

Language Attitudes of Selected Japanese Senior High School Students towards English

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Abstract

The study aimed to identify and analyze the language attitudes of forty Japanese senior high school students from Noshiro Shoyo in Akita Japan towards English, and the possible factors that affect their attitudes. Though Japan has emerged as a global leader in recent years, English proficiency in the country appears to be in decline (EF EPI, 2023), giving rise to a need to look into its learners' attitudes. The study assumes that attitudes can be classified through McKenzie's (2010) Mentalist theory while also assuming that language attitudes can be influenced by factors such as those in Getie's (2020) taxonomy. It used an explanatory-sequential design wherein a Likert-scale questionnaire was used followed by a focus group discussion (FGD) to cross-verify both quantitative and qualitative data. The non-probability sampling of snowball was utilized in selecting the population. The results show that Japanese students possess no cognitive attitudes in terms of English's utility within their classes but possess some in terms of its utility for their economic plans. They also have negative emotional responses or affective attitudes to English, and have some conative attitudes that predispose them to learn English. Moreover, the results also revealed that personality and social contexts affect their attitudes negatively implying that English is not yet integrated well enough in Japan. Their educational context, on the other hand, does not seem to affect them either positively or negatively. These findings can be used to formulate a better English curriculum within Japan that takes into account the learners' attitudes.

Keywords: community, English as Foreign Language (EFL), factors affecting language attitudes, language attitudes, mentalist theory

Introduction

Japan has long confronted a persistent paradox in English language education. Although Japanese students typically study English for at least six years in secondary education, only a relatively small number develop the confidence and competence required for natural communication. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has aggressively pushed for communicative competence through initiatives like the "Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities". However, the reality of the Japanese classroom remains heavily dominated by *juken eigo* (English for entrance examinations). As a result, instruction heavily relies on the *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) method, which privileges rigid linguistic form and reading comprehension over spontaneous communicative use (Fukunaga, 2016). Such a deep contradiction between institutional goals for global communication and an examination-driven reality leaves many learners perceiving English primarily as an academic hurdle rather than a meaningful communicative resource.

Towards navigating such systemic tension, language attitudes play a critical role, as they influence how learners perceive the value, difficulty, and relevance of the English language. In the Japanese context, attitudes toward English are distinctly ambivalent. Ryan (2009) notes that while many Japanese youth claim to "like English," such a sentiment is often an intentionally vague and socially conditioned response rather than a genuine commitment to learning or interacting with the language. Moreover, Ishikawa (2016) argues that a Japanese learner often exhibits a "deficit perspective" regarding their own English. Driven by an educational obsession with grammatical "correctness" and idealized native-speaker norms (particularly American English), learners develop severe language anxiety and negative attitudes toward their own Japanese-influenced English. The learners' reluctance to communicate, therefore, cannot be understood solely as a byproduct of proficiency, but rather as a complex attitudinal barrier.

Furthermore, these complex language attitudes do not form in a vacuum for they are heavily mediated by the specific contexts where learners study and interact. Drawing from Getie's (2020) taxonomy, learners' attitudes are continually shaped by personality, educational, and social contexts. This multidimensional perspective is especially necessary in the Japanese setting. For instance, while English is highly valued macro-socially for employment and internationalization, on a micro-social level, learners often face peer pressure to conform; speaking English too fluently or eagerly in front of peers can risk violating group harmony or being perceived as showing off. Thus, evaluating the interaction between a learner's personality (e.g., risk-taking and anxiety) and their immediate social and educational environments is essential to understanding their ultimate withdrawal from or commitment to English.

While an extensive body of literature has explored language attitudes among Japanese university students (Ishikawa, 2016; McKenzie, 2010; McKenzie & Gilmore, 2017; Sasayama, 2013; Lafaye & Tsuda, 2002), there is a notable dearth of research focusing specifically on senior high school students. This represents a critical gap, as the senior high school stage serves as the absolute peak of *juken eigo* pressure, wherein students are caught directly between communicative ideals and grueling university entrance exams. In response, the present study examined the language attitudes of selected Japanese senior high school students toward English via synthesizing two robust frameworks. It investigates the internal composition of these attitudes using the cognitive, affective, and conative domains of McKenzie's (2010) Mentalist theory, while simultaneously analyzing the external forces shaping them through Getie's (2020) taxonomy of personality, educational, and social contexts. By foregrounding the learners' own perceptions during this critical educational juncture, this study seeks to contribute to a more holistic and contextualized understanding of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Japan.

Review of Related Literature

Language attitudes play an indispensable role in second and foreign language learning. They dictate how learners perceive a target language and their subsequent willingness to engage with it. Departing from binary views, Tódor and Dégi (2017) define attitudes as multidimensional psychological constructs. Grounded in the Mentalist paradigm (McKenzie, 2010), language attitudes are viewed as internal states of readiness comprising three interacting domains: 1) the cognitive (beliefs and ideologies), 2) the affective (emotional reactions), and 3) the conative (behavioral predispositions). In foreign language education, evaluating this tripartite structure is essential. Learners may, for example, cognitively recognize the instrumental value of a language for future mobility while simultaneously experiencing affective intimidation or anxiety, resulting in a reluctance to actually communicate.

