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# Perspectives From Japanese Staff in Canadian ESL Schools Regarding Japanese Students' Groupism

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*The present study, which stems from a critical approach to common perceptions about ESL learners in the TESOL community, examines the perspectives of Japanese-speaking staff in Canadian ESL institutions on their students' school performance. From September 2003 to April 2004, qualitative data were gathered from 11 staff members through mail survey, on-line communication, and interviews. These voices were found to be instrumental for a contextual understanding of the tendency of Japanese students toward passivity and groupism, which is partly attributable to the interplay between students and the outside world. As an awareness-raising study, it provides a detailed description of the research process.*

*La présente étude découle d'une approche critique aux perceptions généralisées des apprenants en ALS dans la communauté TESOL. Elle porte sur les perceptions qu'a le personnel de langue japonaise par rapport à la performance de leurs élèves dans des institutions ALS au Canada. De septembre 2003 à avril 2004, nous avons recueilli des données qualitatives auprès de 11 membres du personnel et ce, par le biais d'une enquête postale, de communications en ligne et d'entrevues. Les réponses obtenues ont joué un rôle déterminant dans notre compréhension contextuelle de la tendance qu'ont les élèves japonais à être passifs et à se retrouver en groupes, comportement qui s'explique en partie par l'interaction entre les élèves et le monde extérieur. Nous fournissons une description détaillée du processus de recherche associé à cette étude de sensibilisation.*

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## Study Background

ESL schools are a growth industry in English-speaking countries, bringing in large numbers of foreign students and serving as a valuable contributor to local economies. In Canada, although exact statistics on foreign students are nonexistent because of contact fluctuation in the group body and ESL schools' lack of obligation to report numbers, the Canadian media estimates that the sheer size of the market ranges from \$3.5 billion (Penner, 2002) to \$4 billion (Sokoloff, 2002), with the number of international students ranging from 75,000 to 100,000 (Penner) or to 133,000 (Sokoloff). The largest figure, 142,731 is calculated by a monthly magazine for language travel agents

(Baker, 2003). Students from South Korea, Japan, and China reportedly retain their dominance in Canadian ESL schools (Baker; Wee-jae, 2002).

It is widely known that the ESL teaching industry reaps enormous profits by generating opportunities for international students to engage in intercultural communication in English. These opportunities are promulgated through appealing messages that appear in school brochures and commercial magazines, often with the guaranteed assurance of support from teaching and L1-speaking staff. However, it is also taken for granted in the TESOL profession and in public that Asian students are passive and group-oriented and that they are candidates for failure in optimizing linguistic and cultural opportunities available in the learning context.

The two concepts of Collectivism (group membership overriding individuals) and Confucianism (submission to teachers as authority) are conventionally employed to provide cultural explanations for Asian students' unwillingness to speak up in ESL/EFL classrooms and their groupism (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Wen & Clement, 2003). Cheng (2000), opposing these pervasive "allegations" (p. 437) argues that "the idea of Asian ESL/EFL learners' reticence and passivity is largely groundless myth rather than a universal truth" (p. 438). The study, based on the author's 10-year teaching experience in China, "numerous" class observations, discussions with colleagues "from around the world" (p. 438), and five studies reviewed as "counter evidence" (p. 445), argued that the causes for Asian students' reticent and passive behavior in Asian contexts "are situation specific, though methodological differences and language proficiency are the two common causes" (p. 442). Citing LoCastro (1996), a good documentation of traditional English classes at Japanese secondary schools, Cheng claimed that "such a rigid format and solemn atmosphere obviously do not encourage students to speak freely" (p. 442).

Meanwhile, the most recent postconstructivist attempt seems to focus on Asian students' reticence and groupism observed longitudinally in Western school settings, both during classes and outside classrooms. The burgeoning line of such ethnographic research has contributed to this research theme and evidenced contextual elements embedded in ESL secondary classrooms (McKay & Wong, 1996; Miller, 2004; Pon, Goldstein, & Schecter, 2003). Miller, for example, documents that Chinese ESL students' sense of marginalization amid white Australian classmates and the sheer presence of and solidarity in the Mandarin-speaking group engender their perceived racial discrimination and inclination to speak English the least at school and socialize the most with their L1 group members both inside and outside the school context.

