Original Article

Re-examining the English Proficiency Level of Japanese EFL Learners

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This paper aims to counter the media's claim that Japanese are poor at English by re-examining the total mean test scores of Japanese English learners on Education First's Standard English Test (EFSET) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) internet-Based Test (iBT). The authors consider what these scores actually show in order to rebut the media's claim and to give a fairer, more realistic view of Japanese learners' English proficiency when compared with those of other countries, particularly those in Asia. These two tests were chosen because they are sometimes cited in the media and because both break down their worldwide results into European, Asian, (Latin) American and the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) regions. After outlining the EFSET and TOEFL iBT and setting out why the media's comparative use of their scores is invalid, we explain the method of analysis and present and discuss the results to show that the media's view of Japanese poor English ability is overstated. In the discussion, the concepts of linguistic distance and English as an official language are also taken into consideration.

Introduction

Many Japanese people believe that they should be able to use English to some extent, particularly because they are familiar with it from their school studies and because it is a *lingua franca* for international business and tourism. However, it has been a long-held and often repeated position in the media that Japanese are still poor at English, for example Clark (2000, 2009) and Tolbert (2000). This latter view is often supported by pointing to the relatively low scores that Japanese attain on commonly cited international, 'standardized' English proficiency tests compared with test-takers of other non-native English speaking countries. However, is this truly representative of the reality?

The purpose of this paper is to counter the media's claim by re-examining the total mean test scores of Japanese English learners on Education First's (EF's) Standard English Test (SET) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) internet-Based Test (iBT). We consider what these scores actually show in order to rebut the media's claim and to give a fairer, more realistic view of Japanese learners' English proficiency when compared with those of other countries, particularly those in Asia. These two tests were chosen because they are sometimes cited in the media and

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because both break down their worldwide results into European, Asian, (Latin) American and the Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) regions.

After outlining the EFSET and TOEFL iBT and setting out why the media's comparative use of their scores is invalid, we explain the method of analysis and present and discuss the results to show that the media's view of Japanese people's poor English ability is overstated.

Education First EPI and EFSET

Education First is a global, private English education company that has developed the EFSET, the results of which are presented in their *English Proficiency Index* (EPI) reports. These reports, released annually since 2011 (Education First 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017), use each country's test-takers' mean total EFSET score to rank that country worldwide and by the regions identified above. Based on its total mean score, each country is assigned an English proficiency level: 'Very high', 'High', 'Moderate', 'Low' or 'Very low'. The company claims that the EPI is the world's largest ranking of countries by English skills. The EPI's sixth edition incorporates data from 950,000 adults from 72 countries and territories (Education First, 2016). A minimum of 400 test-takers are needed from a country for it to be listed (Education First, 2016), though this number is usually greatly exceeded.

The EFSET consists of three online, 'standardized' tests, each with reading and listening sections, the scores for which are combined to give a total score. The two free, open, 30-item tests are adaptive while the third, a 70-item, non-adaptive test, is used for placement purposes within EF's schools. EF claims the EFSET to have been validated against its own course levels and to have test-retest reliability, though no validation study results are offered in support of these claims in the EPI reports themselves.

The Test and Score Data Summary for TOEFL iBT Tests

The Educational Testing Service (ETS), a global, non-profit organisation, has developed the TOEFL iBT, the results of which are presented in annual *Test and Score Data Summary* reports (Educational Testing Service, 2017). The results are listed by native language in alphabetical order and by geographical regions very similar in makeup to those of EF's EPI but unlike the EPI, countries are not ranked. To qualify for entry in a summary, a country must have more than 30 test-takers.

The TOEFL iBT is an online, non-adaptive test for which test-takers pay an administration fee. The test consists of reading, listening, speaking and writing sections that test-takers must complete within four hours. Section and total score means for each country's test-takers are shown in the summary. The ETS claims the test to be fair, objective, valid and reliable (Educational Testing Service, 2017), though no validation study results are provided in the summary itself in support of this claim.

Inappropriate use of test data

Detractors support their view that Japanese are poor at English in large part by citing EFSET and TOEFL iBT score data (*cf.* Reedy, 2000), but this support is *highly* dubious. The Educational Testing Service itself views using TOEFL iBT scores for national comparisons as "a misuse of data" which it "does not endorse" (2017). The reasons for this are methodological, statistical, logistical and linguistic.

