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Research Article

The Challenges Faced by Non-Japanese Global English Teachers Working in Japan

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Abstract

Global English is a term used to capture the increasing diversity in the use and ownership of English in multilingual contexts. Despite the increasing awareness of Global English worldwide, in Japan, many education providers and their stakeholders still seem to desire the attainment of native speaker ideals. Moreover, although the number of non-Japanese, Global English-speaking teachers is increasing, their viewpoints remain under-researched. To address this gap, the authors investigated the strengths and challenges faced by five non-Japanese Global English speakers working as English teachers at a university in Japan. Through semi-structured interviews, the researchers collected and analysed their narratives. Four themes emerged, related to language identity, taking opportunities, demotivated students and hiring practices. Global English-speaking teachers may provide inspiring role models for language students in Japan; however, their voices need more representation. This paper is a small step in that direction.

Global Englishとは、多言語環境における英語の使用と所有の多様化を捉えるために用いられる概念である。世界的にGlobal Englishへの認識が高まる中、日本では多くの教育機関とその関係者が依然としてネイティブスピーカーの理想像の達成を望んでいるように見える。さらに、Global English スピーカーの外国人英語教師の数は徐々に増加しているにもかかわらず、彼らの視点は十分に研究されていない。このギャップを埋めるため、著者らは日本の大学で英語教師として働く5人のGlobal English スピーカーが直面する強みと課題を調査した。半構造化インタビューを通じて、研究者らは彼らの語りを取りまとめ分析した。「言語アイデンティティ」、「機会の活用」、「やる気のない学生」、「採用慣行」という4つのテーマが浮かび上がった。Global Englishスピーカーの教師は日本の語学学習者にとって刺激的な言語学習のロールモデルとなり得るが、彼らの声はより多く反映される必要があるだろう。本論文はその方向への小さな一歩である。

In today's world, English exists in various forms worldwide. Kachru (1985) classified English users into three circles: the Inner Circle (e.g., the UK and the US), the Outer Circle (e.g., India and Singapore), and the Expanding Circle (e.g., Japan and China). In contrast, the Global English (GE) paradigm treats all forms of English equally, thereby highlighting the diverse and dynamic use of English worldwide (Sadeghpour & D'Angelo, 2022). GE's definition is also being applied in educational contexts. Rose et al. (2021) argue for a shift away from traditional inner-circle "native English" centred education and towards education that emphasises diversity, multilingualism, and practicality. Dewaele et al. (2021) state that non-native-speaking (NNS) teachers are often perceived as less capable than their native-speaking (NS) counterparts and are treated unfairly in terms of employment and compensation. They further argue that the distinction between NS and NNS promotes discrimination and inequality in language education. In the context of English language education in Japan, the voices of non-Japanese GE-speaking teachers have been under-represented; therefore, we interviewed five participants to discover non-Japanese GE-speaking teachers' strengths and challenges in English education in Japan. This research contributes to Japanese education, as it needs to respond to changes in the international context involving GE. Thus, our study answers the research question "What challenges do non-Japanese Global English university teachers face?"

Literature Review

The multilingual turn in research acknowledges diversity in the backgrounds of language learners and teachers. According to Cenoz and Gorter (2019), traditional SLA research has concentrated on the acquisition of a target language, and they claim that this ignores the multilingual repertoires of people as they move on a continuum between learning and using languages. Most people worldwide use GE as a foreign or second language rather than as a first language (L1; Crystal, 2003). Currently, approximately one billion people speak English as a second language (L2), while only around 370 million are L1 speakers. English has become a global lingua franca, formed and sustained by L2 users who are not affiliated with any Anglophone group (van Hout & van der Slik, 2024). GE is a comprehensive