Shifting focus from students to the ESL profession itself, Kumaravadivelu (2003a) critically examined the persistence of cultural stereotypes about Asian students in the field of TESOL. He argues that Asian students are misleadingly characterized by three common stereotypes, that is, their

obedience to teachers, lack of critical thinking, and passive participation in class activities, and points out two potential factors behind the stereotyping: first, “[stereotyping our learners] helps us reduce an unmanageable reality to a manageable level” (p. 716) and second, “primary pedagogic conceptualization in TESOL is very much conditioned and constrained by ... the predominance of Western perspectives to the teaching of culture” (p. 717). This brief, yet important study adds its critical perspective of the TESOL/TESL profession to the growing research on TESOL institutional practices and notions challenged from the perspective of minority staff such as female faculty of color (Lin et al., 2004) and non-native English-speaking educators (Canagarajah, 1999). This study illuminates another minority group in ESL schools, Japanese-speaking staff, and examines their perspectives of Japanese students, particularly regarding groupism and their contextual rationale for the inclination.

The present study adopts its theoretical framework from the above-mentioned contextualist perspective that contextualizes “a second-language learner as a complex social being” (McKay & Wong, 1996, p. 577) and also from a critical, “ideologically sensitive orientation to the study of culture that ... can demystify the interests served by particular cultures” (Canagarajah, 2001, p. 211). Also presupposed in the study is “a complex interplay between classrooms and the outside world” (Pennycook, 2000, p. 92).

This study attends to Japanese staff members because the lack of their voices in TESOL research is in contrast to the fact that they are often part of the staff at schools with a high enrollment rate of Japanese students and are mentioned on institutional Web sites and in commercial magazines, consolidating the image of staff as mental support and caregivers for potential Japanese applicants for overseas ESL schools. With its specific focus on Japanese ESL staff, however, this small-scale, exploratory study neither aims to use their voices to assess the equation of groupism with Japanese students nor investigates the degree of influence Japanese staff exert on Japanese students’ study performance in school and experiences outside school contexts. Rather, as an awareness-raising attempt, not a problem-solving one, this study purports to explore Japanese staff’s perspectives and have those unheard voices heard in the hope of contributing to context-specific, critical discussions on Asian students’ groupism and on TESL staff members’ perceptions about it.

## The Study

This study, based on written responses from nine Japanese staff members and interview data from another two, is part of a larger investigation into Japanese students in Canadian ESL schools conducted from spring 2003 to winter 2004, which sought participation from Japanese-speaking staff, Japanese students, and managerial staff and garnered from them qualitative data

through interview and participant observation and quantitative data through administration of questionnaires.

This particular preliminary study explores qualitative data gained from Japanese-speaking staff through mail survey, on-line communication, and interviews. Originally, the study aimed to compile a comprehensive file on the experience, perceptions, and opinions of the Japanese-speaking staff working for ESL institutions in Canada, and it therefore attempted to identify and contact schools with Japanese staff. However, that initial research plan had to be modified, and the spectrum of the research design was reduced significantly because of privacy issues and the status and workload of Japanese staff. The research process is described in more detail than in conventional scholarly papers, as this process and research experience are probably instrumental for a better understanding of the research context and for future research involving contact with L1-speaking staff in ESL institutes. In other words, it can be said that the following contextualized description is part of these research findings to be shared with the TESL profession.

### *The Mail Survey*

The initial stage of this mail survey focused on ESL schools in one major city in Canada. Japanese staff listed as full-time on the Web sites of schools that are accredited members of one of the three major associations were identified: the Canadian Association of Private Language Schools Association (CAPLS), the Council of Second Language Programs in Canada (CSLPC), and the Private English Language Schools Association (PELSA, merged into CSLPS in April 2004). This preparatory process also entailed e-mail contacts with potential schools for general inquiry (e.g., the confirmation of Japanese staff members' names), personal communication with ESL professionals for advice (e.g., the most appropriate way to contact staff and the potential appeal of this research to the TESL profession), review of commercial magazines, Web sites, and official documents on overseas study, and attendance at overseas study fairs and seminars in Tokyo, which all guided the construction and selection of items included in a questionnaire. This pilot study resulted in the identification of 14 staff members in 14 schools. A semistructured anonymous questionnaire in Japanese was mailed to them in November 2003 (see Appendix for the translated questionnaire). Within a month, six responses were returned.