In the Japanese context, this interplay of attitudinal domains manifests as a deep ambivalence that is rooted in the systemic tension between global aspirations and localized linguistic insecurities (Ryan, 2009; Gottlieb, 2005). While English is macro-socially valued for employment and internationalization, learners frequently exhibit an "English allergy" (Kawabata, 2024). Such allergy stems from a significant sense of inadequacy in the language, despite learners undergoing at least six to ten years of formal English education (Kawabata, 2024). Ryan (2009) argues that many young Japanese individuals' affinity for English is often a socially conditioned response to expectations rather than a genuine commitment to communicative engagement.

This superficial affinity is further compromised by pervasive standard language ideologies and entrenched "native-speakerism". Ishikawa (2016) highlights that Japanese

learners frequently exhibit a "deficit perspective" regarding their own English, and evaluate their proficiency against rigid English as a Native Language (ENL) norm. As a result, learners perceive their Japanese-influenced English as "awkward" or deficient, prioritizing strict grammatical correctness over communicative intelligibility. McKenzie (2010) notes that while Japanese learners rate standard inner-circle varieties (e.g., North American English) highly for prestige and competence, they often evaluate heavily accented Japanese English negatively. Without direct intercultural contact, standard ideologies are configured by contingent knowledge or impressions built from media, stereotypes, and peer discourse rather than lived experience. Such a highly mediated exposure acts as a motivational filter that serves to cement risk-averse attitudes and an internalized linguistic hierarchy that ultimately devalues the learners' own voices.

Moreover, it can be argued that the Japanese educational system further reinforces these attitudes. English has historically occupied a powerful position in formal schooling, especially since it acts as a primary gatekeeper in highly competitive university entrance examinations (Otaka, 2011). However, the dominance of grammar-translation methods and the intense emphasis on examination performance have meant that learners encounter English more as a rigid subject of study than as a communicative practice (Samuell, 2021). Despite government initiatives promoting communicative fluency, the strict adherence to mandated exams frequently forces educators to default to traditional grammar-translation methods.

Such systemic pressure often induces language learning trauma and high language anxiety, resulting directly from the grueling vocabulary-and-grammar-based pedagogies targeted at exams (Samuell, 2023). Furthermore, this obsession with testing continues into adulthood. Kawabata (2024) notes that the over-reliance on standardized tests like the TOEIC for corporate hiring and promotion perpetuates linguicism and inequality. When English serves primarily as a rigid gatekeeping metric rather than an interactive tool, it fosters deep resentment that significantly damages learners' affective and conative domains.

As the present study argues, this broader educational context makes Japanese senior high school students an exceptionally important group to examine. They sit at the apex of exam-oriented pressure, wherein English is crucial for academic and occupational mobility but heavily constrained by test preparation. Although previous studies have examined Japanese learners' attitudes toward English, fewer studies have focused specifically on senior high school students or on how attitudinal domains interact with personality, educational, and social factors. This necessitates the examination of not only what attitudes learners hold toward English, but also the specific contextual conditions that form such attitudes at what is considered a critical bottleneck in formal schooling (Getie, 2020; Otaka, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

McKenzie's (2010) mentalist theory

The present study is anchored in the Mentalist (or cognitive) theory of language attitudes, as outlined by McKenzie (2010). In the context of sociolinguistic research, attitudes are traditionally investigated through either a behaviorist or mentalist paradigm. The behaviorist view posits that attitudes can be directly inferred from observable responses, assuming a perfect correlation between a learner's attitude and their external behavior. However, this approach is flawed at a fundamental level when applied to foreign language learning given that it ignores intervening variables such as language anxiety, peer pressure, or cultural norms in terms of silence and reticence. The Mentalist perspective, conversely, treats an attitude as an internal or latent state of readiness that cannot always be observed directly, but must be inferred through learner introspection. The framework is highly appropriate for the Japanese context, wherein a learner's outward reluctance to speak English does not necessarily equate to a negative internal attitude toward the language itself, but may instead indicate a severe communication apprehension or cultural conditioning.

Under this framework, moreover, attitudes are deconstructed into three interacting components: the cognitive (beliefs and hypotheses about the language, such as its economic utility or prestige), the affective (emotional reactions, such as language anxiety, fear, or enjoyment), and the conative (behavioral intentions or the predisposition to act). This tripartite model allows for a highly nuanced analysis that recognizes the complex reality of the Japanese learner. For instance, a student may recognize the instrumental value of English for exams and employment (cognitive) while experiencing severe trauma or anxiety (affective) during rigid, grammar-focused instruction. Through an evaluation of these three domains independently, the Mentalist theory is apt to capture the ambivalence and conflicting attitudes that frequently characterize Japanese EFL learners.

