

# Societal Consideration in the Prevalence of Katakana Enunciation in English Language Education in Japan

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## 1. Introduction

English language has become an indispensable medium of communication, a universal language so to speak in our increasingly globalized world, particularly the business world. (Crystal, 2003; Pandarangga, 2015; Runde, 2017; Nuttall, 2019). High proficiency in English language has the potential to boost economic competitiveness by rendering a country or territory more appealing to investors globally. It is apparent therefore that the economic benefits of an English-capable labour force provide sufficient impetus against any perceived drawbacks (e.g., foreign influences, cultural dilution) often associated with English language such that even the most wary of governments may make relevant reforms, however reluctant, to cultivate English assimilation and enhance proficiency. To improve English education in Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), the government ministry responsible for policy development, has over the years made several policy reforms to that aim (Glasgow and Paller, 2016).

These policy initiatives such as “The Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities in 2003”, the “Global 30” Project in higher education to promote English-medium learning in 2009, the implementation of “Foreign Language Activities” (Gaikokugo Katsudou) in elementary schools in 2011, the implementation of the revised national senior high school foreign language curriculum in 2013, and the English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalisation are some of the efforts initiated by the government to enhance English language learning and teaching practises. Other initiatives of note are The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET Programme) in 1987, and the 1994 implementation of the policy reform “Course of Study” for senior high school. As the reception and implementation of these measures on English Education have varied, so have their impacts and successes, particularly on the subject of the active usage of English in practical settings.

The provenance of the disparity between policy initiatives and outcomes, and the ensuing contradictions in interpretation, are well established and discussed in the literature (Yoshida, 2003, 2012; Tada, 2016; Glasgow and Paller, 2016; Nuttall, 2019); however briefly, Hagerman (2009) makes a compelling argument that the status quo

on policy objectives and implementation arise from wariness of policy-makers pertaining to the associated cultural influence of English language beyond the simple attainment of proficiency such that the potential exist to undesirably alter the traditional and cultural identities of Japanese society – a view also shared by Hashimoto (2013) and Tan and Rubdy (2008). Furthermore, the 2003 policy initiative titled “Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” developed to improve and/or promote English Language Teaching (ELT) also contained provisions for promoting Japanese language education (JLE) and abilities which is somewhat perplexing (MEXT, 2003). Be that as it may, whilst there has been appreciable progress on English language teaching owing to the above-mentioned policy initiatives, some issues still remain despite mitigating policy provisions being in place.

A noticeable feature of English language in Japan is the lexical variation on articulation (pronunciation of some or most English words), and to a lesser extent spelling, that results from katakana, which has a seemingly perpetual presence in language learning. Thus, one may begin to question whether some of these outstanding issues such as the prevalence of katakana in English education are beyond the mitigatory reach of policy tools. Studies on the linguistic elements (e.g., phonetics, phonology) of katakana in relation to its effects on articulation and spelling in English are well known, and much like the issues surrounding policy initiatives and implementation have saturated the literature (Sherard, 1986; Smith, 1997; Martin, 2004; Daulton, 2008; Lauer, 2017; Lee, 2018). Therefore, the present study discusses broadly the societal elements that are unwittingly contributing to this phenomenon (katakana enunciation) and the channels through which they are sustained. Using data from the study survey, the paper first discusses the general sentiment, to English language, and public awareness of basic elements of ELT policies. It goes on to examine the relationship between English education background and enunciation, culminating in discussions about societal elements in the prevalence of katakana in English language acquisition.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Participants**

A total of 133 individuals (113 native Japanese speakers and 20 native or near-native English speakers) participated in the study. All participants are resident across Japan. Of all those surveyed, 57% are 19 years of age or younger, 26% are between the ages of 20 – 30, 5% (31 – 40), 7% (41 – 50), 4% (51 – 60), and 1% (61 years and older). Over 60% of the participants are students in higher education, 19% are in education-related occupation, and a further 17% are company employees. 89.3% of the 113 Japanese participants are studying or had studied English in Japan, while 10.7%

are studying or had studied overseas. Similarly, 74% obtained their English education at school (formal education), while 26% had done so by self-study (books, online, friends, family, private lessons). All, but five of the 113 non-native speakers, have studied English continually for at least four years. Two of the five participants have studied English for three years, one for 2.5 years, and the other two for two years.

