

A case study of learning in English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japan: High school students' English proficiency levels and fostering positive cross-cultural attitudes.

Shirley O'Neill

(oneills@usq.edu.au)

Faculty of Education, University of Southern Queensland

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Abstract

This study reports on aspects of a larger study of over 600 Japanese high school students taken from ten schools in one prefecture and their attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language (Ingram, Kono, O'Neill & Sasaki, 2008). It compares the cross-cultural attitudes of those who performed highly on the STEP Test with those who had low performance on the STEP Test. Students rated seventeen items on a semantic differential scale to elicit their attitudes towards English speaking people, Japanese people, European people, Asian people, the Japanese, Indigenous Ainu people, their own English language teachers and themselves. They also provided their opinions about cultural diversity in society, foreign language learning and their preferred ways of learning EFL at school. Based on percentage positive response ratings the results showed that those students who had achieved higher levels of English proficiency on the STEP Test tended to be more positive towards English speaking people and Europeans in general, and to a little extent more critical of their own culture, Asian people in general and themselves but in some respects more positive towards the Ainu people. There was also evidence of students who had higher proficiency levels recognising the need to engage more frequently in learning experiences that involved the English language and culture, and meaningful communication.

Key words: Cross-cultural attitudes, English as a foreign language, Language Policy, Language testing, High School Students

Background

This research is a part of a much larger study of Japanese high school students' and their teachers' cross-cultural attitudes and opinions about language and culture, and language learning and teaching as reported in Ingram, Kono, O'Neill and Sasaki (2008)¹. Such research is important because those working in the global field of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL), together with the languages education policy and syllabus documents typically expect language learners will develop favourable attitudes towards the language and culture of the language being learned (the target language). The present paper² explores the responses of two sub-samples of the main

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study to consider in more detail whether these Japanese high school students' cross-cultural attitudes and opinions about language learning differed on the basis of their level of English language proficiency as categorised by their self-reported STEP Test results. The responses of students with higher English language proficiency levels were compared with those of students with lower English language proficiency levels.

Current issues in languages teaching

Methods and approaches to teaching languages have changed dramatically over the years with contemporary pedagogy advocating an eclectic approach that may draw upon the most effective aspects of past and recent teaching and learning strategies.

Importantly, since the advent of the communicative approach (Canale & Swain, 1980) which recognised the necessity for languages learners to be involved in authentic, purposeful/meaningful communicative tasks and assessment, the additional need for intercultural literacy has been established (Kramsch, 2002; Nault, 2006).

O'Neill and Gish (2008, p. 226) state:

Language learning materials and resources should assist language learners to identify and understand their own culture and thinking as well as the culture and thinking of the target language. Intercultural literacy as a basis for effective cross-cultural communication demands an awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity, the ability to reflect on one's own language and culture and that of the target language.

This acknowledgment and emphasis on intercultural literacy for effective cross-cultural communication has provided a new impetus for all teachers who are involved in teaching students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds to acquire the appropriate knowledge and pedagogical skills to be effective. Thus, in Australia, besides the typical short postgraduate programs being available for existing teachers to acquire qualifications to teach EFL/ESL some undergraduate, education degree programs are preparing teachers to teach mainstream ESL students (see example course ECE4012, www.usq.edu.au). Similarly, students' acquisition of language skills and cultural relevance for effective language learning is dependent on their teachers' ability to develop their own intercultural literacy. So programs for preparing EFL teachers need to consider how this will be taught and promoted. Heyward (2002, p. 10) defines "intercultural literacy as the understandings, competencies, attitudes, language proficiencies, participation and identities necessary for successful cross-cultural engagement . . . [where one] has the background required to effectively 'read' a second culture, to interpret its symbols and negotiate its meanings in a practical day-to-day context." On this basis it would seem that both programs for teachers and learners need to be carefully planned and implemented to allow participants to engage with the relevant languages and cultures involved.

When one examines languages education policy documents (ACTET, 2002; DECS, 2005; EULF, 2007; MCEETYA, 2005; UNESCO, 2003) they tend to work on the premise that through the process of learning a new language learners will automatically develop positive attitudes towards the language and the culture. But as shown by Ingram and O'Neill (2000) and Ingram, Kono, O'Neill and Sasaki (2008) this may not be the case. While Lightbown and Spada (1993, p.40) pointed out that some language learners may not aspire to "adopting the identity markers of another cultural group", contemporary approaches to languages teaching are making explicit that teaching intercultural literacy is crucial to developing effective communication (Byram & Grundy, 2003; DeCapua & Wintergerst, 2004). Without this knowledge, understanding and

application in practice, students will have difficulty acquiring the language. It is important also not to assume that a native speaker of the target language e.g. native speaker of English working in TESOL, will fully understand the nature of the cross-cultural communication involved with his or her students. This is because such an understanding requires knowledge of one's own culture as well as the different cultures of the various learners. ACTET (2002, p. 04) points out that "ESL learners continue to develop their language and literacy skills when mainstream teachers use language focused teaching strategies. This is further enhanced when teachers display an awareness and appreciation of cultural and linguistic pluralism which is incorporated into all school practices." Bearing this in mind the present research explores whether students with higher levels of English proficiency have more positive attitudes to learning English, and the culture compared with students who are less proficient.