paradigm that integrates research on World Englishes (WE), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) and English as an International Language (EIL), aiming to explore linguistic, sociolinguistic and sociocultural diversity and fluidity in English usage, as well as the impact of this diversity on multifaceted aspects of society, including TESOL curricula and English teaching practice (Rose et al., 2021). Japanese learners can also become GE users; however, Japanese education tends to continue focusing on L2 English mastery (Humphries & Burns, 2015), and “native-like” proficiency remains the goal for students in many English classes (Aoyama, 2023). In addition, Galloway (2013) asserts that many Japanese students prefer native English and believe their future English-speaking partners will be native English speakers. In this context, English textbooks in Japan feature many Japanese cultural elements and Japanese characters. In recent years, countries from the Outer Circle (India, Singapore, the Philippines, etc.) and Expanding Circle (China, South Korea, etc.) have also begun to appear in textbooks; however, while diversity in textbooks is increasing, there is still a strong tendency toward the NS orientation and American English-centric materials and audio, which deviates from the original purpose of WE, which is to “respect the diversity of English” (Shiroza, 2010, p. 3).

Global English Language Teaching (GELT) is an educational paradigm that emphasises diversity and inclusiveness in English language teaching and has been proposed as an alternative to the traditional native speaker-centred model. Galloway (2013) highlights the need to make English learners aware that their future communication partners are likely to be ELF users, not only native English speakers. GELT components include WE and ELF integration, valorising multilingualism, raising awareness of Global Englishes, introducing ELF-based communication strategies, embracing cultural fluidity, and diversifying teachers (Budiman & Liu, 2025). For example, there is a shift among NNS secondary English teachers in Thailand who gained overseas experience and who interacted with diverse English speakers. These teachers gained an awareness that “English is not one single entity,” and shifted their focus from “speaking like a native speaker being the ideal” to “communication-focused teaching.” By prioritising “being understood” over the “native speaker norm,” NNS teachers sought to encourage learners to develop a sense of “ownership of their own English” (Intachai et al., 2025, pp. 7–8).

These elements may contribute to the development of a more inclusive learning attitude, for example, feeling relatively more comfortable experimenting with language use, expressing themselves, and participating in communication. GE users are also working within the context of English language education in Japan. However, some challenges faced in promoting a global approach include a shortage of teaching materials, a strong adherence to standard language ideology in TESOL, traditional perspectives in teacher training, and recruitment practices favouring NS teachers (Galloway & Rose, 2015). In the Japanese education context, Ng et al. (2023) report that teachers who have multilingual experience have challenges, such as students perceiving “correct English” as the Anglo-American model and disparaging other variants or limited multilingual exposure, making it difficult to create multilingual experiences in lessons.

Many scholars have investigated the challenges that Anglophone-speaking and Japanese-speaking teachers face in English language teaching in Japan. University teachers from Anglophone countries have discussed challenges, including motivating students, caring for them, and managing their own negative emotions as they adapted to cultural and contextual constraints (King, 2016). Japanese teachers can face issues such as gaps between their own beliefs and expectations, a lack of educational and institutional support, and challenges to student motivation (Humphries & Burns, 2015). Despite studies examining the emotional impact of teaching English in Japan for teachers from Anglophone countries (King, 2016) and Japanese teachers (Humphries & Burns, 2015), there has been a lack of research into the attitudes of teachers who are GE speakers from Asia, South America, and Europe. This research explores this gap and examines how GE speakers can contribute to Japanese English education.

Methodology

We interviewed five participants using a qualitative semi-structured approach. All participants were current English language teachers at a large prestigious university in western Japan. They were multilingual non-Japanese GE users from Europe, South America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia (Table 1).

Table 1

Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Birth region	Teaching Experience in Japan	Interview Duration (minutes)
Alan	Male	Southeast Asia	15 years	76
Betty	Female	Western Europe	6 years	63
Chrissie	Female	Southeastern Europe	13 years	54
David	Male	South America	5 years	46
Emma	Female	Middle East	8 years	52

The participants either came to Japan as English teachers or as students. Alan, David and Emma already had experience teaching English in their home countries before coming to Japan. In contrast, Chrissie and Emma received Japan-based scholarships to study at PhD-level. Emma also mentioned that she was looking for a place to move to because of economic, social, and political issues in her home country. David said that the reason was because he met Japanese students while working as an English teacher in another country. Furthermore, Betty came to Japan by chance, as she followed her ex-boyfriend.