## **2.2 Procedure**

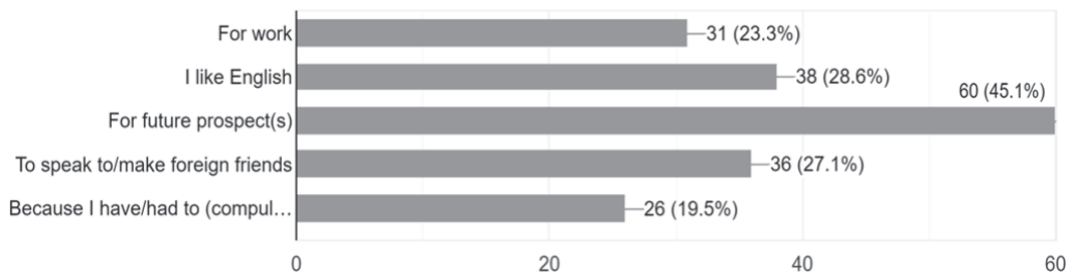
A survey questionnaire method was used for data acquisition. The questionnaire design incorporated the various forms of closed-ended, as relevant, and open-ended question formats, employing a summated rating scale for responses (Stockemer, 2019). The questions were designed to afford the investigator the means to assess, as well as to gain insights on the general perceptions and views of government ELT policies held by members of the society. Cross examination of the dataset was carried out to explore any interactions between learning source or background and articulation, and in turn used to make inferences on English output (usage). The survey questionnaire was drafted in English language, and contained a total of 43 questions, from which 21 were selected for use in the study (see appendix). The questionnaire was then administered electronically online to all 133 participants. Data analysis was completed using the computational features of the survey platform provider on Google Sheets (Google Inc.) and Microsoft Excel software data visualization and analytical tool (Microsoft Corp.). During data computation, specific data (responses) from native speakers were excluded from the pool, where appropriate, for more accurate data representation. The findings are presented graphically in figures (chart and graphs).

## **3. Result and Discussion**

### **3.1 English Language and General Sentiment**

Public sentiment to English language has changed over the years, as reception drifted across optimism and pessimism, with the prevailing political wind. A notable instance was the suppression of English language during WWII as it symbolised the enemy, and deemed an affront to the war efforts. As Japan emerged from the war, public interest in English began to rise. English language has since maintained a relatively positive reception as demonstrated by the results of the survey where an overwhelming 79% agrees with the need to learn English while only 2.3% disagreed with the notion; 16.5% were unsure. The historical association of English-proficient labour force with development afforded through global competitiveness allows English language to remain relevant and attractive to study. Subsequent inquiry pertaining to interests in studying the English language showed varied, but largely positive reasons

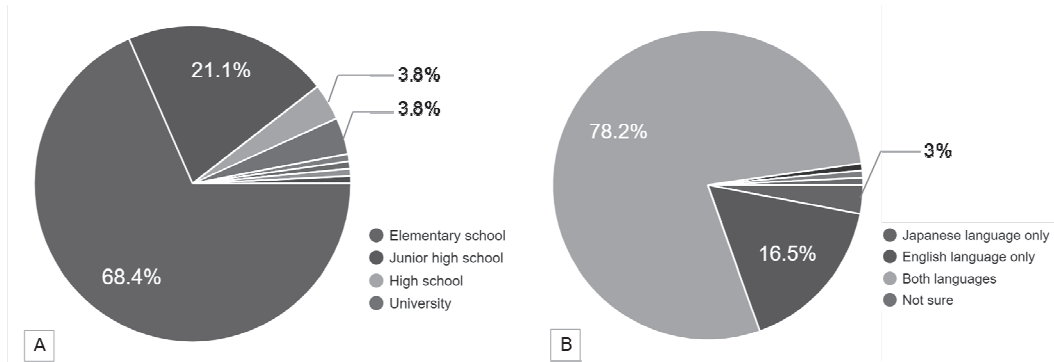
as drivers for studying English, with the most entry in the multi-select option question being “for future prospect” (Figure 1). Of the 26 responses received for the option “because I have/had to”, less than half (11 individuals) made the selection the sole input. The greater proportion of inputs registered for the range of positive drivers (For work; I like English; Future prospect; Make foreign friends), coupled with the demographic distribution of the study participants (82.5%, 30 years and younger), indicates that the present positive reception to English language in Japan is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. It also highlights the consideration of English as an instrument for personal growth and development rather than simply a tool for furthering the collective objective of national economic prosperity as it is presented by the government (Hagerman, 2009; Nuttall, 2019).