The approach to measuring cross-cultural attitudes as used here is by survey questionnaire. The survey was developed and first used in a study of Australian high school students in a metropolitan city in Australia (Ingram & O'Neill, 1999; Ingram & O'Neill, 2000). These students were learning a variety of foreign languages at school. The survey questionnaire was then translated into Japanese and adapted to replicate this study with high school students learning EFL in Japan (Ingram, Kono, O'Neill & Sasaki, 2008). Overall, the results provided evidence in both cases to suggest that the language learning experiences of students (independently of the number of years spent learning in secondary school) did not necessarily promote positive attitudes towards the culture of the target language. In addition, a similar survey questionnaire was administered to these students' teachers. It showed similarities between the Australian languages teachers' and Japanese EFL teachers' backgrounds in identifying their lack of experience in the country of the target language and the need to build in more authentic communicative learning tasks for students to use the target language in a meaningful way. Attention was also drawn to the influence of text books, the importance attributed to grammar at the expense of more communicative strategies and the testing of English on EFL pedagogy. This was in spite of the teachers recognising the need to engage students in more communicative tasks.

Methodology

A Survey Questionnaire (SQ) was completed by 632 Japanese EFL high school students from one prefecture in Japan. These students came from ten high schools of varied geographic location (urban/rural), and type (general/specialist curriculum and coeducational/single gender).

The present research is based on the responses of two-sub-samples of students drawn from this main sample. It includes the analysis of their answers to part of the SQ that involved a series of questions exploring their cross-cultural attitudes and their views on EFL pedagogy. Students rated their level of agreement with a list of 17 cultural features presented on a semantic differential with a six point scale. They also rated the extent to which they agreed with 12 opinions about cultural diversity in society and 11 opinions about foreign language learning. Insights into their preferred ways of learning EFL were gauged through their recommendations for changing the amount of in-class time spent on each of 19 items in a list of language learning experiences.

A comparison was made between students whose English language proficiency was categorized as *Higher Level* according to their self-reported STEP Test results (*Higher Level* STEP Test group) and students whose English language proficiency was

categorized as *Lower Level* according to their self-reported STEP Test results (*Lower Level* STEP Test group). The data was analysed on the basis of students' percentage positive response ratings (PPRRs) where the proportion of responses in the positive range (e.g. ratings for 4, 5 and 6 on the semantic differential 1 to 6) were added together.

For the purposes of this comparison on the basis of English language level, students who had achieved at Level 1 to 3 were counted as *Higher Level* English language proficiency and students who had achieved at Levels 4 and 5 were counted as *Lower Level*. Where some students had taken several levels of the test during one year their last level passed was recorded. Taking into account some students had not yet taken the STEP Test (273) and some did not fully answer the question to be categorised (43) this split of the data resulted in 222 students categorized as higher level and 94 students as *lower level* English language proficiency.

The STEP Test

The STEP Test is administered by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) which is Japan's largest testing body. The society aims "to advance English learning in Japan by providing accessible, affordable assessment tools for learners at all proficiency levels . . . Now in its fifth decade, STEP administers a wide range of English tests for education and business, sponsors and conducts research into testing and language acquisition, and plays an active role in international conferences and testing councils." (EIKEN, 2007). The STEP Test results are used for a variety of purposes including entry into some Western Universities where proficiency in the English language is essential. The STEP Test measures candidates listening, speaking, reading and writing skills and claims to engage more authentic assessment techniques in its approach.

Results

Students experience in an English speaking country

The proportion of students categorized as *Lower Level* on the STEP Test who had spent time in an English speaking country was approximately 35%. These students (mean age 16 years) were distributed across all but 2 schools in the sample but a large proportion came from an academic single gender school. The majority of these students had spent time in Australia with a minority visiting the USA. The remainder had visited Guam (4), Canada (1) and England (1).

The proportion of students categorized as *Higher Level* on the STEP test who had spent time in an English speaking country was approximately 20%. These students (mean age 16 years) were distributed across all but one school in the sample, but more than a quarter came from the same academic school noted above, while approximately a quarter came from a coeducational academic school and a further quarter from another single gender school. While Australia and USA were most popular destinations students also visited Canada and England with Guam and Saipan being specified as English speaking countries (ESCs).