The tests' datasets use self-selected sampling. This skews the rankings towards better developed, richer countries with test-takers who are both able to access the internet *and* are interested in taking the test. Also, the EFSET is *not* standardized as claimed by EF because it is completed online *unsupervised*, so some test-takers may use dictionaries, texts or online resources during the test to enhance their score.

Additionally, Reedy (2000) shows that national comparisons are statistically invalid because each country's sample size is unknown and almost certainly represents a different proportion of their respective country's population. Logistically, countries' EFL education systems start at different ages, apply divergent pedagogic approaches and offer disparate amounts of contact time. Furthermore, some languages are linguistically much more distant from English than others, making English more difficult to master. Chiswick & Miller (2005) found that of the 43 languages they compared with English in their analysis, Japanese was the most distant. Another source of

disparity is that countries which have English as an official language would be expected to attain higher test scores.

A strong case therefore exists against using the rankings or scores from the EFSET, TOEFL iBT or other similar, globally available tests such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Business Language Testing Service (BULATS), to support the view that Japanese are inherently poor at English or that they are worse at English than other nationalities. However, despite these arguments, detractors persist in misusing the scores in this way to support their entrenched view because they are unaware of, do not understand, or choose to ignore these methodological, statistical, logistical and linguistic issues.

Method

The EFSET's mean total scores for 2016 (Education First, 2016) and the TOEFL iBT's mean total scores and separate reading, listening, speaking and writing section scores for 2017 (Educational Testing Service, 2017) for each country were input into a Microsoft Excel file, together with the associated country name, EPI proficiency level, ranking and region. From the dataset, descriptive statistics for the EFSET and TOEFL iBT were calculated to check for similarities, differences and trends among worldwide and within and between regional scores (Table 1). Japan's EF EPI worldwide and Asian rankings were also tracked across all seven editions of the EPI to check for English proficiency level (Table 2). The Netherlands' and Philippines' EFSET scores were excluded from the analysis because they did not have TOEFL iBT scores against which to compare them.

Results and Discussion

As mentioned above, it is not valid to use these tests' scores to rank countries by English proficiency. However, to rebut the claim that Japanese are very poor at English, we first use the media's own argument against it by examining the same scores more closely, in tandem with findings on linguistic distance. We then use additional arguments to further rebut the claim.

Asia acquits itself well

The tests' descriptive statistics for worldwide and regThe tests' descriptive statistics for worldwide and regional results presented in Table 1 show that Asia comes second only to Europe in the EFSET and third to behind Latin America in the TOEFL iBT.

However, such positions are far from poor when language distance is also taken into account. Chiswick

Table 1   Descriptive statistics for EF EPI[1] and TOEFL iBT[2] by region and worldwide

Region	Test	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Europe (n = 25)	EF EPI	46.90	71.15	59.00	6.10
	TOEFL iBT	77.00	99.00	90.36	5.44
Asia (n = 18)	EF EPI	38.45	63.52	50.84	6.42
	TOEFL iBT	66.00	97.00	80.89	7.89
Latin America (n = 14)	EF EPI	43.83	58.4	50.19	3.69
	TOEFL iBT	82.00	94.00	85.79	3.67
MENA (n = 13)	EF EPI	37.65	49.86	44.45	3.93
	TOEFL iBT	60.00	84.00	75.62	6.06
Worldwide (N = 70)	EF EPI	37.65	71.15	52.44	7.64
	TOEFL iBT	60.00	99.00	84.27	8.16

[1] Education First (2016)
[2] Educational Testing Service (2017)

& Miller (2005) found that most European languages are closer to English than Japanese is and that all Asian languages except Malay are more distant from English than most European languages, so it is to be expected that Asia would score behind Europe. What is surprising is that in the EFSET, Asia scores *higher* than Latin America, where, with the exception of Portuguese-speaking Brazil, Spanish is the primary language throughout. Chiswick & Miller (2005) placed Spanish joint 11th closest to English out of the 43 languages they examined and Portuguese joint 8th. The smaller language distance between English-Spanish and English-Portuguese also explains why Asia comes third to Latin America in the TOEFL iBT but, again, still ahead of MENA.