Getie's (2020) taxonomy of factors affecting attitudes toward english

In addition to identifying the internal composition of learners' attitudes toward English, this study examines the external and psychological factors that configure them. For this purpose, it draws on Getie's (2020) taxonomy, which categorizes these influences into three major contexts: the learner's personality, the educational environment, and the social environment. This taxonomy moves beyond identifying positive or negative attitudes to interrogate the socio-psychological forces sustaining them.

The personality context includes internal variables such as self-confidence, risk-taking, and anxiety (Getie, 2020). These factors are critical in foreign language learning; for instance, a learner may hold positive cognitive views toward English yet hesitate to use it

due to a paralyzing fear of mistakes or peer embarrassment. Getie (2020) notes that high anxiety and low self-confidence contribute to a high "affective filter," which effectively blocks linguistic input from becoming intake. In Japan, cultural norms frequently value reticence and group harmony over standing out, leading to remarkably high levels of communication apprehension (McCroskey et al., 1985; Yashima, 2002). Consequently, this personality-driven hesitation can severely inhibit learners' conative willingness to engage in actual language use, regardless of their actual linguistic competence (Horwitz et al., 1986; Rohrer, 2010).

The educational context encompasses elements such as the learning situation, classroom environment, teaching materials, and the role of the language teacher (Getie, 2020). Educational factors matter profoundly because they mediate how learners encounter English in everyday schooling. When English instruction is dominated by *juken eigo* (English for entrance exams) and the *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) method, learners are conditioned to associate the language with immense academic pressure, rote memorization, and strict error avoidance rather than authentic communication or meaning-making. Conversely, supportive teachers and engaging, communicative learning environments can lower the affective filter and foster more positive orientations toward the language. As Getie (2020) notes, the educational context can actively construct or destruct learners' attitudes depending entirely on how the classroom experience is pedagogically structured.

The social context includes the learner's parents, peer groups, and the wider community (Getie, 2020). In Japan, learners navigate a highly contradictory social ecosystem regarding English. On a macro-social level, parents and the broader community heavily promote English for university entrance exams and future career mobility, meaning learners frequently adopt their parents' instrumental attitudes toward the language (Kobayashi, 2021). However, on a micro-social level, learners often have extremely limited opportunities to use English meaningfully, and their immediate peer groups may exert pressure to conform; speaking English too eagerly can risk violating group harmony (Ryan, 2009). Furthermore, in the absence of direct intercultural contact, the wider community's perception of English is largely based on "contingent knowledge"—impressions built from media, stereotypes, and peer discourse (Perrem & Gaynor, 2026). This makes the interaction between an individual's attitude and their surrounding social environment especially volatile.

Taken together, these frameworks demonstrate that language attitudes toward English in Japan are both multidimensional and heavily context-dependent. Beyond internal thoughts and feelings, learners' responses to English are configured by the rigid personal, educational, and social conditions they encounter. For this reason, the present study synthesizes both the internal attitudinal domains proposed by McKenzie (2010) and the external contextual factors identified by Getie (2020) to account for how Japanese senior high school students perceive and experience English during a critical juncture in their education.

In particular, the paper interrogates the following: 1) what cognitive, affective, and conative attitudes toward English are present among Japanese senior high school students based on McKenzie's (2010) Mentalist theory? and 2) which personality, educational, and social factors from Getie's (2020) taxonomy positively or negatively influence these attitudes?

Methodology

Research design

The study employed a mixed-method explanatory sequential design (Ivankova & Creswell, 2006). In this approach, quantitative data were gathered first through a questionnaire to identify broad attitudinal trends, followed by a qualitative focus group discussion (FGD) designed to clarify and substantiate the initial statistical results to uncover the latent socio-psychological forces driving said attitudes. As the study did not involve pedagogical treatment or intervention, it is classified as non-experimental.

Research environment and participants

The study was conducted at Noshiro Shoyo Senior High School in Akita Prefecture, Japan. This environment was purposefully selected as it represents a typical Japanese secondary educational setting where students face the dual pressures of communicative English curricula along with rigorous university entrance examinations. A total of 40 respondents participated in the initial questionnaire phase. The researchers utilized exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling to leverage existing peer networks within the school to recruit willing and qualified participants. While such method facilitated access to a specific student demographic, it is acknowledged that relying on peer referrals may have introduced social network bias. Said bias could potentially limit the diversity of attitudinal perspectives gathered, as participants might have referred peers with similar academic motivations or social circles.

