are underpinned by systemic, ideological, and local discourses of English language hegemony (Zeng & Yang, 2024), privileged Englishes, and “embodiment of ‘Japaneseness’” (Kato & Kumagai, 2020, p. 1681).

Global citizenship and English proficiency: A complex negotiation

Internationalisation policy agendas in higher education in many countries, including economically developed, neo-colonial contexts such as Japan (Kubota & Takeda, 2021), have been widely critiqued for their orientation of English language study as central to enhancing international competitiveness and learners' development as global citizens (Hammond & Keating, 2018; Samuelli & Smith, 2020). Although certain attributes of global citizenship, including awareness of and responsiveness to cultural diversity and a sense of responsibility to act, are not without merit, it is increasingly problematised as an ideologically and ethically ambiguous concept (Pais & Costa, 2017; Sherman, 2019).

Given the discursive power inherent in such policy framing (Marginson, 2023), it is unsurprising that many survey responses emphasise global citizenship and English proficiency as key factors for successful engagement and participation in international contexts (Eiras, 2023). Overall, there was a distinct recognition among respondents of the links between English language skills and global opportunities in terms of:

- travel—for example, *necessary ... to go abroad* (海外に行く必要がある)
- employment opportunities—for example, *broaden my future choices* (私の将来の選択肢を広げてくれるでしょう)
- intercultural relations—for example, *essential in an era of increasing diversity* (多様化が進む現代において不可欠である).

Many respondents emphasised the importance of acquiring a requisite level of English proficiency that enhances their employability, as shown in this comment: *I think it can help me in my work and enrich my life* (仕事をする上でも役立つし、人生を豊かにできると思う). Conversely, non-instrumentalist reasons and benefits of language study (Kikuchi, 2019) were also highlighted by some participants, for example, communicative ability in English as an enabler for information sharing and forming intercultural connections:

In Japan, English is not indispensable, so many people can't communicate with English speakers. But I think that being able to tell foreigners what I am thinking is very priceless. It allows you to interact with many people and expands the information you can take in.

However, the survey also indicated uncertainty about whether respondents' English skills were sufficient to *get across* their intended meaning, with many expressing doubts about their ability to use English *correctly*. Rendering further complexity was a commonly expressed view among participants that *Japanese are inferior* or *Japanese people find it hard to come up with things to say* (日本人はなかなか会話がでて来ない) reflecting the persistence of deficit stereotyping of Japanese English language learners, often corroborated by Japan's low rankings in international proficiency tests (McDonough et al., 2022). Furthermore, the survey responses draw attention to the contentious yet enduring discourse of *nihonjinron* (日本人論) (Walpole, 2026), characterised by a neoconservative emphasis on Japanese national identity and cultural uniqueness (Munezane, 2023). As argued in the literature, these discourses contribute to reinforcing binary understandings of language learners as legitimate users of either 'our' or 'their' language (Rivers, 2021) and requiring students to preserve their national identity and its linguistic and cultural associations (Madya, 2019). The mismatch between the Japanese government's aspirational internationalisation rhetoric in higher education and historically insular promotion of Japanese identity (Hashimoto, 2009) results in Japanese university students being placed in a paradoxical educational context that requires them to negotiate identities as Japanese nationals, English users, and global citizens. However, congruent with Englishisation-as-internationalisation policy orientations, the data suggest that several students closely associate global citizenship with English language proficiency,

and conversely, view English proficiency as integral to global citizenship. . For Japanese students to gain a more multidimensional understanding of the multiplicities of modern English use in global contexts requires curriculum in Japanese higher education to move beyond promotion of firm associations between highly proficient users of English and successful global citizens. Alternative perspectives that recognise the diversity of Global Englishes may better support students' development as competent English users and global citizens beyond native-speakerist and Anglocentric standards (Orsini-Jones & Lee, 2018).

Navigating Anglocentrism in English language learning

Despite an emerging reconsideration of learner agency (e.g., Nitta & Baba, 2023; Saeki, 2015) and general recognition that university classes offered some exposure to English varieties, several respondents noted that instruction remained centred on American and British English. The finding that survey participants also indicated a preference for these varieties as 'correct' forms of English aligns with previous research highlighting Japanese students' perceptions of US and UK English varieties as standard proficiency benchmarks (McKenzie & Gilmore, 2017).