**Figure 1. Drivers for studying English language (see appendix, question 3.12).**

### 3.2 ELT Policy and Public Opinion on the Introduction of English in Schools

English language education in Japan has come a long way. Attempts at reforms to the foreign language education policy has continued to see increased activity, particularly in recent years (Tada, 2016; Glasgow and Paller, 2016; Nuttall, 2019). The speed of reforms and/or introduction of policies sometimes may even appear to outpace implementation. In any case, educators play an undisputed role in policy implementation – their domain being the interface between policy content and delivery to recipients (learners). Like educators, learners are also impacted in one form or another by changes triggered by policy reforms. For instance, sweeping changes in learning structure may result in either learner-passion or learner-anxiety, the latter with the potential to cause apathy. Data from this study exploring public view and awareness (PVA) of basic policy stipulations show that PVA is more or less in agreement with government policy in terms of the timing of introduction of English language in schools. However, this varied on the question of language of instruction, the extent of which is contingent on the specific objectives, interpretations, and target level of education (elementary school; junior high school; senior high school; higher education) of the individual policy initiatives.

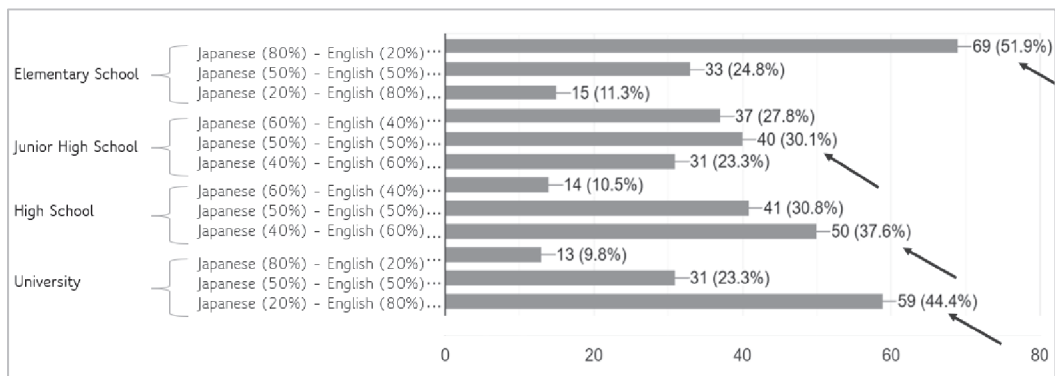


**Figure 2. (A) Public opinion on the timing of introduction of English language in schools; (B) Public opinion on the language of instruction in English classes (see appendix, question 3.21 and 3.22).**

There is a general consensus on the timing of introduction of English in schools as well as the language of instruction. The former largely inline with policy guidelines (“*Gaikokugo Katsudou*” mandatory “Foreign Language Activities” in elementary schools), and the latter in quasi-conflict (Figure 2a and b). Just over 68% agreed with the introduction of English in elementary school against the 21% that preferred introduction in junior high school (Figure 2a). Furthermore, the vast majority (78%) supports the use of both English and Japanese language for instruction in English classes, whereas only 16.5% support the use of English language only (Figure 2b). Public view and awareness may be considered to be in agreement with these policy directives when policy interpretation is given primacy over policy impact potential. In other words, the interpretative variations afforded by policy wording through expressions such as “*in principle, should be conducted in English*”, “*consideration should be given to use English in accordance with the students’ level of comprehension*”, not only permits English classes to be conducted in English and in Japanese, but also in Japanese only, which tallies with public opinion on the use of either, or both languages in English classes (Hagerman, 2009; MEXT, 2003). Disregarding all other diluting effects to policy content, PVA is in conflict with the policy directive which stipulates that English classes are to be conducted primarily in English language. Nevertheless, it is the expectation of educators to have a good understanding of the policy content they expect to implement. In addition, the author argues that learners may also benefit, particularly in the security of expectations in their own learning and/or study, should they be provided with a working knowledge of the relevant aspects of policy, even in the most rudimentary sense. That way, learners are better prepared for study in an environment where their expectations are not betrayed.