The interviews were conducted individually in January 2025, averaging approximately an hour each in length. The second and third co-authors conducted the interviews. Due to their identities as female, non-Japanese English L2 users from China and Denmark, they could build a rapport of trust with the GE participants. The interviewers followed a qualitative semi-structured interview format (Barkhuizen et al., 2014) that explored themes such as participants' backgrounds, language identities, teaching English as GE users and life in Japan (themes and sample questions are outlined in the Appendix). Each interview was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data. We analysed the data using the inductive constant comparison approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). This analytical approach enabled us to iteratively compare incidents within and across interviews, allowing for the emergence of grounded categories that reflect the participants lived experiences, focusing on identifying shared themes, recurring patterns, and key differences across the participants' narratives (Humphries et al., 2023). This process aimed to uncover common experiences and to generate insights into the professional realities and identity formation of GE teachers in the Japanese university context.

Results

After analysing the participants' narratives, four codes emerged that encapsulated the main threads of discussion: (a) opening doors, (b) my language, (c) look fairly western and (d) just there to get credit (Table 2).

Table 2

Four Codes and Sample Narratives Connected to the Codes

Code	Sample
Opening doors	“Learning languages opens not only so many doors but also prepares you to open your mind” (Chrissie)
My language	“[English is] my language. I own this language in my own terms” (Emma)
Look fairly western	“I still look fairly western. I think it’s a very different experience for teachers who are Japanese or from other Asian countries, or who come from like African countries” (Betty)
Just there to get the credit	“Japanese university students usually like they don't have a real goal for them... they just want to get the credit” (David)

Opening Doors

Being GE speakers could bring new perspectives to their personalities. David felt that English is useful to “open doors” through an open mind. It helped him to meet interesting people.

I actually tell them, like, I’m a good example of that, because you know, I learned English as a foreign language, and it has opened doors in different countries. I have met lots of interesting people. Even in Japan, of course. So, I tried to tell them if you learn English, if you do it well, if you do it for fun, not because you have to, but you should do it for fun, to meet people to go and study abroad, it will open many doors, and you won’t regret doing that. (David)

Speaking English, therefore, made it possible to communicate with people whose native language is not English (such as Japanese people). It also allowed them to meet individuals from different cultures and encounter interesting people. Furthermore, Chrissie reported that she expanded her perspectives by learning English.

Learning languages opens not only so many doors but also prepares you to open your mind for different perspectives.... The amount of information produced in my native language is very minor... If you want to access information, you need to know that language. (Chrissie)

When the native language is a minority language, there are limitations on obtaining information. Chrissie explained that learning English can increase the amount of information that can be obtained. As a result of using GE, the participants had experienced various changes such as meeting diverse people, discovering new aspects of their personalities, and broadening their horizons.

Otherwise, Betty said that she really liked English, and it gave her a kind of freedom. In addition, learning English as a communication tool enabled her to decide on her career path.

I really liked English and I felt that English allowed me to communicate in ways that I couldn't really communicate very well in [my home country]. It was more kind of a it gave me some freedom. it was a freeing experience, you know, different language, different way of communicating and I really enjoy that. So I decided to become an English teacher. (Betty)

Overall, these narratives demonstrate that becoming a GE speaker is not merely a linguistic achievement, but rather a life-changing experience that fosters openness and shapes personal and professional identity.

My Language

By becoming GE speakers, they could discover new self-identities. Emma advocated for “owning the language” and adapting it to express one's culture and mindset, aligning with the concept of EIL:

I feel like it's my language. I own this language in my own terms. You know, I have inserted my mindset, my culture, my worldview, my outlook, and I modified this language, and I made it for myself. This is the language that I use on daily basis in my classroom, with my friends, inside the society, with my family, and so on and so forth. (Emma)

In addition, Betty also mentioned that English had become central to her life, replacing her mother tongue. She claimed that she has greater freedom of self-expression in English than in Japanese or her L1. “In English, I have more of a business or friendly tones, you know, when I speak Japanese, you know, I tend to be very kind of shy and quiet and like not say much.”