The main activities that students were involved in ESCs included formal study of English, cultural exchange, taking a vacation, taking a vacation involving homestay, going on a school excursion and living in an ESC for some reason (visiting relatives, performing, attending a Japanese school/family moves for father's work).

Overall the *Lower Level* group had spent an average of 44 months learning English in contrast to the *Higher Level* group who had spent an average of 57.5 months learning English. While it may be questioned that it appears that students with the most

experience in an ESC were members of the *Lower Level* category (according to the STEP Test self reported results) it needs to be noted that apart from the minority of students with extended stays the average time spent in weeks (1.5 weeks) would not be expected to have a significant impact on students' proficiency levels. For instance, Mosher (2002) found that students who participated in the Saratov-Wyoming Exchange Program learned the importance of acculturation and that such activity was likely to facilitate more positive outcomes there are no guarantees given the various financial, educational and time constraints. Kohlmayer and Schindehutte (2001) also reported that too short an exchange visit may confirm participants' worse fears about the target culture rather than create or enhance positive attitudes. Thus it seems that time in country has either the potential to alienate participants or endear them to the country, culture and language depending on a range of factors including length of stay.

Students' cross-cultural attitudes

Students rated seventeen items on a semantic differential scale to elicit their attitudes towards English speaking people, Japanese people, European people, Asian people, the Japanese Indigenous Ainu people, their own English language teachers and themselves.

Students' positive response ratings of English speaking people

Table 1 shows the percentage positive response ratings for students' opinions about English speaking people.

Table 1: Students' opinions about English speaking people: English proficiency levels and semantic differential PPRs

Item	Semantic Differential Features	Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
a	Boring/Interesting	93.9	74.9
b	Prejudiced/Unprejudiced	64.9	61.3
c	Dirty/Clean	57.4	60.3
d	Ugly/Handsome	87.7	76.9
e	Colourless/Colourful	96.5	86.6
f	Unfriendly/Friendly	97.8	86.5
g	Dishonest/Honest	86.9	71.3
h	Stupid/Clever	84.6	78.5
i	Cruel/Kind	80.8	67.5
j	Unsophisticated/Sophisticated	72.4	56.7
k	Impolite/Polite	53.1	54.1
l	Unsuccessful/Successful	80.2	67.9
m	Unreliable/Reliable	59.6	41.9
n	Strict/Permissive or Easygoing	29.4	38.6
o	Lazy/Hardworking	69.3	62.2
p	Uncivilised/Civilised	80.2	75.7
q	Secretive/Open	97.8	86.6
	Mean	76.03	67.5

There was no statistically significant difference between students with *Higher Level* STEP Test English proficiency results compared with those with *Lower Level* STEP Test English proficiency results with regard to their views of English speaking people

($p > 0.05$). However, consideration of descriptive statistics shows the *Higher Level* STEP Test group to be eight percent more positive on the features of English speaking people being *interesting, handsome, colourful, friendly, honest, kind, sophisticated, successful, reliable and open*. There is little difference in the two groups' ratings on the features of *prejudice, cleanliness, cleverness, politeness, being hardworking and civilised*. However, the *Lower Level* group tended to view English speaking people as more *permissive or easy going* than did the *Higher Level* group (by 9% PPRRs).

Table 2: Students' opinions about Japanese people: English proficiency levels and semantic differential PPRRs

Item	Semantic Differential Features	Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
a	Boring/Interesting	47.4	56.6
b	Prejudiced/Unprejudiced	28.1	40
c	Dirty/Clean	86	78.2
d	Ugly/Handsome	60.1	64.5
e	Colourless/Colourful	36.4	42.9
f	Unfriendly/Friendly	40	52.8
g	Dishonest/Honest	37.6	34
h	Stupid/Clever	57.5	59.3
i	Cruel/Kind	54.8	54.1
j	Unsophisticated/Sophisticated	51.7	46.5
k	Impolite/Polite	74.5	65.3
l	Unsuccessful/Successful	57.7	53
m	Unreliable/Reliable	57.7	52.8
n	Strict/Permissive or Easygoing	56.4	55.1
o	Lazy/Hardworking	79.3	75
p	Uncivilised/Civilised	67.2	69.3
q	Secretive/Open	23.7	40.5
	Mean	53.89	55.29

Table 3: Students' opinions about European people: English proficiency levels and semantic differential PPRRs