A second survey was distributed to an expanded participant base in eight cities across Canada. This distribution, however, encountered methodological difficulties and failed to be identical to the first mail survey. For example, mainly due to lack of data on potential Japanese ESL staff, this second mail package had to be addressed generally "To Japanese coordinators/counselors," whereas individual names were typed on the first mail package and

cover letter. This survey conducted in April 2003 resulted in only three responses out of 23 packages.

This questionnaire had been designed and administered in accordance with scholarly guidelines for mail surveys in second-language research such as Brown (2001) and Dörnyei (2003), and it was determined that more context-specific resources were needed to examine this low return rate in the second survey. Although such a knowledge base has yet to be located, one can speculate, based on on-line, on-site personal communication and interviews with Japanese staff and managerial directors during the whole research process, that: (a) not a few young Japanese staff are employed on a working visa and/or a contract basis; (b) therefore, they might be cautious about disclosing their personal perspectives to outsiders or having personal communication with them even in the form of anonymous survey questionnaires; (c) many of them do not intend to make a lifelong commitment to the current job, look for better career opportunities elsewhere; and (d) might be inclined to avoid an additional, job-unrelated task (including this type of no-reward survey); and (e) their workload largely consists of marketing as well as counseling, with frequent trips to overseas study fairs (e.g., in spring when the second mail survey was conducted). As a matter of fact, one female employee, who readily participated in an interview session and provided inside-information in detail, which is part of this study, was found to be working as a receptionist in another public institution in the same city one year ago. She laughingly noted that she was more satisfied now with a slower-paced and less stressful workplace.

In spite of the unsatisfactory return rate for the second survey, nine respondents provided detailed comments, including one respondent who used up all the provided lines and added more vertically to the bottom and center blank space of the B4-size, one-page survey sheet, including an encouraging emoticon.

### *The Interview*

Two Japanese staff from the same city are part of this interview data. They were contacted on the basis of their schools' affiliations mentioned above, personal profiles disclosed on the schools' Web sites, and major commercial references available in the Japanese market. Informed of the purpose of this study and its subsequent procedures by regular mail, e-mail, and telephone, they consented to collaborate. Interview sessions were held in person in September 2003 in their respective schools. Each interview was held in Japanese and lasted for approximately two hours.

Communication before the interviews led to the decision not to tape interviews: in the initial stage of then-ongoing research, the priority was placed on locating participants who voluntarily expressed their interest in the research theme and were willing to take time to share their perspectives

with an outside researcher. Instead of taping, notes were taken during each interview and added to immediately after the interviews. These summaries with quotations included were e-mailed to the interviewees within a week of the interviews for confirmation of accuracy.

Although there is no denying that this method of untaped interview is not recommended in most research settings, this approach was not critically ineffective in the present interview context where inquiries in person or by phone to interviewees interrupted interviews at least once, and interviewees provided further information while showing the researcher around the facilities and greeting students in the corridors before and after the sit-down interviews. Moreover, this method successfully accommodated one interviewee's unexpected offer to spend more time over a late lunch, which resulted in an addition to data in the form of casual talk on the way to and back from the restaurant and a more relaxed, in-depth interview in a quiet eatery.

### *Data analysis*

Qualitative data in the present study were analyzed through two stages (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Erickson, 1986). First, data were read through as a whole in order to gain an overall understanding of Japanese-speaking personnel's experience and perspectives regarding Japanese students' behavior, attitudes, and mindset. This process led to the emergence of a certain degree of commonality among the data as well as variances, which were then categorized into discussion themes. Second, data were examined under these categorical themes in order to further explore commonalities, patterns, and ranges in informants' responses to a particular theme. On the identification of overall trends in the responses, frequencies were checked, not for rigid descriptive statistical analysis, but to evaluate the appropriateness of categorical themes.