### 3.3 Preferred Language of Instruction at Different Levels of Education

The implication of public opinion on language of instruction was investigated further in relation to various levels of education (elementary school to university). The data suggest public preference for a measured, rather than a full-scale introduction of English language as the language of instruction in classrooms (Figure 3). There is greater support for the use of Japanese language in elementary school (80:20), shifting to 50:50 in junior high school, 40:60 and 20:80 in favour of English in high school and at university respectively. Specific questions within the survey discharged to teachers of English language about language of instruction show more preference for the use of both English and Japanese languages (42%), over English-only (31%) or Japanese-only (27%). In two other accompanying questions, 66% use Japanese language because it is easier for everyone, while 50% say they are uncertain of the correct pronunciation. However, the 31% of teachers that conduct their classes in English marks a significant increase in numbers relative to that in the survey conducted by MEXT in fiscal year (FY)2006, where only 1.1% of Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs) in public senior high schools conducted their classes in English (Aspinall, 2013). In a show of progress from 2006, recent survey conducted by MEXT in FY2021 revealed that 73.4% of teachers in junior high schools, and 46% of teachers in senior high schools conducted their classes in English (MEXT, 2021). However, it should be noted that in junior high schools, 58.1% used English for more than 50% to less than 75% of the time, and 15.4% for more than 75%, while in senior high schools 35.3% used English for more than 50% to less than 75% of the time, and 10.7% for more than 75%.



**Figure 3. Public opinion on the proportion of use of English to Japanese language in English classes at various levels of education (see appendix, question 3.31).**

As discussed in the preceding section, the vast majority (78%) supports the use of both English and Japanese language for instruction in English classes, whereas only 16.5% support the use of English language only (Figure 2b). This observation is

considered to reflect a collective rather than an individual desire. However, when specific conditions or choices are presented, the response changes, reflecting a more personal desire. Although the majority had supported the use of both languages in English education, 45% would prefer to study English without recourse to Japanese, while 34% remain against the notion. Furthermore, 68% would prefer to study in both languages – with Japanese used occasionally for the explanation of difficult concepts (without katakana pronunciation). The influence of katakana on pronunciation and its consideration as a problem in English language learning remains a point of contention. 38% agrees that katakana pronunciation is not and should not be considered a problem while 42% disagrees with a caveat that native-like pronunciation should not be the primary focus in learning and teaching English (Horie and Long, 2007).

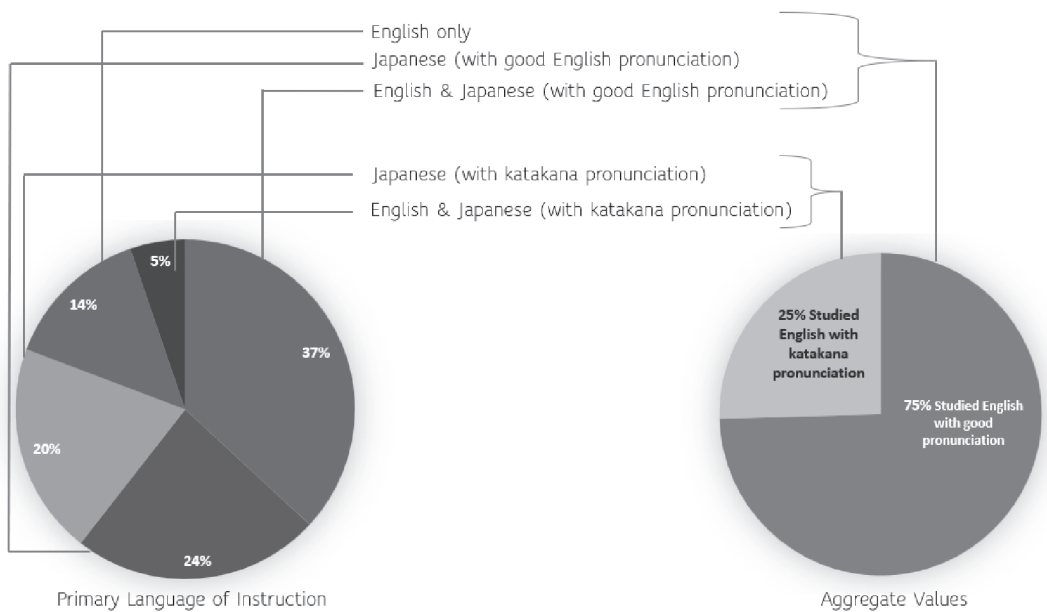
### **3.4 English Education Background and Katakana Enunciation.**