GE-speakers can empathise with the learning process. Betty mentioned that she had previously received an offer to teach her native European language at a university, but she declined the offer because she had only been trained to teach English. She stated that GE teachers have strengths that come from being NNS of English.

I think the advantage of having teachers who are like non-native speakers is that we had to learn it, you know, we had to learn it and because we had to learn it, we understand it so much better sometimes than people who didn't have the training to be English teachers.... We understand why the grammar works the way it works. We understand the vocabulary nuances and so on, because we've had to think about it to be able to use it. (Betty)

Betty strongly believed that it is better to hire trained teachers who have learned the language rather than inexperienced native speakers lacking explicit linguistic knowledge.

In contrast to the empowering effect of English felt by the other participants, Alan had more nuanced feelings about his ownership of the language. He has Southeast Asian nationality but grew up using what he described as pidgin English on an island in the South Pacific. However, after moving to the USA during elementary school, he was shocked to realise that his English differed from the local American dialect. At that moment, he felt that English was not his “first language.” Furthermore, when he returned to his home in Southeast Asia, he experienced being laughed at by his peers when speaking in an American English style. Alan's most disturbing revelation seemed to emerge in Japan, where he said that English is perceived as a language for white people rather than as a global language: “[Japanese] prefer people who either have citizenship of these so-called native-speaking countries and they prefer something that is non-Asian looking. This is the first time in Japan that I thought, oh, English is not for the non-whites.” In effect, English was more problematic for Alan than for the other participants. While the other interviewees felt the addition of English to their personal repertoires, Alan seemed to struggle with defining how this core part of his identity was viewed by others.

Look Fairly Western

As indicated by Alan's feeling that English was for white people in Japan, there was an awareness among the participants that race-based discrimination could occur in educational employment practices. Emma said she has never felt unfairly treated directly, but she has heard from colleagues about employment discrimination against non-native speakers: “If your resume is equal to a resume from another candidate who is from a native English-speaking country... they would prefer to hire that person.” David was reaching the end of a limited-term contract and struggling to find a new employer. When asked if he had faced discrimination, he mentioned that nothing had happened overtly, but, “There's always something there in your mind like, if I was from Britain, I was from the US maybe I could get this job more easily.”

Betty and Chrissie discussed the importance of racial appearance. Chrissie claimed that there is a tendency to idealise white male native speakers. She reasoned that English education has become like “customer service,” and the institutional structure in which the needs of Japanese “customers” are met by native English teachers leads to the preferential treatment of native speakers and westerners. Betty added:

If you look at me, I still look fairly western. I think it's a very different experience for teachers who are Japanese or from other Asian countries, or who come from like African countries or who are African American, and they look different, then it's a lot more complicated. (Betty)

Overall, the participants' responses indicated that they felt that some Japanese employers might have idealised images of the types of foreigners they wanted to hire and compared themselves to these stereotypes.

Just There to get the Credit

The participants discussed students' perceived low participation from various perspectives, such as a lack of realistic goals. Alan, Betty, and David pointed out that students take English just for "credit." David said, "Japanese university students ... don't have a real goal ... they just want to get the credit."

Betty also mentioned that Japanese students may view it solely as an academic subject rather than a practical tool for communication. Additionally, Emma stated that, compared to students in her home countries, Japanese students lack the impulse to seek better opportunities, live in better places, or achieve their goals:

Many students, when they get to know themselves, like when they are 15, they think that, 'Alright, so I'm not going to stay in this country. I want to leave this country; I want to go to some western country. (Emma)

Chrissie also pointed out that Japanese university students see their university years as a vacation: "University education in Japan is four years, four years of holidays. And a lot of students think, 'I entered here, it's my time to have fun.' And if they do that, their motivation to learn diminishes." Alan claimed that students with lower motivation could negatively influence their peers.