The organizing structure in the following discussions on the findings is in accordance with the identified themes. All the data shown in this article are English translations from the original Japanese.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### *Japanese-Speaking Staff Profile*

Japanese-speaking staff profiles gained from questionnaire survey and interview sessions suggest that their exact titles vary in accordance to affiliations, including marketing director, coordinator, marketing coordinator, and consultant, either with or without *Japanese*. One *Japanese consultant* explained during an interview that *Japanese coordinator* and other titles are often used because another title, *Japanese counselor*, could incite "too many expectations for help" from Japanese students. Interestingly, the review of commercial

magazines and general Web sites on overseas study for Japanese potential customers appears to suggest a wider use of the title *counselor*, which from the viewpoint of the interviewee, can misleadingly create an image of them as counseling specialists to be relied on. In the discussion below I use more neutral terms such as *Japanese-speaking staff*, *Japanese staff*, and *Japanese personnel*, regardless of informants' actual job titles.

Regarding job responsibilities, two interviewees stated that marketing represents 80%+ of their workload, varying with yearly and daily schedules. It is also a large part of their responsibility to organize the first-day orientation for newly arrived Japanese students and conduct individual follow-up interviews one week later. Although varying in the exact workload of counseling and degree of voluntary commitment to it, the 11 informants mentioned their attempt to engage in daily contact with students, for example, in the corridor and eating space ("with 10, or at least 5 students" for one interviewee) and provide counseling on request. The following is a written response from one staff member whose school annually accommodates 30-40% Japanese students and 40-70% during the peak summer season.

As the school I work for is a midsize one with 60 to 80 students, I remember and recognize almost all the students' names and faces. So I greet them by their names almost every day whenever I run into them on the corridors. Once or twice a week I have lunch with students from a randomly chosen class and through chatting and playing games I try to keep a friendly atmosphere as much as possible. At the same time, I regularly ask them, "Is everything okay?" When they are dealing with some issues, most Japanese students respond to my inquiry and start talking with "*Jitsuha* ... (Actually)."

Japanese-speaking staff evidently do not function as counseling specialists stationed in individual rooms with flexible office hours, despite the general connotation of the terms *counselor* and *counseling staff*. However, their written and oral comments imply their daily, often personalized contact with Japanese students, which probably evolves into perceptions about and understanding of students' school performance. These nonteaching staff members probably possess considerable potential for further discussions on TESL professionals' perceptions about Asian students' passivity and groupism (Kumaravadivelu, 2003a) and on the contextual background for such behavioral inclination in ESL contexts (McKay & Wong, 1996; Miller, 2004; Pon et al., 2003).

### *Japanese Students' Groupism*

Data gathered from Japanese-speaking staff suggest their recognition of Japanese students', particularly female students', inclination to socialize

mainly or exclusively with other Japanese students in and outside school settings. One informant commented in a semistructured questionnaire:

I had one Japanese female student who was caught between her wish to stop socializing with other Japanese peers after school to improve English and her fear of leaving the Japanese network and being isolated. I found her dilemma very Japanese.

Similarly, an interviewee remarked:

A recent trend is to have many Japanese female students who come to me to ask for advice on their relationship with other Japanese students. For example, not having Japanese friends anymore because close Japanese friends have gone back to Japan or having trouble getting along well with their close Japanese group. I advise those students to try to spend more time with other international students since they are in Canada after all.

These data, however, should not be translated into the hasty generalization that the young female Japanese students are inclined to form their own group in a foreign school context. As a matter of fact, a seemingly contradictory response was provided by another informant whose school restricts the percentage of any nationals to 33% and appears to be committed to enhancing interactions among students:

My observation is that recently Japanese students have been making efforts to socialize with students of various nationals both at school and outside school. However, perhaps due to their lack of topics, they seem to be having trouble making the conversation flow and are unsure what to do.