The prolonged exposure to English, as well as the use of English as the language of instruction can enhance learning and communication, improving overall learning experience. During language education, the language of instruction creates additional learning opportunities within the learning environment in which learning can be maximized on the part of the learner. For instance, if we assume active learning to constitute the ordinary content of a given lesson taught to a group of learners alike in English or in Japanese, passive learning will be that tendency for learners, as dependent on ability, to augment their learning to gain supplementary knowledge (e.g., vocabulary, expressions, intonation, enunciation etc.) over their peers from the instructor's use of the relevant language (English or Japanese) thereby improving their own learning experiences. ELT policies have sort to create this opportunity in schools across the country with some degree of success, in that it has essentially established the concept as the status quo (MEXT, 2003; MEXT, 2011b).

Investigating the connections between language of instruction and form of enunciation, the study revealed the variation, and the extent of this variation among participants. According to the survey (Figure 4), only 14% studied English with English as the only language of instruction. 37% were instructed in English and Japanese language, with good English pronunciation. A further 24% were instructed in Japanese language, also with good English pronunciation. However, 20% were instructed in Japanese language only, with katakana pronunciation, and another 5% in both English and Japanese language, again with katakana pronunciation. Collectively, 75% of the participants have studied English with good English pronunciation (English only; Japanese – with good English pronunciation; English and Japanese – with good English pronunciation), while 25% were instructed with katakana pronunciation (Japanese only – with katakana pronunciation; English and

Japanese – with katakana pronunciation). Furthermore, during personal and/or self-study, 81% responded to paying attention to the correct spelling and pronunciation of English words as presented in English, 6% responded to paying attention to grammar and natural expressions, while only 13% responded to paying attention to katakana spelling and pronunciation.

Whilst learners may not be entirely free from the influences of the katakana syllabic characters; however, given their English education background, that is, the majority have either studied English with good pronunciation during formal education (75%), and/or during their personal/self-study (81%), it is the expectation therefore that the participants will possess good enunciation, however, the data does not mirror the reality. Of all the participants surveyed, 75% are considered to have good exposure to pronunciation (Figure 4), however, only 21% agrees with the statement that they do not have any trouble with the articulation of English. Deductions from this observation suggests that the loss in good pronunciation may be attributed to external factors arising from the society, and indicates that one’s English education background does not necessarily result in better articulation. Furthermore, investigations into possible interactions between location of English education (Japan, overseas), mode of English education (formal education, self-study etc.) and articulation show no discernible trend in the study although it is possible that this is being confounded by socio-economic factors and/or sample size.

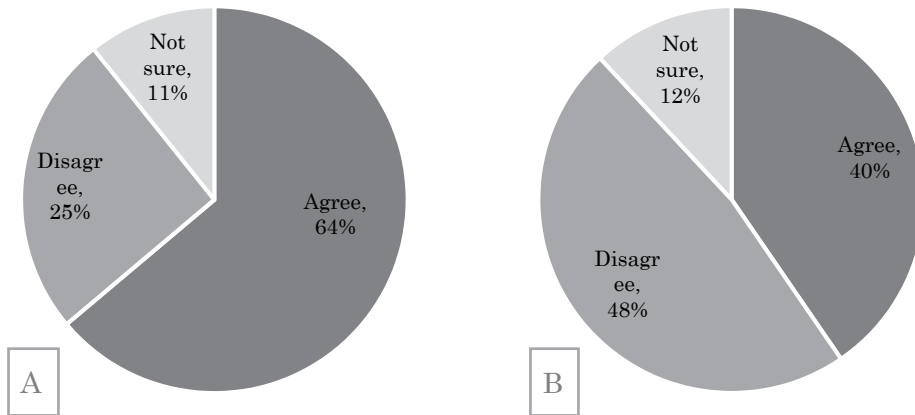


**Figure 4. Language of instruction and form of enunciation in English classes (see appendix, question 3.41).**



### 3.5 Katakana Enunciation and Reticence in Verbal Communication in English: Speakers' Perception and Awareness

As discussed, although public sentiment remains positive and unlikely to change, negative public perception of '*strong*' katakana pronunciation in English is apparent, with nearly 60% in agreement. This leads to a general reticence to engage verbally in English language (Horie and Long, 2007). However, results also indicate that people are more tolerant to the prevalence of katakana pronunciation in other people's speeches than they are of their own, as long as comprehension is not too compromised. 64% of the study participant do not mind katakana pronunciation used by others in contrast to the 25% that do (Figure 5a). That value falls to 40% in relation to oneself, that is, 40% do not mind the occurrence of katakana pronunciation in their own communication (Figure 5b). Generally, one's awareness, and the generally negative public perception of katakana pronunciation is attributed for the observed reluctance to engage ordinarily in verbal communication, consequently, nearly 60% agrees that a wider acknowledgement of katakana pronunciation as one of many accents in the English language will see a positive change in attitude to the use of English in oral communication.