The above-mentioned complexities are further compounded by an uncertainty that continues to exist for Japanese students about their connection to English. Several responses highlighted 'how the disempowering discourses of native speaker superiority can shape feelings of inadequacy and professional illegitimacy among non-native speakers of English' (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019, pp. 710–711) as exemplified in this statement: *For some reason, I feel a sense of reassurance when talking to people whose native language isn't English. On the other hand, when I communicate with native speakers, I feel anxious whether my message is getting across correctly* (英語を母国語としない人々と会話していると、なぜか安心感を得られる。一方で、ネイティブスピーカーとコミュニケーションを取ると、自分のメッセージが正しく伝わっているのか不安になる).

Following on from this comment, it could be argued that a narrow focus on accuracy in English language use, experienced in students' formative years of English education, may have contributed to a compartmentalised view of what constitutes accomplished English proficiency (Resnik et al., 2025). Furthermore, instructional and assessment practices in English-medium classrooms may reinforce the misconception that language mastery is primarily equated with fluency aligned with native English norms (Galloway & Numajiri, 2020). However, it should be noted that some respondents valued the focus on *learning English for everyday life* and *practical English*. For some, this seems to have brought about a shift in thinking to 'reconceptualise themselves from "English learners to English users"' (Deacon & Miles, 2022, p. 262), as expressed in the following response: *It is more important whether you try to communicate than whether you can speak English* (英語が話せるかどうかよりコミュニケーションを取ろうとするかどうかの方が大切). Furthermore, some responses articulated an understanding of English as a global and inclusive community of language users, as one participant expressed in English: *English will accept anyone, but if the speaker refuses to accept it, the connection will be lost.*

Overall, we argue that the data presented in the study highlight the importance of the university English classroom as a space that facilitates engagement with diverse Englishes (Rose et al., 2020) and challenges the 'inconspicuous while at the same time real and ubiquitous' (Sakamoto & Furukawa, 2022a, p. 417) hegemonic language ideologies. This could afford students more flexibility in negotiating their positioning as English users, global citizens, and Japanese nationals (Hino, 2018) and contribute to efforts of "re-configuring students' negative self-image ... so that the students do manage to acquire a sense of achievement" (Sakamoto & Furukawa, 2022a, p. 417).

Conclusion

This study provides current insights into undergraduate students' recent experiences of their English education in high school and university, and their sense of connectedness to English. The findings indicate that while the participants demonstrated knowledge and awareness of Global

Englishes, American and British English continued to function as dominant proficiency benchmarks, with unequal legitimacy attributed to different English varieties in international communication (Seargeant, 2019). Although the students viewed university English positively overall, respondents reported persistent transition challenges from high school (Aizawa, 2024; Toh, 2020) and ongoing ambivalence regarding the legitimacy and ownership of their English use, particularly among Japanese students (Sakamoto & Furukawa, 2022b). This may be reflective of policy rhetoric which “per globalized ideological-discursive assumptions” (Smith, 2022, p. 1652), equates English language proficiency with successful participation in the global economy, thus constraining agency to participate in English education that is meaningful to the learner (Hashimoto & Glasgow, 2022).

It is noteworthy that the findings of this study are not dissimilar from findings of earlier studies on learner experiences of Japanese university students. Conducted sixteen years ago, Tanaka’s (2010) study pointed out that ‘many of the students are beginning to accept the use of local varieties of English ... there is considerable awareness of the value of English as an International Language’ (p. 67). Tanaka (2010) concluded that:

the aspirations of the younger generation wishing to teach English as a communication tool and the current initiatives of MEXT to reform English education are a move in the right direction. However, ... there is much to be done to truly reform English education in Japan ... one is to change the contents of entrance examinations ... The other need is ... focusing on a raising awareness of ‘English as an International Language’ and English to promote intercultural understandings. (p. 67)

While university entrance examination reform has since been undertaken, it appears that the ‘linguistic, cultural, national and ethnic borders around being and becoming “Japanese” and a “user of English” continue to constrain spaces “for ‘border crossing’ within Japanese society, and English language education situated therein” (Rudolph, 2016, p. 2). We argue that the findings of our recent study highlight the importance of deeper engagement with students’ learner experiences of English and their practices of English language use as a means of what Lloyd (2020) describes

as “breaking the chain of the nativist/owner metaphor.” By centring students as grassroots actors of pedagogical change, future research and co-research with students about learners’ connection to English and their agency as legitimate English language users could provide fresh impetus to move curriculum as usual” (Brennan, 2022) and to contribute to a participatory, bottom-up transformation of language ideologies (Kubota, 2019).

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