His written comment is a good reminder of perceptual variations among Japanese staff members and of the need to exercise caution in making generalizations. Nevertheless, further examination of qualitative data yields some characteristics that Japanese-speaking staff attribute to committed learners. These learners are characterized as those who are extrovert (personality), pay for the study on their own (financial resource), study on a student visa (status), and join the program with a clear goal and future plan (purpose of study). Although these factors can and should be examined further in both qualitative and quantitative studies, it is sufficient to point out here the existence of some perceptual commonalities among Japanese staff regarding students who are willing or unwilling to seek the opportunity for English learning and intercultural communication during their overseas study period.



### *Diversity and Changes in Purposes of Overseas Study*

Further examination of the data led to the emergence of another picture of current Japanese students studying overseas. Data gained from Japanese staff are indicative of changes and diversification in Japanese students' purposes for studying overseas over the years. One female interviewee with five years working experience at the school, who herself was a student in an ESL school 10 years ago, mentioned the change in an interview.

I have a feeling that there used to be more Japanese students who tried to make the most of their time and money. But nowadays overseas study has become so accessible that I see more students whose purpose is to stay overseas itself rather than study English diligently.

An equivalent comment was written by another participant in another school who lamented some Japanese students' lack of specific purposes for being enrolled in ESL schools:

Maybe due to lack of courage, some Japanese students are not good at making friends and end up socializing with other Japanese students and continue such Japanese-only life. I wonder what brought them here. This is the trend commonly observed among quiet students. Don't they have courage? Are they shy? They listen to Japanese songs, read Japanese Web sites, and speak Japanese. What a waste.... It seems to me the biggest problem is that they lack confidence and do not have a clear-set goal such as "I want to speak English for this purpose."

The chance of studying overseas used to be a privilege reserved exclusively for the elite whose mission was strictly limited to acquiring Western knowledge in order to devote themselves to the Westernization of their motherland (see Wilkinson, 2001, for a related discussion on Americans studying in Europe). It has been more than three decades since such an era came to an end. Overseas study is now a national pastime with the emergence of a group of ordinary Japanese citizens studying in ESL schools who are not enthusiastically dedicated (at least) to studying English or to making friends with students from other countries.

Another story shared by an interviewee exemplifies the existence of Japanese students who are not enrolled in ESL programs for any linguistic or cultural opportunities in English-speaking countries. According to the informant, whose school has a branch in the vicinity of resort areas, almost all Japanese students choose the branch solely to enjoy skiing. These ski-loving students register for ESL classes at the branch simply because in the initial stage of planning travel, they can persuade their parents to finance their overseas study. Furthermore, she pointed out the sparse communication between a group of Japanese students and Swiss students, due both to the distinct discrepancy in their English levels and also to the Japanese students'

primary reason for being there: skiing, not socializing with other international students or studying English.

### *Interplay Between Students and the Outside World*

These Japanese-speaking staff members' perspectives suggest the increasingly weak relationship between Japanese students' voluntary, physical attendance at ESL school overseas and their motivation to study English or to make friends with students from other countries. These data seem to reflect the current economic status of Japan, where many middle-class people can afford to study overseas for academically nonessential reasons. Furthermore, interview data revealed that some Japanese students' lack of motivation to study stems from their societal backgrounds in Japan. One student "was told to go to Canada by his/her parents after failing university entrance exams," and another recently divorced female student "came to Canada to escape from gossip of relatives and neighbors." These students, whose attendance at ESL school does not reflect their wish to improve English or experience intercultural communication, are both described as uncommitted students.

Kumaravadivelu (2003b) articulates the interrelatedness between students' experience outside school and their school performance:

The experiences participants bring to the classroom are shaped not only by the learning and teaching episodes they have encountered in the past but also by a broader social, economic, and political environment in which they grew up. These experiences have the potential to affect classroom practices in ways unintended and unexpected by policy planners, curriculum designers, or textbook producers. (p. 256)

The present study also suggests that an understanding of Japanese students' backgrounds for studying in Canada necessitates knowledge of Japanese society where, for example, neighboring family members' misfortunes such as a son's failure in entrance exams and a daughter's divorce are the prime target for gossip lovers in Japanese communities.