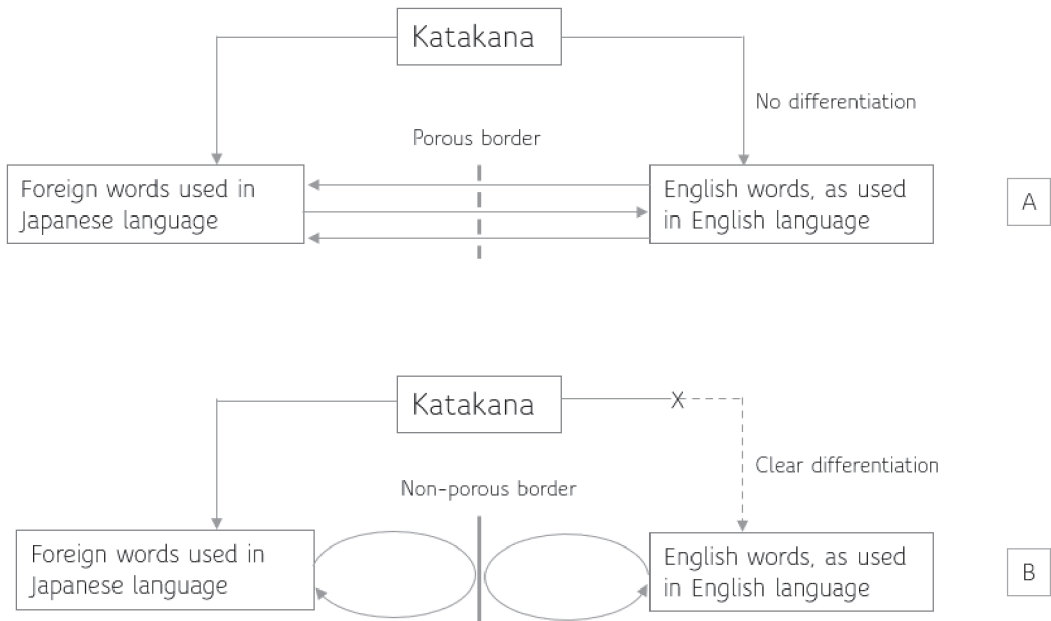


**Figure 5. (A) 64% of those surveyed do not mind katakana pronunciation used by others; (B) 40% of those surveyed do not mind katakana pronunciation used by oneself (see appendix, question 3.52 and 3.53).**

### 3.6 Prevalence of Katakana Enunciation in English: A Societal Element

Language study may take place both actively and passively in diverse environments such as schools, workplaces, and homes, each setting with varying degrees of impact on proficiency and output. Thus, pressures from linguistic and non-linguistic origins may influence language learning (Sherard, 1986; Lauer, 2017;

Lee, 2018). Whilst policy tools can be relied upon in managing the influence of katakana in English language learning in formal education, societal pathway(s) through which katakana influences English language learning may be more challenging, if contentious to manage. On the one hand, in environments where the learning contents are structured and supervised such as schools and other educational institutions, within the coverage of policy instruments, learners are exposed to authentic materials during their education, albeit for a limited period of time. On the other hand, learners have unlimited and unsupervised exposure to a range of contents in the society, outside the time-limited learning environment and the bounds of policy coverage and effect, which also happens to be where a significant portion of one’s time is spent. The author states that the prolonged repeated exposure of learners to predominantly katakana English content away from formal or informal language learning environment such as classrooms far exceeds that in the learning environment thus perpetuating an undue influence on articulation – with “duration of exposure” perhaps a stronger agent than supposed. In both educational and societal pathways to the prevalence of katakana, failings to segregate katakana words used to denote words of foreign origin in Japanese language, which for all intents and purposes form part of



**Figure 6. (A) Model showing existing relationship (little to no distinction) between the enunciation of imported foreign words in katakana, and ordinary English words; (B) Proposed introduction of concept of awareness to distinguish between the enunciation of imported foreign words (katakana) and English words during communication.**

the Japanese language, from English words as used ordinarily in English language falsely impresses upon learners that such articulations, as rendered in Japanese language, are always intelligible during communications in English (Figure 6a) (Smith, 1997).