All respondents were 18 years of age or older, adhering to the legal age of adulthood in Japan. From this initial cohort, a purposive subsample of eight participants was selected for the focus group discussion (FGD). Selection for the qualitative phase was based on the participants' willingness to engage and the direct relevance of their questionnaire responses to the most salient statistical findings of the first phase. Participants of the FGD ($n=8$) were identified by arbitrary codes P1 through P8 to maintain confidentiality. The subsample size was deemed sufficient for thematic saturation due to the high homogeneity of the study population, which exhibited minimal variance ($SD < 1$) in the initial quantitative results. Given such consistency, eight participants allowed for a representative and in-depth exploration of the data identified in the first phase without redundancy.

Research instruments

The primary instrument for the first phase was a Likert-scale questionnaire divided into two parts. The first part measured attitudes toward English in terms of the cognitive, affective, and conative domains using McKenzie's (2010) framework as adapted by Somblingo and Alieto (2020). The second part measured the factors affecting such attitudes using Getie's (2020) taxonomy of personality, educational, and social contexts. A Japanese translation of the questionnaire was also provided for the respondents' convenience. For the second phase, a focus group discussion guide was prepared based on the salient results of the questionnaire. The guide included open-ended and probing questions intended to clarify and elaborate on the participants' responses. A Japanese version was likewise prepared and verified with the help of a licensed language translator.

Research procedure

i. Gathering of data

Data gathering proceeded in two phases. In the first phase, the questionnaire was distributed directly to the participants at the target school after informed consent had been secured. The accomplished questionnaires were then digitally encoded and prepared for quantitative analysis using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS). In the second phase, one face-to-face focus group discussion involving eight participants was conducted. The participants for this phase were selected based on their willingness to participate and the relevance of their questionnaire responses to the salient findings from the first phase. The session was moderated by one researcher while the other served as note-taker. The discussion followed the prepared interview guide, which was subsequently developed on the basis of the initial quantitative results, and was recorded for reference.

ii. Treatment of data

Quantitative data were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). To ensure statistical rigor, the treatment of the Likert-scale data adhered to established psychometric distinctions between ordinal and interval data. Following Jamieson (2004), descriptive statistics for individual Likert items were analyzed using the median, as individual items produce ordinal data. Conversely, when multiple Likert items were grouped to represent broader attitudinal domains or contextual factors (Likert scales), the data were treated as interval; thus, the mean and grand mean were utilized for interpretation (Subedi, 2016). Negatively worded items were reverse-coded prior to computation. All statistical interpretations were guided by a language attitude scale adapted from Somblingo and Alieto (2020) and were verified by a licensed psychometrician.

Table 1

Language Attitude Scale Adapted from Somblingo and Alieto (2020)

Range	Description	Interpretation
4.24 – 5.00	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Very Positive</i>
3.43 – 4.23	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Positive</i>
2.62 – 3.42	<i>Undecided</i>	<i>Neutral</i>
1.81 – 2.61	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Negative</i>
1.00 – 1.80	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Very Negative</i>

Qualitative data obtained from the focus group discussion were utilized to triangulate and enrich the quantitative findings. Following the data reduction procedures outlined by Nagle and Williams (2013), the interview transcripts were systematically reviewed, coded, and organized in terms of themes according to the salient attitudinal domains and contextual factors identified in the initial phase. To preserve sociolinguistic authenticity, Japanese excerpts were retained in the final analysis with corresponding English glosses provided.

Prior to data collection, the study underwent a rigorous ethics review at the University of San Carlos Research Ethics Committee. Participation was strictly voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the assignment of arbitrary alphanumeric designations in place of names, and all digital data were encrypted and securely stored in password-protected repositories accessible exclusively to the researchers.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study in relation to its two main concerns: first, the attitudes toward English present in selected Japanese senior high school students in terms of the cognitive, affective, and conative domains of McKenzie's (2010) Mentalist theory; and second, the factors that affect these attitudes in terms of personality, educational, and social contexts. The quantitative results gathered from the questionnaire are presented first, after which they are clarified and substantiated using the qualitative data obtained from the focus group discussion. Since all the Likert scales and Likert items yielded a standard deviation of below 1, there is generally little variance in the respondents' answers, which suggests a relative consistency in their responses across the sample.

Attitudes toward english in terms of the mentalist theory

Table 2 presents the learners' attitudes toward English in terms of the three domains of McKenzie's (2010) Mentalist theory. As shown in the table, the respondents' attitudes toward English generally skewed toward the negative, particularly in the cognitive and affective domains, while the conative domain yielded a neutral interpretation. This pattern is significant since attitude toward a target language is an important aspect that often influences how successful an individual is in learning it. As Delić (2020) notes, positive attitudes tend to improve language learning, whereas negative ones often hinder it. In this sense, the overall results suggest that although English continues to hold importance for the respondents, their present relationship with the language remains constrained by negative perceptions of its classroom utility and by negative emotional responses associated with its use.