Receptive skills lead productive skills

Counter to the media's claim, Table 2 shows that Japanese actually perform quite well with respect to the receptive skills (listening and reading) measured by the EFSET, which shows Japan as having consistently 'moderate' English proficiency. It is also consistently above the midpoint for worldwide results and around the midpoint within Asia.

This gives a much better impression of Japanese people's receptive English abilities, an impression which is further enhanced when it is considered that most of the Asian countries with higher EFSET total mean scores than Japan have English as an official language and so would be expected to perform better.

Conversely, the TOEFL iBT placed Japan joint 27th out of the 31 Asian countries in 2016 (Education Testing Service, 2017). In particular, Japan scored lowest in Asia for speaking and joint fourth lowest in writing (Education Testing Service, 2017). That Japan scores more highly on the EFSET than the TOEFL iBT is likely because the former tests only receptive skills while the latter tests these as well as the productive skills of speaking and writing.

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has set a target of 50 % of high school students having an English proficiency sufficient to pass the EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency Pre-2nd grade upon finishing school. MEXT tested and surveyed thousands of Japanese high school students on their ability to meet this requirement and found that 32 % of students could attain this level for reading and 26.5 % for listening, but that only 17.9 % could for writing and 11 % for speaking (N = 81,000 for reading, listening and writing, N = 18,000 for speaking) (MEXT, 2016). This further highlights that Japanese are better in the receptive skills than the productive skills.

The EFSET's, TOEFL iBT's and MEXT's results can be explained with reference to Spolsky (1989), who noted in his ninth condition for language learning that "[receptive skills] will usually develop to a higher level [than productive skills]". This natural language learning effect is likely exacerbated within the Japanese public school EFL education system by its strong emphasis on the receptive skills at the expense of better improving productive skills. However, it is hoped that the introduction of the four-skills university entrance exam in Japan in the near future will have a positive washback effect within Japan's EFL education system, which would go some way to redressing this imbalance.

Table 2   Japan's EF EPI world and Asian rankings

Edition	Year	World ranking (out of)	Asian ranking (out of)
1st (Education First, 2011)	2011	14 (44)	5 (13)
2nd (Education First, 2012)	2012	22 (54)	6 (12)
3rd (Education First, 2013)	2013	26 (60)	7 (13)
4th (Education First, 2014)	2014	26 (63)	4 (13)
5th (Education First, 2015)	2015	30 (70)	6 (16)
6th (Education First, 2016)	2016	35 (72)	10 (19)
7th (Education First, 2017)	2017	37 (80)	9 (20)

The influence of English as an official language

According to Education First (2016):

> [t]ere is a clear divide in Asia between countries previously under the influence of the British Empire, where English has long played an important role in daily communication, and countries where English is used primarily as a foreign language for communication with outsiders.

For historical reasons, Japan is therefore at a linguistic disadvantage to former British colonies such as India, Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong where English is still an official language, all of whom score more highly than Japan in the EFSET (Education First, 2016) and TOEFL iBT (Education Testing Service, 2017). Despite this linguistic disadvantage, Japan still manages to score more highly than the former British Asian colonies of Bangladesh and Pakistan, both of which are in the Low Proficiency band.

Conclusion

This paper outlined the EFSET and TOEFL iBT and analyzed their score data to show that, while much needs to be done to continue to improve Japanese people's English receptive and productive skills, they are not as poor as commonly reported in the media, who rely on the invalid use of national rankings to support their case.

We have shown that Asia acquits itself well in comparison with other regions, particularly when language distance is taken into account. Also, that Japan compares well against other countries within Asia, especially when the use of English as an official language by some is factored in. Furthermore, we demonstrated that Japanese have moderately good receptive English skills and that while their productive English skills do lag behind, this is partly explained by the natural process of language learning.

The fact is that there currently exists no objective way in which to *validly and reliably* compare the English proficiency of one country against others. As such, any claims regarding the English proficiency of Japanese is subjective and susceptible to intentional or unwitting bias.

Therefore, from the above analysis and discussion, it can be concluded that Japanese people's English ability is not necessarily as bad as portrayed by the media, particular with respect to receptive skills. It is our hope that with the introduction of the four-skills entrance exam in the near future, there will be an increase in English proficiency and related test scores among Japanese.

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