

Japan Doesn't Want to Become Another Casualty of English

English skills bring status, but the public remains stubbornly bad at learning.

In a [2019 survey](#), Japan dropped to 53rd in global English proficiency, squarely in the “low proficiency” band. Japan ranks near the bottom of [Asian and developed countries alike](#) despite constant [reshuffling and refinement](#) of the English educational curriculum in schools and [the](#) frequent assertions, [acknowledged](#) by Japan’s Ministry of Education, that English-language skills are needed to compete in the modern economy.

The failure to adopt English is particularly unexpected given that the English language—and the whiteness associated with it—signifies privilege in Japan. [Countless advertisements](#) flaunt white foreigners on TV and use English aptitude as the basis for selling products. Top companies such as Rakuten, an e-commerce website and the Japanese competitor to Amazon, place immense weight on [English proficiency](#), whether or not English is needed for an employee’s role. *Eikaiwa* (English conversation) programs run daily on TV, and accounts featuring videos of Japanese American children speaking English cultivate [tens of thousands of Instagram followers](#).

At the same time, essays and books about the supposed uniqueness of Japanese language, culture, and identity—a genre known as *nihonjinron*—are in every bookstore, next to shelves of English-learning books. They overflow with complaints about young people’s poor Japanese and instructions on how to speak polite and beautiful Japanese.

In a [2019 survey](#), Japan dropped to 53rd in global English proficiency, squarely in the “low proficiency” band. Japan ranks near the bottom of [Asian and developed countries alike](#) despite constant [reshuffling and refinement](#) of the English educational curriculum in schools and [the](#) frequent assertions, [acknowledged](#) by Japan’s Ministry of Education, that English-language skills are needed to compete in the modern economy.

The failure to adopt English is particularly unexpected given that the English language—and the whiteness associated with it—signifies privilege in Japan. [Countless advertisements](#) flaunt white foreigners on TV and use English aptitude as the basis for selling products. Top companies such as Rakuten, an e-commerce website and the Japanese competitor to Amazon, place immense weight on [English proficiency](#), whether or not English is needed for an employee’s role. *Eikaiwa* (English conversation) programs run daily on TV, and accounts featuring videos of Japanese American children speaking English cultivate [tens of thousands of Instagram followers](#).

At the same time, essays and books about the supposed uniqueness of Japanese language, culture, and identity—a genre known as *nihonjinron*—are in every bookstore, next to shelves of English-learning books. They overflow with complaints about young people’s poor Japanese and instructions on how to speak polite and beautiful Japanese.

Today, Japanese are caught between a belief in the importance of Japanese language and culture and the need to exist in a globalized world in which English carries economic privileges and status associations. A [plummeting population](#) and an [inevitable future influx of foreign workers](#) collide with a proud national identity, structural and cultural obstacles to English learning, and enough economic independence to resist what might otherwise seem an inevitable future: an English-speaking Japan.

For years, multinational companies have been [mandating English as the common corporate language](#). “In East Asia, many parents, professionals, and students themselves see English as a prerequisite for attaining the best jobs on the market,” said Minh Tran, the executive director of academic affairs at Education First, a Swiss language-education company that offers classes in Japan.

Yet the spread of English has left behind a [“trail of dead”](#): mangled languages, literatures, and identities. As countries around the world scramble for widespread English, there’s a fear of losing their own traditions, cultures, and even names.

English became a tool of the Japanese elite throughout Meiji era Japan’s relentless race to catch up technologically with the West. And while Japan was never a colony of a Western country, the U.S. occupation after World War II lasted for seven years—enough time for the U.S. military to [implement widespread political and economic changes](#) throughout the country. In the Cold War, Japan came under the U.S. nuclear umbrella of protection from the Soviet Union, further cementing America’s image as a symbolic protector.

This presence of American soldiers at this time exposed the general Japanese public to spoken English. “America [was] idealized in Japan at the time as a symbol of freedom and democracy, partly as a result of the success of the American occupation,” writes Takako Yoshida, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Lleida. English accordingly became associated with freedom, power, and status.

Throughout the 20th century, more and more English loanwords were introduced into the Japanese language, and English signage, slogans, advertising, and speakers spread across the country. Foreign loanwords, closely associated with the world’s strongest nations and Japan’s social elite, took on elements of prestige. English developed an undeniably positive association in Japanese culture. “English for speaking proved attractive to the general public, particularly since the image attached to eikaiwa in the media was cheerful, fun, and accessible, accompanied by *akogare* (desire) for America,” Yoshida wrote.

Yet despite this growth, studies [estimate](#) that less than 30 percent of Japanese speak English at any level at all. Less than 8 percent and possibly [as little as 2 percent](#) speak English fluently. For comparison, in Germany, roughly [60 percent of the population speaks English](#), and 16 percent of speakers [say](#) they are proficient.

There are various possible explanations for this gap between enthusiasm and proficiency.

The sheer difference between two languages certainly plays a role—whereas German and English are closely related, Japanese and English have extremely distinct vocabulary, writing systems, and sentence structure. Japanese tutors at the English Tutor Network with fluent English [say](#) they spent a ridiculous 4,000 to 5,000 hours studying to reach that level. Compare that to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages used for foreign-language study within Europe, which is based on achieving total fluency in a foreign language in just 1,200 hours of classes.