Table 2

Learners' Attitudes toward English in terms of the Mentalist Theory

Domain	Mean	SD	Description
<i>Cognitive</i>	2.20	0.43	<i>Negative</i>
<i>Affective</i>	2.17	0.52	<i>Negative</i>
<i>Conative</i>	3.03	0.57	<i>Neutral</i>

Note: *5.00–4.24 = *Very Positive*; 4.23–3.43 = *Positive*; 3.42–2.62 = *Neutral*; 2.61–1.81 = *Negative*; 1.80–1.00 = *Very Negative*.

As seen in Table 2, the Cognitive domain garnered a mean of 2.20, interpreted as negative. This suggests that the respondents do not possess strong cognitive attitudes toward English in relation to their present classes. The Affective domain likewise yielded a negative mean of 2.17, indicating the presence of negative emotional responses toward learning English. In contrast, the Conative domain obtained a mean of 3.03, which is interpreted as neutral and suggests the presence of some willingness on the part of the learners to study or use English despite the generally negative orientation reflected in the other two domains. Overall, the results appear to show that while the learners do not strongly view English as useful in their immediate school experience and respond to it with some degree of negativity, they are not entirely resistant to learning it, especially when it is associated with future academic and professional goals.

i. The cognitive domain

The negative interpretation of the Cognitive domain indicates that the respondents do not strongly perceive English as useful within their immediate academic environment. Their responses show that they do not readily associate English with their other school subjects, nor do they consider themselves able to express themselves confidently in English during class. In this respect, English seems to remain compartmentalized as a separate

subject rather than functioning as an active part of their wider learning experience. This finding may be understood in relation to the position of English in Japan as a foreign language. Morita (2017) notes that English in Japan is strongly tied to university entrance examinations and future employment prospects, while Matsuda (2001) likewise points out that Japanese learners are not sufficiently acquainted with English in earlier stages of schooling. Unlike learners in ESL contexts, Japanese learners generally encounter English in more limited and formalized ways, which may weaken their perception of its present usefulness. Richter (2022) further explains that achieving fluency demands significant effort in cases wherein a learner's cultural and educational environment do not actively support active and practical communication.

At the same time, the negative cognitive result does not mean that English is regarded as entirely unimportant. Rather, the data show that the learners' recognition of English is oriented more toward its future value than toward its current academic function. In other words, English is not strongly linked to their present learning needs, yet it continues to be acknowledged as beneficial in relation to examinations, jobs, and later opportunities. This distinction helps explain why the domain yields a negative interpretation even though English retains institutional prestige. In this regard, the findings echo Kobayashi's (2021) observation that Japanese learners often distinguish between English as a school subject and English as a language for broader practical use.

ii. Affective domain

The Affective domain also registered a negative interpretation, which indicates that the respondents generally hold unfavorable emotional responses toward learning English. Their answers point to discomfort, hesitation, and a lack of ease in engaging with the language, especially in contexts requiring actual use. Such a result may be linked to the learners' limited exposure to communicative English, particularly in speaking and listening, which leaves them less prepared for spontaneous interaction. This interpretation finds support in Horwitz et al.'s (1986) discussion of foreign language anxiety, wherein learners experience apprehension when they feel unable to express themselves adequately in the target language. Specifically, learners reported discomfort when spoken to in English and a lack of enjoyment during English classes. This negative effect can be attributed to what Samuell (2021) identifies as language learning trauma or high levels of stress and anxiety induced by the rigid and grammar-focused Japanese classroom. Furthermore, the qualitative data suggest that learners fear making mistakes in front of others. This is indicative of a pervasive "deficit perspective" (Ishikawa, 2016; 2017). In the present case, the learners' negative emotional response to English may be understood not simply as dislike of the language itself, but as a reflection of their unfamiliarity with using it meaningfully and confidently.

The result may also be considered in light of the instructional conditions under which the learners encounter English. Since English learning remains closely associated with grammar-focused instruction and formal assessment, learners may not be receiving enough sustained communicative practice to develop comfort in actual language use. Consequently, their emotional orientation toward English becomes marked by unease rather than enjoyment. Thus, the affective result points less to hostility toward English and more to the emotional burden produced by limited practice and high expectations of correctness.

iii. Conative domain

In contrast to the first two domains, the Conative domain yielded a neutral interpretation. This indicates that the learners still possess some degree of willingness to study or use English, even if this willingness is not especially strong. Their responses show that English is not entirely rejected; rather, it remains something they are prepared to pursue under certain conditions, particularly when it is connected to future academic and professional goals. Such a result may be understood in relation to the place of English in Japan's educational and economic system. Otaka (2011) notes that English education in Japan has long been tied to entrance examinations and future career opportunities, with growing recognition of the need for speaking and listening abilities in an increasingly globalized context. In this regard, the learners' conative orientation appears to be driven less by immediate enjoyment of English and more by its perceived usefulness in securing future advantage.