This does not imply, however, that school settings are an absolute mirror of the outside world. As Pennycook (2000) correctly states, "there is a complex interplay between classrooms and the outside world, or rather that classrooms are not so much a reflection of the outside world, but rather part of the outside world" (p. 92). This study based on perspectives from Japanese-speaking staff also negates a complete association between classrooms (and outside classrooms inside school) and the outside world (both host and home country) while confirming significant interactions between the two.

## **Conclusions**

This preliminary study suggests Japanese teaching staff members' varying degrees of recognition of Japanese students' inclination for groupism. The

conventionally overlooked voices of ESL school staff who speak students' L1 were also found to be instrumental for a better understanding of the interrelatedness between students' seemingly uncommitted orientation and the outside world, including their home country and family. Given the role L1-speaking staff play in supporting students outside classrooms, more findings are likely to emerge from future research on these staff members, especially those who exercise frequent communication with students.

At this point, as this preliminary study is an awareness-raising, problem-posing one rather than a problem-solving one, it should end not with one packaged academically oriented pedagogical implication, but with both research- and pedagogy-related questions.

With the finding that Japanese students' reasons or backgrounds for being enrolled in ESL programs overseas continue to change and diversify even in the eyes of Japanese-speaking staff, what would be a good way, for example, to motivate a young Japanese boy to study English after he failed the entrance exams and lost confidence in himself, was forced to attend a Canadian ESL school by his parents, and who had little idea about his immediate future plans? Kumaravadivelu (2003b) incorporates into second-language learning the idea of *liberatory autonomy*, which aims to liberate and empower language learners in the process of learning the target language. Kumaravadivelu suggests as one way to promote liberatory autonomy, that teachers let students "write diaries or journal entries about issues that directly engage their sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world, and continually reflect on their observations and the observations made by their peers" (p. 142).

The question is then raised here: how do we motivate students, with limited English proficiency and motivation to use English, to negotiate their identity and share it with other international students? For example, would a Japanese high school student who failed the university entrance exam be willing to share his or her perspective in the presence of other Japanese university freshmen who have passed the exam and started their new lives? Furthermore, to what extent do ESL staff, both practitioners and L1-speaking personnel, exert or need to exert influence on students' motivation given that this motivation is probably influenced by something beyond the school boundary, something of which students themselves might not be cognizant?

Given the popularity of studying English overseas and the importance of ESL schools for students, more scholarly and pedagogical discussions and studies are needed on the constituents of the learning settings, including students, teaching staff, support staff, their emotional baggage about studying or working, the outside world, and their interrelatedness. This preliminary study, conducted by an outside researcher with limitations of time, location, and method, does not claim to have achieved this ultimate goal. Rather, with the documentation of findings and discussions based even on

this small-scale study, it attempts to showcase the potential of ESL-school-based research, regardless of its scale, and to raise scholarly and pedagogical interests in what might appear to be the taken-for-granted norm in the TESOL/TESL professional field and what is behind such common practices or inclinations.

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## Appendix

A list of questions included in the semistructured questionnaire given to Japanese speaking staff (translation from original Japanese version):

1. Please describe the ratio of Japanese students at your school based on the yearly average and during the peak season. (Two lines provided)
2. Regarding your job of counseling, how often do you meet Japanese students? (Four lines provided)
3. I understand that the ratio of students from South Korea at Canadian ESL schools is high. Please describe the communication between Japanese students and South Korean ones. (Seven lines provided)
4. Please describe the types of questions most frequently asked by Japanese students and particular questions you remember the most. (Nine lines provided)
5. Please describe your perspectives on any commonalities among Japanese students who make an effort to improve their English or to make friends with another international students. (Nine lines provided)

6. Please describe your perspectives on any commonalities among Japanese students who make little effort to optimize their overseas study. (Nine lines provided)
7. Ratio of your workload: ( ) percent of marketing + ( ) percent of counseling.
8. Years of your work experience at the current school: ( ) years.
9. What made you decide to work at the current school? Please provide broad explanation. (Three lines provided)