I think the motivation, I would say, 50% of all my classes have that sort of motivation to learn English. The other half, I'd say they're just there to get the credit... when 15 [students] are not interested and 15 [students] are interested, even if you have that sort of enthusiasm to listen to the teacher, you will lose your enthusiasm. (Alan)

In response to this attitude and approach to learning, David and Alan focused on the need to establish clear rules. David explained, "if you tell them from the start, this is what you should do and you're going to get points if you do this or something like that, they do it, and they actually follow the rules." He added that students from his home country tend to be "troublemakers," in comparison. Alan similarly stated that if teachers explain the rules at the beginning of the course, students will follow them.

From another perspective, the participants tended to believe that Japanese students' English proficiency levels are connected to their motivation. Betty stated that Japanese students feel that their English level is very low, but she also said that when Japanese students feel their proficiency has reached a comfortable level, they do not see the need to improve further and remain silent. Chrissie pointed out that having an idealised image of English speakers (e.g., native-like pronunciation) can hinder participation. For example, she said that they may feel discouraged when listening to recordings of their own voices that do not match this idealised image. Emma felt that teachers can serve as good role models as fellow language learners who take risks to communicate their thoughts.

I usually make an example of myself about Japanese language, and I just showcase some of my mistakes, some very silly and funny mistakes in terms of kanji and pronunciation and they feel like, and I see some, you know, they have good chat, good laugh, they laugh at my mistake. It's okay, I want them to laugh. So, after a while I can see that they feel a bit more comfortable. All right. She's also a learner, she's learning Japanese, she's making mistakes. I can make mistakes. (Emma)

Such steps may reduce students' anxiety and encourage greater participation in class discussions. Additionally, Emma highlighted that students' thinking and mentality are sometimes quite narrow, often focusing only on the United States, Australia, and Japan. She encouraged her students to step out of their comfort zones and explore the wider world. Emma also noted that students from challenging backgrounds are motivated to learn English for their future. Furthermore, students with a multilingual background (e.g., Chrissie's home country) learn English to broaden their perspectives. Compared to these students, GE participants (especially Emma) felt that Japanese students are living in a comfort zone and do not see English as necessary for their livelihoods. It was interesting to note that, although the participants carried experiences that they could share with students to motivate them as fellow GE role models, they tended to describe approaches that could be employed by Japanese or Anglophone teachers of English.

Overall, the results indicated that the participants recognised how English opens opportunities to access new countries and broaden perspectives; however, Japanese students often do not take advantage of these benefits. Specifically, it was suggested that Japanese students see English merely as an academic subject or a way to earn credits and that they lack clear language-learning goals. GE-speaking teachers could help change these attitudes by demonstrating their multilingual identities, sharing how their own language-learning experiences have opened new doors and perspectives. Unfortunately, although our participants could provide excellent role models for demonstrating the beneficial effects of learning English for global communication, they did not discuss this perspective. Instead, they described to us how Japanese education providers may lack awareness of the benefits of hiring GE-speakers because of the existence of hiring discrimination favouring idealised NS teachers.

Discussion

The GE participants faced challenges in motivating Japanese students to learn English beyond receiving credit, as they perceived Japan as a relatively comfortable country that reduces the need to take risks. Difficulties in engaging reticent students have similarly been reported among L1 Anglophone teachers (King, 2016) and Japanese teachers of English (Humphries & Burns, 2015). It shows that this challenge is not unique to GE-speaking teachers. In addition, Ng et al. (2023) found that teachers with multilingual backgrounds in Japan encounter students' strong

adherence to “correct English” such as associated with an Anglo-American model, which can limit participation and openness to linguistic diversity. Although previous studies argue that teachers’ multilingual identities can serve as valuable resources for promoting more inclusive attitudes towards English learning (Galloway, 2013; Rose et al., 2021), the participants in this study did not explicitly position themselves as GE users or role models; in addition they did not mention intentionally teaching GE principles. However, they reported that they drew on their own experiences as former language (not only English) learners by sharing struggles or mistakes, which could help to normalise risk-taking and imperfection in communication and could contribute to supportive classroom environments. Such practices may align implicitly with GELT, including learner ownership, intelligibility, and diversity in English use (Rose et al., 2021). However, these values were not articulated as pedagogical goals by the participants themselves. None of the participants reported consciously drawing on their GE backgrounds to challenge NS norms or to present themselves explicitly as alternative models of English use. This finding highlights a gap between the theoretical potential of GE-informed pedagogy and its explicit classroom implementation, suggesting that teachers’ GE identities remain an underutilised resource in English education in Japan.