However, the neutral interpretation also reveals the limitations of this willingness. Although the learners are not unwilling to learn English, their readiness to do so is restrained by the same conditions reflected in the cognitive and affective results. Limited communicative experience, weak confidence, and discomfort in actual interaction all reduce the extent to which this willingness is translated into active and confident use. Thus, the Conative domain occupies an intermediate position: it reflects a measure of openness toward English, but not one strong enough to overcome the barriers produced by negative classroom utility and emotional unease.

Taken as a whole, the findings show that the learners' attitudes toward English are mixed rather than entirely uniform. English is not strongly embraced as a useful or emotionally comfortable language in the present, yet it continues to be recognized as worth pursuing for future purposes. What emerges, then, is not a complete rejection of English, but a divided orientation in which institutional value remains intact even as confident personal engagement with the language remains limited.

Factors affecting attitudes toward learning English as a foreign language

Table 3 presents the means and grand means of the three contexts, along with the factors under them, affecting the learners' attitudes toward English. As shown in the table, the majority of the contexts and factors enumerated by Getie (2020) negatively affected the learners' attitudes toward English. In particular, the Personality Context garnered a grand mean of 2.41, interpreted as negative, while the Social Context obtained a grand mean of 2.34, likewise interpreted as negative. In contrast, the Educational Context yielded a grand mean of 3.32, which is interpreted as neutral. These findings suggest that the learners' attitudes toward English are influenced more negatively by internal psychological factors and surrounding social conditions than by the formal educational environment itself.

Table 3

Means and Grand Means for each Factor/Domain in Getie's (2020) Taxonomy

	Factor Mean	Domain Grand Mean	Interpretation
<i>Learner's Personality Context</i>		2.41	<i>Negatively affects attitudes</i>
<i>Self-Confidence</i>	1.94		<i>Negatively affects attitudes</i>
<i>Risk Taking</i>	2.53		<i>Negatively affects attitudes</i>
<i>Anxiety</i>	2.77		<i>Neutrally affects attitudes</i>
<i>Educational Context</i>		3.32	<i>Neutrally affects attitudes</i>
<i>Learning Situation</i>	3.33		<i>Neutrally affects attitudes</i>
<i>Foreign Language Teacher</i>	3.28		<i>Neutrally affects attitudes</i>
<i>Social Context</i>		2.34	<i>Negatively affects attitudes</i>
<i>Learner's Parents</i>	2.05		<i>Negatively affects attitudes</i>
<i>Learner's Peer-groups</i>	2.60		<i>Negatively affects attitudes</i>
<i>Community</i>	2.35		<i>Negatively affects attitudes</i>

*Note: *5.00–4.24 = Very Positive; 4.23–3.43 = Positive; 3.42–2.62 = Neutral; 2.61–1.81 = Negative; 1.80–1.00 = Very Negative.*

i. The personality context

As shown in Table 3, the Personality Context registered a negative interpretation. Among its factors, Self-Confidence obtained the lowest mean at 1.94, followed by Risk-Taking at 2.53, while Anxiety yielded a neutral mean of 2.77. Taken together, these results reveal that the learners' attitudes toward English are largely hindered by low confidence in their own ability and by reluctance to use the language when mistakes are possible. This pattern aligns with Getie's (2020) claim that personality-related variables, particularly self-confidence, risk-taking, and anxiety, play an important role in influencing learners' attitudes toward a foreign language.

The negative result for Self-Confidence points to the learners' weak belief in their own ability to use English successfully. Their responses show that they do not readily view themselves as competent users of the language, particularly in oral communication. Such a finding may be linked to their limited experience with communicative English, especially in speaking and listening, which restricts the development of confidence in actual interaction. This tendency can be seen in the following responses:

“誰かと英語でしていると英語力がまだまだなので、自信がないです。私はいつも言葉が詰まったりするので、恥ずかしいなって思います。”

Gloss: *When speaking, I don't feel confident because I think I'm not good enough yet at using English. I always seem to stumble on my words, and I would feel conscious and embarrassed (P2).*

“英語を使うのは自信がないです。...自信を持てるようになるには、経験と練習がまだまだ必要だと言えます。”

Gloss: *I don't feel confident at all whenever I use the English language... I still need more experience and practice in real-life situations before I can consider myself to be confident (P3).*

These excerpts show that the respondents associate confidence with experience and repeated practice. Their lack of confidence does not arise from a total rejection of English, but rather from the feeling that their present exposure has not been enough to allow them to use the language comfortably. This finding is comparable to Tridinanti's (2018) observation that low self-confidence in English often emerges when learners believe that their knowledge and experience remain inadequate for successful communication. A similar tendency appears in the negative result for Risk-Taking. The respondents were reluctant to use English freely when mistakes might occur, particularly in speaking and listening. Their responses reveal a careful and restrained attitude toward oral communication, with greater preference given to familiar vocabulary and structures in order to avoid error. This tendency is reflected in the following responses:

“スピーキングに関しては、いつもすごい意識しながら英語を話します。間違いがないように気をつけてるから慣れ親しんだ言葉や文法を使うようにしています。”

Gloss: *In terms of speaking, I feel very conscious whenever I speak English. I try to use familiar words and grammar so I don't make mistakes (P1).*

“一番間違いが気になるのはスピーキングとリスニングだと思います。...きちんと答えられないと相手にも迷惑かなって思ってしまうです。”

Gloss: *I think speaking and listening are the most worrisome whenever I make a mistake... I'd feel pretty bad for the one I'm communicating with if I cannot answer them properly (P3).*

Rather than merely fearing error for its own sake, the learners appear concerned about the consequences of those errors in interaction. Their hesitation seems to stem not only from self-consciousness but also from worry about failing to respond properly to others. This resembles what Horwitz (1986) describes as communication apprehension in foreign language use, wherein learners become uneasy when they feel unable to present themselves adequately in the target language. Meanwhile, Anxiety received a neutral interpretation. This indicates that although the learners experience low self-confidence and reluctance to take risks, these do not consistently develop into intense or pervasive anxiety. In other words, insecurity is present, but it does not dominate every act of English use. What emerges more clearly from the data is that the negative influence of the Personality Context comes primarily from low self-belief and fear of committing mistakes, rather than from overwhelming anxiety alone.

ii. The educational context

Unlike the other two major contexts, the Educational Context yielded a neutral interpretation, with Learning Situation obtaining a mean of 3.33 and The Foreign Language Teacher obtaining 3.28. This indicates that the educational environment does not affect the learners' attitudes toward English in a strongly positive or strongly negative way. The classroom, then, appears to occupy an intermediate position: it does not greatly discourage learners, but neither does it substantially cultivate stronger positive attitudes toward English.

The factor The Foreign Language Teacher is especially noteworthy. The learners generally described their teacher as kind and considerate in correcting grammatical mistakes, which appears to lessen tension during classroom interaction. This may be seen in the following response:

“松陽の先生は文法の間違いを親切に指摘してくれるので、先生の前で恥ずかしい思いをすることもなく、英語を話すときの緊張が和らぎます。”

Gloss: *My English teacher in school is very kind and she would point out mistakes in my grammar in a kind way. I think this helps me become less nervous when I'm speaking English (P8).*

This response presents the teacher as a moderating presence rather than a source of pressure. In this regard, the teacher contributes to a more manageable learning environment, consistent with Getie's (2020) and Rosenkjar's (2015) observations that the role of the

language teacher can either improve or weaken learners' attitudes depending on the nature of classroom interaction. Still, the learners' use of English with the teacher does not appear to be wholly voluntary. In some instances, it remains tied to classroom obligation rather than personal initiative, as reflected in the following response:

“先生と話す時は英語を自発的に話すのではなく、英語を話さなきゃいけないと思ってしまいますね。”

Gloss: *I'd say I'm obliged to speak English with her rather than it being voluntary on my part (P5).*

This remark makes it clear that English use in class may still be understood as something expected rather than something naturally embraced. For this reason, the Educational Context remains neutral overall. The findings do not point to a hostile classroom environment, but they also do not show a classroom that strongly transforms learners' feelings toward English. The neutral result may therefore reflect a setting that supports formal learning requirements without necessarily encouraging a deeper, more confident engagement with the language.

iii. The social context

The Social Context also yielded a negative interpretation, with The Learner's Parents obtaining a mean of 2.05, The Learner's Peer-Groups obtaining 2.60, and Community obtaining 2.35. These results highlight the extent to which the learners' immediate social environment may weaken rather than reinforce positive attitudes toward English. Since attitudes toward a foreign language are often influenced by the expectations and practices of the people surrounding the learner, these findings are particularly important. The negative result for The Learner's Parents shows that parental influence is not uniformly beneficial. Although parents may recognize the value of English and may even provide additional support through tutoring, their involvement can also produce pressure that turns English into a burden. This may be seen in the following response:

“英語塾に通わせてくれるので助かります。...しかし、親からプレッシャーはかなりかけられています。”

Gloss: *They're helpful because they would enroll me in tutoring classes... However, I can say they are detrimental too because they would really pressure me to learn the language (P4).*

This excerpt illustrates that parental support may function in two directions at once. On the one hand, it increases access to learning opportunities; on the other, it can intensify performance pressure. In this case, what might seem supportive at first also carries an

emotional cost, thereby affecting the learner's attitude negatively. A similar pattern emerges under The Learner's Peer-Groups. The findings indicate that peers do not consistently offer a supportive environment for English use. Instead, the learners often remain within the comfort of Japanese when interacting with friends, and attempts to use English may even invite ridicule. This tendency is illustrated in the following response:

