



## A Variety of English Accents Used in Teaching Materials Targeting Japanese Learners

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### Abstract

The present study analyzes the audio materials that accompany six government-approved textbooks for Japanese junior high school students to determine the variety of English accents used and to discuss the choice of pronunciation and listening models for Japanese learners.

Despite the fact that the textbooks introduce various characters, not only from the Inner Circle but also from the Outer and Expanding Circles, a small-scale accent identification experiment reveals discrepancy between the textbook characters' descriptions and their accents. In other words, the diversity of English speakers is reflected in the content of the textbooks, but not in their audio materials. Although pronunciation and listening models are not specified in the Course of Study (i.e., the government's curriculum guidelines), the North American accent is observed to be predominant.

Apart from the teachers' pronunciation, textbook audio materials are the primary source for listening study in classrooms. Although careful attention is required when choosing pronunciation and listening models for students, teachers must also be aware of the importance of exposing students to a variety of accents, both to enhance students' awareness of English diversity and to build their confidence as English speakers.

**Keywords:** English accents and varieties, teaching pronunciation, pronunciation and listening models, English education in Japan

### 1. Introduction

At present, English is used in various international contexts by speakers with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds [1, 2]. In its Action Plan 2003 [3], Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) stresses the need to develop Japanese learners' communicative competence in the English language, allowing them use it as a lingua franca that connects people of different backgrounds. However, is the diversity of

English use and speakers currently reflected in the teaching materials used in the classroom?

To use English as a lingua franca, an important decision to be made in pronunciation teaching is choice of models. English education in public junior high schools in Japan follows the Course of Study, the curriculum guidelines established by MEXT. The 1969 version of the guidelines states that classroom activities and materials should be based on "standard pronunciation of contemporary British or American English" [4]. However, subsequent versions, including the latest, indicate that "contemporary standard pronunciation" should be used [5]. The guidelines no longer specify any details.

The aims of this study are to examine the variety of English accents used in textbooks targeting junior high school students in Japan, and to discuss the validity of incorporating various accents into pronunciation and listening models.

### 2. Materials and method

The materials used in this study are the six government-approved textbooks and their respective audio CDs used in junior high schools (see Table 1). All the textbooks were published in 2011 and approved by the Japanese government for the academic years 2012 to 2015.

**Table 1:** List of textbooks.

Titles	Publishers (Editors)
<i>Columbus 21</i>	Mitsumura Tosho (Togo, K., et al.)
<i>New Crown</i>	Sanseido (Takahashi, S., et al.)
<i>New Horizon</i>	Tokyo Shoseki (Kasashima, J., Seki, N., et al.)
<i>Sunshine</i>	Kairyudo (Matsuhata, K., Sano, M., et al.)
<i>One World</i>	Kyoiku Shuppan (Matsumoto, S., et al.)
<i>Total English</i>	Gakko Tosho (Yada, H., Yoshida, K., et al.)

All public junior high schools in Japan are required to use one of these textbooks for their integrative English course. All three volumes for the three

grades in junior high schools were used in the analysis.

The stories in the textbooks revolve around Japanese junior high school students. The textbooks try to enhance understanding of different cultures by having Japanese students interact with English teachers, classmates, and overseas students. They talk about their own cultures and those of other countries, and discuss current issues such as education, the environment, or technology.

As the first step in analysis, a list was made of all the characters that appear in all the textbooks. After excluding characters who do not speak or only say a few words, a total of 50 characters were selected as the target for analysis. All the characters were then categorized based on Kachru's Three Circles [6] and assigned a label based on their description in the textbook. In addition to the introductory page of each textbook, which provides basic information about all characters, the content of each textbook was carefully examined to discover more background information about each character. One example is Ms. Cathy King, who is described as an English teacher from Sydney in the *One World* series. She was given the label "Australia." Another example is a character in the *Columbus 21* series, who was given the label "Cambodia" since she works at a school in Cambodia and introduces the local culture. Table 2 summarizes the classification and distribution of all 50 characters.

**Table 2:** Distribution of the 50 characters by textbook. The textbook titles are abbreviated as follows: C21 (*Columbus 21*), NC (*New Crown*), NH (*New Horizon*), SS (*Sunshine*), OW (*One World*), and TE (*Total English*).