Implications

This study examined GE teachers who teach English in Japan and explored the challenges they encounter. Interviews revealed that their stated teaching styles seemed linked to their language identity, and past learning and teaching experiences. These styles may inspire Japanese students to view language learning from a different perspective. Although the focus was on non-Japanese GE-speaking teachers, Japanese teachers who speak GE could also act as learning models for students. Future research might investigate how the language identity of Japanese GE speakers influences Japanese students.

Limitations

In this study, we collected valuable perspectives from five participants. However, since they were all employed by the same organisation, the interviews were limited to that context. Rose et al. (2021) noted that studies on GE are often short-term, small-scale, self-reported, and primarily focused on university research. This study is also small-scale and university-focused. Only positive views about the workplace environment were identified. If teachers of GE from multiple organisations had participated, it could have allowed for gathering more diverse narratives and perspectives. As this study targeted teachers, we examined their perceptions of Japanese students’ attitudes towards learning. The most common theme was that students only seemed to study for credit. This is a problem widely discussed by teachers in Japan (Humphries & Burns, 2015) that is not limited to GE-speaking teachers. Only one participant (Chrissie) mentioned that students had an idealised view of language, and none of them mentioned that students preferred to learn so-called NS English. Therefore, we did not find explicit evidence to align with Galloway’s (2013) claim that students held beliefs that they wanted to communicate with speakers from Anglophone countries. Instead, learners probably held deficit ideologies that they imagined themselves as imperfect communicators (Henry & MacIntyre, 2023), rather than translanguaging ideologies that they could use their foreign language repertoire (Cenoz & Gorter, 2019). Longitudinal research by Humphries et al. (2023) indicates that Japanese students studying abroad in Anglophone countries developed awareness that it can be easier to communicate with other GE peers who had shared interests and who demonstrated that English communication does not need to meet an imaginary perfect NS standard. Rather than a one-off interview, future research could focus on Japanese students enrolled in GE-speaking teachers’ courses to explore how their attitudes towards learning English change before, during and after such experiences.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges faced by non-Japanese GE teachers in Japan. Through interviews with five GE-speaking teachers, the research focused on language identities and the difficulties encountered within the context of English language education in Japan. The findings revealed that participants discussed challenges such as student passivity and idealised native speaker norms and compared these to their multilingual identities and personal language learning experiences. However, although GE-speaking teachers could provide potential role models, they did not describe teaching strategies grounded in GELT. Further studies could explore action research interventions (Burns, 2010) to empower GE-speaking non-Japanese teachers in approaches leveraging their identities to inspire students. Moreover, these results should be shared to increase awareness of the benefits of hiring from a wider range of English-speaking backgrounds.

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Appendix

Themes and Sample Questions

1. Participants' background/identity

- Please tell us about yourself

2. Language Identity

- What kind of English user do you describe yourself as?
- In your opinion, what are the benefits to learning English for Japanese people?
- What do you feel about Japanese people's attitude towards learning / using English?

3. How is (was) your life in Japan

- Why did you come to Japan?
- Is there any problem living in Japan?
- Did you feel any difficulty with colleagues or managers?
- How is your work as an English teacher in [your university]?

4. Teaching English as a Global English user in Japan

- How do you describe yourself as a teacher of English
- Is there any difference between your past teaching environment in other countries or Japan?
- What are the features of Japanese students? / Did you face any problem with Japanese students?
- Are there any differences in students' motivation for learning English between Japanese students and students in other countries?

5. Any idea for future questionnaire for students /

(Interview will ask students' attitudes to Global English) In April, [Researcher] would like to send an online questionnaire to students about their attitudes to global English and share the results for the whole responses with you and other participants. He will contact you later for permission and support sharing the questionnaire. Are there any questions that you would like him to include in the questionnaire?

- Is there anything you want us to ask your students?

6. Ending

- Is there anything that you want to tell us more or miss to share with us?