Furthermore, 58% of the study participants responded positively to the question in reference to the value and convenience of unsupervised contents, that is, the inventory of English words, phrases and expressions in katakana that is available online and through other channels (see appendix, question 3.61). Search inputs in English alphabets will yield responses such as spelling and pronunciation in katakana which the user then assimilates. The subscription to these resources, coupled with the indiscriminate use of such languages (words, expressions) during interactions in Japanese in the society by institutions such as the mass media (news, entertainment), the government, the education system etc., only serves to increase exposure to katakana English content, thereby reinforcing their use (Figure 6a). To mitigate this, the establishment of clarity on what words constitutes aspects of Japanese language vocabulary and ordinary English language vocabulary is required across the entire social spectrum (Figure 6b). For instance, the discouragement of the unnecessary use of foreign words in communications in Japanese for which an equivalent word exists in Japanese language. This may also serve to cultivate Japanese language ability of native speakers as is being sort by the government (MEXT, 2003). Furthermore, government survey in 2011 revealed that only 22.2% of high schools provided English learning opportunities (authentic materials) in and out of the classroom using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) materials such as the internet and digital blackboards (MEXT, 2011b). Presently, this figure stands at over 95%, and now also includes primary schools (小学校) and junior high schools (中学校), although, it is unclear whether the tool is available for use out of the classroom (MEXT, 2021). Nevertheless, the potential exists to utilize ICT as a platform to narrow the gap in the exposure time of learners to unsupervised content away from the classroom by providing materials that foster relevant target activities and exercises such as speaking and pronunciation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

As have been discussed, the proportion of individuals that are studying, or have studied English in environments with good enunciation either during their formal education or their personal study did not tally with those that reported that they have no troubles with their English articulation. This loss in articulation is attributed to societal effects beyond the reach of ELT policy coverage. Over the years, policy tools have proved useful in tackling issues with ELT; however, it is also true that

the degree of policy impacts is being tempered in part by its own construction, and in some cases undermined by wider societal effects, as discussed. In any case, the author argues that policy reforms alone should not be relied upon entirely to address the issues, and that it should be accompanied by relevant social campaigns designed to introduce awareness that will bring about a more considered use of language.

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## Appendix

List of selected survey questions by section and order of discussion.

### Section 3.1

- 3.11. Do you think that Japanese people need to learn English?
- 3.12. Why are you studying/have you studied English? [Figure 1]

### Section 3.2

- 3.21. What is the earliest grade/level in school you think English should be taught? [Figure 2a]
- 3.22. In what language(s) do you think English should be taught in Japan? [Figure 2b]

### Section 3.3

- 3.31. What do you consider to be a good balance in the use of Japanese and English during class in Elementary school, Junior high school, High school, and University? [Figure 3]
- 3.32. In what language do you teach English?
- 3.33. I teach in Japanese because it is easier for everyone.
- 3.34. I teach in Japanese because I am not sure of the correct English pronunciation myself.
- 3.35. Would you prefer to have learnt/studied English entirely in English language, with no concessions to Japanese?
- 3.36. Would you prefer to have learnt/studied English in both English and in Japanese; with Japanese used occasionally for explaining grammar etc., without the use of katakana pronunciation?
- 3.37. Katakana pronunciation is not, and should not be considered a problem in learning and teaching English.

### Section 3.4

- 3.41. What was the primary language of instruction during your entire English education/learning (so far)? [Figure 4]
- 3.42. When I study English, I pay attention to.....
- 3.43. I do not have any trouble with my English pronunciation.
- 3.44. Where did you learn English?
- 3.45. What is the main channel through which you learnt English?

### Section 3.5

3.51. Do you think that people (Japanese and foreign individuals) in general have a negative impression of strong katakana pronunciation?

3.52. I do not mind katakana pronunciation used by others as long as I can understand them. [Figure 5a]

3.53. I do not mind katakana pronunciation used by me as long as I can be understood. [Figure 5b]

3.54. Would your attitude to speaking English change if katakana pronunciation was to become a generally recognised accent?

### Section 3.6

3.61. Katakana is useful because there is a large inventory (online resources) of English words in katakana; like a dictionary, I can find the meaning of English words if I do a search.