Text-book	Inner Circle	Outer Circle	Expanding Circle	No.
C21	US (2) Australia (1)	—	S. Korea (1) Japan (2) Cambodia (1)	7
NC	US (1) UK (1) Australia (1)	India (1)	Japan (3) China (1)	8
NH	UK (5) Canada (1) Australia (1)	—	Japan (3)	10
SS	US (2) UK (3) Canada (1) Australia (1)	India (1)	Japan (4)	12
OW	US (1) Australia (1)	Singapore (1)	Japan (3) S. Korea (1)	7
TE	US (1) Canada (1)	India (1)	Japan (2) Germany (1)	6
Total	24	4	22	50

Table 2 shows that characters from more than one Inner Circle country appear in all the textbooks. The US characters account for half (12 out of 24), and at least one appears in every textbook. Only four textbooks introduce a character from the Outer

Circle countries, India or Singapore. Of the characters from the Expanding Circle, most dominant are Japanese characters (17 out of 22), and these characters are found in all textbooks. In addition to the Japanese characters, four textbooks introduce characters from other Expanding Circle countries: South Korea, Cambodia, China, and Germany.

Following the preliminary analysis, a small-scale accent identification experiment was conducted. L1 Listeners are generally said to be very sensitive to accents [7]. Flege [8] gives an example of English native speakers distinguishing native accent from non-native accent using a phrase, a syllable, or even a sample shorter than a syllable. The accuracy of detection is influenced by a number of factors, such as the familiarity with the target accent [7, 9]. In the present experiment, which involved listening to both native and foreign accents, two native speakers of English (American and British), both of whom are experts in phonetics, were asked to act as judges.

For each character in the textbook, a short audio clip (WAV file) of a voice sample was prepared; each sample comprised less than 30 words, with no information given about the speaker's language background. Most voice samples were monologues. A dialogue was selected when a monologue with appropriate length and content could not be found.

The two judges were asked to listen to the 50 audio clips in a quasi-random order. They were presented with the script and could listen to each audio file as many times as they wished. For each character, the judges were asked to identify their accent by choosing one label each from the main categories and subcategories. Table 3 lists the accent labels prepared by the authors after conducting a preliminary analysis (cf. [9]).

**Table 3:** List of accent labels.

Main Categories	Subcategories
North America	US, Canada
UK/Ireland	England, Scotland Wales, Ireland
Australia/NZ	Australia, NZ
Foreign Accent	Cambodia, China Germany, India Japan, Singapore, Other

The judges were also asked to write comments, if they noticed specific characteristics.

### 3. Results

With respect to the main categories, the two native-speaker judges were unanimous in their judgment of the accent for all 50 characters. Three cases of disagreement were found for the subcategory of the "North American" accent. For all the three cases, the

British judge chose “US” and the American judge chose “Canada.”

General American and Canadian accents share a number of characteristics, including rhoticity, /æ/ in BATH words, and t-tapping. The differences between the two lie in lexical incidence, the allophonic variation of diphthongs PRICE and MOUTH in front of voiceless consonants (e.g., *white, south*), and the merger of back vowels THOUGHT and LOT (e.g., *caught-cot, stalk-stock*) [10, 11]. However, the loss of THOUGHT-LOT distinction is also observed in the US, which makes it even more difficult to distinguish the two accents, particularly in short samples.

Based on the judge’s comments and a careful re-analysis, it was concluded that an insufficient range of vocabulary and segmental information was included in the voice samples to clearly distinguish the two accents. Therefore, the distinction between American and Canadian accents was disregarded, and the two labels are hereafter collectively referred to as a “North American” accent. For the remaining 47 cases, the two judges agreed on both the subcategories and the main categories.

As summarized in Table 4, 46 out of 50 characters were identified as having a “North American” accent.

**Table 4:** Results of the accent identification experiment. On the left is the expected accent of the characters, based on their descriptions in the textbook. On the right is the character’s actual accent as judged by the two native speakers.

Expected Accent (No.)		Actual Accent in Audio Materials (No.)
Inner Circle	British (3)	UK-English (3)
	Australian (1)	Australian (1)
	American (12)	North American (46)
	Canadian (3)	
	Australian (4)	
Outer Circle	British (1)	
	Indian (3)	
Expanding Circle	Singaporean (1)	
	Japanese (17)	
	South Korean (2)	
	Chinese (1)	
	German (1)	
	Cambodian (1)	
Total	(50)	(50)

Only four characters out of 50 were identified as having accents other than “North American.” Three British characters were given the label “UK/Ireland,” and both judges selected the subcategory “England” with additional comments such as “close to ‘standard’ British English” or “overall near RP.” One Australian character was assigned the label “Australia.” These four speakers are all characters from the same textbook series: *Sunshine*. In other words, *Sunshine* is the only textbook series that

introduces accents other than “North American,” but the accent variation it presents is limited to Inner Circle varieties.