Teachers in Japan have [pointed to](#) English classes' strict correspondence to university entrance examinations as a major culprit of their students' poor proficiency. They argue that the focus on exams leads to an over-emphasis on grammar as well as boring, memorization-oriented classes.

"I studied English in junior high school, high school, and university, and when I graduated college I didn't speak English at all," said Norihiko Inoue, the regional sales and marketing director at Education First Japan.

"The Japanese Ministry of Education has introduced initiatives to make classrooms more interactive, but the teachers don't know yet how to execute on these initiatives," he said. "Japanese students are actually very good at grammar and vocabulary, but they can't communicate very well because they're afraid of making mistakes."

[Numerous studies agree](#) that Japanese culture's aversion to risk-taking leads many students to be reluctant to push their limits, especially in speaking, which is essential for language learning.

Heather Rucker, an associate language teacher with the government's Japan Exchange and Teaching Program in Nagoya, said that when she initially followed the official lesson plans, many of her students tuned out and avoided participating.

"There are definitely kids who want to learn English and do things abroad in the future. But the others try to avoid taking part in class as much as possible," she said. "I try to make activities as fun as possible, so it won't drag for them at least."

The practical economic benefits of English for Japan might seem clear. Japan's population [fell by a record rate in 2019](#). Foreign residents now make up [more than 2 percent of the population](#), nearly double the proportion 20 years ago. In the last two years, Japan has created new visa programs to attract more foreign workers, [highly skilled and service sector employees alike](#), although the new workforce, especially caregivers, mainly comes from its Asian neighbors.

"If Japan is content with not being connected to the rest of the world, then it doesn't need English," said Liang Morita, a professor of language and culture at Nagoya University. "However, big businesses such as Toyota and Shiseido have found that the Japanese market alone is not able to sustain the growth in profits they desire. So it follows that Japan needs English to do business with the rest of the world."

On the flip side, Ryuko Kubota, a professor of language literacy and education at the University of British Columbia, conducted a 2011 study that showed English-language skills [do not contribute to upward career mobility](#) in Japan. While those numbers may have shifted by 2020, Japan still has one of the lowest [dependencies on foreign trade in the world](#). Japan is lightyears away from requiring nationwide English fluency to keep the economy going.

Studies show that positive portrayals of white people and the English language are highly [overrepresented in the Japanese media](#). Some of the national obsession with English proficiency is based on social capital accumulated by proximity to whiteness and the West. "Teaching and learning eikaiwa in Japan is a commercialized activity built on the commodification of English, whiteness, Western culture, and native speakers constructed as superior, cool, exotic, or desirable," Kubota said.

"If you know how to speak English, people think you're smart," said Maki Shirase, a Japanese undergraduate studying at the City University of New York. "That's a pretty big benefit." The discourse

around English as a challenging skill that doesn't come naturally to many people may be an additional barrier for everyday learners.

"After graduating college, when I visited my hometown, some of my friends started to treat me differently," Shirase said. "Not making fun of me, but the fact that I had studied abroad and spoke English made me different."

Even with the relatively low number of English speakers in Japan, others are concerned about Japanese language and literature becoming overshadowed by the behemoth of English.

In 2008, Minae Mizumura made waves with her book *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*, in which she traces the development of the English and Japanese languages and argues for more of a focus on Japanese-language education. At the time, many called her an old-fashioned Japanese imperialist.

"Since the end of World War II, any talk about the need to defend the Japanese language has been considered as a reactionary, nationalistic gesture," Mizumura said in [an interview](#) with the literary blog *Bookslut*. "Now, there seems to be more of an awakening among the general population that they should take a fresh look at their own language."

Mizumura says that Japan should establish a national literary canon and better literature education, as fewer Japanese are able to read literary classics. Surveys show that many Japanese evaluated their own reading habits similarly—in a [2014 study](#), 70 percent of respondents said that they believed people in Japan read fewer books than they used to.

"[After 1946], Japan began to produce generations for whom reading anything prewar in its original form is increasingly a struggle," Mizumura writes in her book. "Older, premodern texts have of course become even more remote."

Ultimately, despite the hype, there is ample resistance to studying English in Japan. Most people simply don't need it in their daily lives. But given demographic trends, Japan will have little choice but to up its English game or fall behind in a competitive global economy. Critics such as Mizumura want to ensure that Japanese doesn't get lost in the shuffle.

These combating priorities have left experts with mixed projections for the future of English in Japan. "I think the English learning industry will grow gradually in Japan," Inoue said. "Parents are spending more money on education per child. English language is in high demand from parents."

The emergence of the coronavirus has also shaken up the global balance of power, leading some to speculate that the United States' bungled pandemic response may change the Japanese perception of America.

"The U.S. response to COVID-19, which falls short of what is expected of the largest economy in the world, may change the perception of U.S. superiority permanently," Morita, the Nagoya University professor, said. "I'm not very optimistic about the future of English in Japan. Nihonjinron thinking is still strong."