“私の友達は教室の外ではあまり英語を使わないから...私が英語を話そうとすると、揶揄われるので、使う抵抗はあります。”

Gloss: *My friends don't really use English that much outside of the classroom... They would sometimes make fun of me whenever I try to speak English with them, so I try to avoid using it (P6).*

This response indicates that peer-groups may function as a discouraging rather than enabling factor. The learner's hesitation is intensified not simply because friends do not use English, but because attempting to use it may threaten one's social ease or sense of belonging. In this respect, peer influence appears to restrict informal English practice. Finally, the negative interpretation of Community points to the limited role of the wider environment in sustaining meaningful English use. The data indicate that the learners do not encounter many opportunities in their locality to hear or use English in daily life. This can be observed in the following response:

“秋田が私を上達させるのに本当に役立ったとは思いません。...秋田の人が英語を話すのを聞く機会があまりないので、あまり練習することもできませんね。”

Gloss: *I don't think Akita has really helped me improve... I don't really get many opportunities to listen to other people in Akita speak English, so I don't get to practice much (P1).*

This excerpt makes evident that the wider community does not present English as an everyday communicative resource. Instead, English remains peripheral and largely disconnected from ordinary interaction, which is often the case in EFL settings where language is confined to academic study as opposed to being embedded in daily use (Richter, 2022). Such a condition naturally limits opportunities for exposure and practice, and this, in turn, may affect learners' attitudes toward the language (Getie, 2020; Kobayashi, 2021).

Taken as a whole, the results show that the learners' attitudes toward English are affected more negatively by their personality and social contexts than by the educational context. What emerges from the data is that the difficulty of English learning cannot be attributed to formal instruction alone. Rather, it is rooted in a more complex interaction

among low self-confidence, fear of mistakes, limited opportunities for communicative use, social discomfort, and a surrounding environment in which English is valued institutionally but not consistently practiced in everyday life.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study reveal a prominent sociolinguistic paradox characterizing the Japanese senior high school experience of English. Through the lens of McKenzie's (2010) Mentalist theory, the data reveals that learners' attitudes are highly compartmentalized and lean heavily negative. Specifically, learners held severely negative cognitive and affective attitudes. They do not view English as a practical communicative tool in their daily lives and experience high anxiety when prompted to use it. While conative attitudes appeared neutral, qualitative data showed that study habits are not driven by a desire for communication. Instead, students are fueled by rigid instrumental motivation. English is pursued primarily as a necessary academic hurdle to navigate the highly competitive university entrance examination system and secure future employment.

Analysis through Getie's (2020) taxonomy reveals that personality and social contexts actively sustain attitudinal resistance, rather than it being a simple byproduct of classroom instruction. The learners are effectively caught in a form of socio-psychological trap. On a macro-social level, they face intense pressure from their parents and society to master English for future mobility, often resulting in stressful enrollment in private cram schools (*juku*). Conversely, on a micro-social level, their immediate peer groups exert immense pressure to conform; displaying overt English fluency is frequently stigmatized, reinforcing a collective reticence. At its core, isolated from authentic communicative opportunities, the learners' perceptions of the English-speaking world are relegated to heavily mediated "contingent knowledge". This environment fosters a persistent deficit perspective, wherein fear of making mistakes against idealized native-speaker norms supersedes actual language acquisition.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions presented, this study proposes the following recommendations to address the systemic challenges of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Japan:

1. *For Educational Policy and Curriculum Design (MEXT)*. The Japanese educational system must recognize that mandating communicative curricula will remain ineffective so long as university entrance examinations continue to exclusively reward grammar-translation (*yakudoku*) proficiency. It is recommended that policymakers align high-stakes testing with communicative goals to validate the actual use of the language.

Furthermore, curricula should integrate critical media literacy and intercultural awareness to transition learners away from relying solely on stereotype-driven contingent knowledge of the English-speaking world.

2. *For EFL Pedagogy and Parental Support.* EFL instructors must actively work to lower the high affective filter present in Japanese classrooms. Pedagogy should focus on decoupling English from strict English as a Native Language (ENL) norms, fostering an environment where making mistakes is decoupled from social embarrassment. Exposure to diverse, non-native varieties of English, including Japanese-English, could help dismantle the learners' deficit perspective and validate their own voices. Additionally, parental support mechanisms must be re-evaluated. Parents should be made aware that intense pressure to succeed in supplementary cram schools often exacerbates language anxiety rather than fostering genuine communicative competence.

3. *For Future Research.* As this study was limited to a specific senior high school in Akita Prefecture, future sociolinguistic research should replicate this explanatory-sequential design across diverse Japanese demographics, including varying socioeconomic statuses and urban versus rural divides, to determine how localized social contexts alter language attitudes. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are recommended to track whether the implementation of earlier English education in Japanese elementary schools successfully mitigates the language anxiety currently observed in secondary education.

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