Among the Inner Circle countries, all US and Canadian characters were correctly given the label of the “North American” accent. However, it should be noted that some of Australian and British characters were also identified as having a “North American” accent. All speakers in both the Outer and Expanding Circles were identified as having a “North American” accent, including all the Japanese characters.

## 4. Discussion

The government’s curriculum guidelines state that “contemporary standard pronunciation” should be used in English classes [5]. Although they do not recommend a specific accent, it has been established that a North American accent is used predominantly in the textbooks targeting junior high school students. One of the limitations of this study is that there were only two judges. To distinguish American and Canadian accents, a further experiment should be conducted with additional judges and/or with longer samples.

Despite being a small-scale experiment, this study shows that there is discrepancy between what is presented in the textbooks and what students actually hear. All the textbooks attempt to reflect the use of English in various international contexts by introducing characters from diverse cultural backgrounds. Unfortunately, except for one textbook series, they are not successful in presenting the students with genuine accent variation.

Whether to expose learners to various accents is an important question that requires discussion. The choice of suitable listening materials for students is an important decision teachers must make. Field explains the importance of a “gradual progression” when presenting listening materials for learners, taking into account factors such as speech rate and the age or sex of speakers in addition to accent. Non-native varieties are included in the last phase [12: 160]:

1. an emphasis on the voice of the teacher, supported by occasional recordings;
2. a range of voices (male and female) in one standard national variety; initially, older speakers, who tend to speak more slowly; later more rapid speakers;
3. the gradual introduction of one or two other varieties, ideally widespread or standard ones; each exemplified in a range of voices;
4. an expansion of the range of accents covered to include a greater number of native-speaker varieties;

5. exposure to a range of non-native speaker varieties – recognising that a great deal of communication today takes place between individuals who speak the target language as a lingua franca.

Many Japanese junior high school students have just begun to study English, and their proficiency level is low, which means that teachers must consider carefully when deciding what type of materials should be used for listening.

However, empirical findings indicate that accentedness does not always interfere with speech's comprehensibility and intelligibility. In their experiments targeting L1 listeners, Derwing and Munro [13: 386] find that "Although listeners who find specific L2 utterances to be both unintelligible and incomprehensible always perceive such samples as heavily accented, the reverse is not necessarily true." In other words, accented speech can be both comprehensible and intelligible.

Even if it is difficult to use a variety of accents as listening models, it is still possible to present various accents in class. Exposure to various accents offers benefit to learners. Walker [2: 94] points out that "learners in a monolingual environment receive only limited exposure to the accent variation that is commonplace in a multilingual class," and continues on to state that "by listening to a range of different accents, learners not only come to accept the reality of accent variation, but also equip themselves to deal with it better." English classes in Japan are mostly monolingual, and students usually lack the opportunity to hear a variety of English accents. Apart from listening to ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers), audio materials such as textbook CDs are a student's only chance to listen to a variety of accents. Through exposure to different accents at an early stage, students will realize and gradually come to respect the differences. Raising awareness of the diversity of English is important for beginning English learners, and nurturing positive attitudes toward accent variation is one of the teacher's most important roles.

Exposure to various accents will also build students' confidence in their own pronunciation. In her questionnaire survey on teacher preparation programs, Matsuda finds that the majority of teacher trainers acknowledge the importance of exposing prospective teachers to various accents, one reason being that it helps build confidence in learners: by learning "the fact that effective communication is possible even when English deviates from American and British norms, students will feel more confident about their own English" [14: 175]. Matsuda also reports that perspectives concerning World Englishes or EIL (English as an International

Language) are coming to be incorporated in teacher preparation programs; however, they are still handled on an individual basis or treated as supplementary and low priority.

## 5. Conclusion

When considering appropriate pronunciation and listening models for learners, it is vital to consider other variables, such as speech rate, use of reduced forms, and hesitations/fillers [15, 16]; but accent is one of the most important factors, and is closely tied to the identity of the speaker.

The abilities to communicate with intelligible pronunciation and to comprehend English spoken with different accents are essential for learners. To achieve these goals, it is imperative to nurture positive attitudes toward a diversity of English speakers and accents. This will also lead to greater confidence in students' own pronunciation.

Providing an appropriate pronunciation model and exposing learners to different varieties of English are crucial roles not only for teachers, but also for curriculum developers, textbook publishers/editors, and all others involved in English education.

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