Item	Semantic Differential Features	Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
a	Boring/Interesting	82	68.2
b	Prejudiced/Unprejudiced	53	52
c	Dirty/Clean	79.4	75.6
d	Ugly/Handsome	91.3	83.4
e	Colourless/Colourful	92.5	80.5
f	Unfriendly/Friendly	88.5	76.7
g	Dishonest/Honest	79.8	74.3
h	Stupid/Clever	81.1	73.2
i	Cruel/Kind	77.2	69.5
j	Unsophisticated/Sophisticated	80.7	76
k	Impolite/Polite	71.5	68.8
l	Unsuccessful/Successful	80.6	68.9

m	Unreliable/Reliable	66.6	58.8
n	Strict/Permissive or Easygoing	27.9	40.9
o	Lazy/Hardworking	75	64.6
p	Uncivilised/Civilised	81.2	76
q	Secretive/Open	85.9	75.2
	Mean	76.13	69.56

Students' positive response ratings of Japanese people

Analysis of the data in **Table 2** showed no statistically significant difference between students with *Higher Level* STEP Test English proficiency results compared with those with *Lower Level* STEP Test English proficiency results with regard to their views of **Japanese people** ($p > 0.05$). While there is little difference in descriptive statistics with regard to the two groups' perceptions of Japanese people on the features of being *handsome, colourful, honest, clever, kind, sophisticated, successful, reliable, permissive or easygoing, hardworking* and *civilised*, responses to the remaining six features are worthy of consideration. For instance, the responses of the *Higher Level* STEP Test group suggest that they may be more critical of Japanese people since they were at least eight percent less positive on the features of *interesting, unprejudiced, friendly and open* yet at least eight percent more positive about the features of *cleanliness and politeness*.

Students' positive response ratings of European people

As shown in **Table 3** There was no statistically significant difference between students with *Higher Level* STEP Test English proficiency results compared with those with *Lower Level* STEP Test English proficiency results with regard to their views of **European people** ($p > 0.05$). However, on the basis of descriptive statistics data suggests that students with higher English language proficiency tended to be eight percent or more positive in their ratings of European people than students with low English language proficiency on the features of being more *interesting, handsome, colourful, friendly, clever, kind, successful, hardworking and open*. The two groups differed little and were generally positive with regards to Europeans on the features of *prejudice, cleanliness, honesty, sophistication, politeness, reliability and being civilised*. In contrast, the *Lower Level* STEP Test group rated Europeans as being more *permissive or easy going* (by ten percent) while the *Higher Level* STEP Test group rated Europeans as being more *successful* (by ten percent).

Students' positive response ratings of Asian people

Table 4 shows the percentage positive response ratings for students' views of Asian people. Based on these data there was no statistically significant difference between students with *Higher Level* STEP Test English proficiency results compared with those with *Lower Level* STEP Test English proficiency results with regard to their views of **Asian people** ($p > 0.05$). Consideration of descriptive statistics shows the two groups PPRRs to be very similar except for the features of *cleanliness* and being *civilised*. On both of these features the *Lower Level* STEP Test group rated Asian people more positively (by ten percent) seeing them as being *cleaner* and *more civilised* than did the *Higher Level* STEP Test group. On the feature of *cleanliness* it is also of interest that

much less than half of the students in each group gave positive ratings. To a lesser extent the features of being *handsome* and *successful* also received a distinct minority of each group's positive ratings.

Table 4: Students' opinions about Asian people: English proficiency levels and semantic differential PPRs

Item	Semantic Differential Features	Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
a	Boring/Interesting	51.3	54
b	Prejudiced/Unprejudiced	44.9	48.6
c	Dirty/Clean	26.1	35.8
d	Ugly/Handsome	31.6	35.8
e	Colourless/Colourful	57	59.2
f	Unfriendly/Friendly	60.5	62
g	Dishonest/Honest	59.7	61.6
h	Stupid/Clever	44.7	47.8
i	Cruel/Kind	70.8	65.5
j	Unsophisticated/Sophisticated	44.5	48
k	Impolite/Polite	63.6	60.4
l	Unsuccessful/Successful	34.7	37.8
m	Unreliable/Reliable	46.5	47.4
n	Strict/Permissive or Easygoing	47.9	49.2
o	Lazy/Hardworking	76.8	71.2
p	Uncivilised/Civilised	52.2	60.3
q	Secretive/Open	51.3	55.1
	Mean	50.83	52.92

Table 5: Students' opinions about Ainu people: English proficiency levels and semantic differential PPRs

Item	Semantic Differential Features	Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
a	Boring/Interesting	52.1	48.6
b	Prejudiced/Unprejudiced	60.2	56.7
c	Dirty/Clean	39.9	47
d	Ugly/Handsome	39.8	42.7
e	Colourless/Colourful	68.7	60.7
f	Unfriendly/Friendly	62	59.4
g	Dishonest/Honest	77.7	73.2
h	Stupid/Clever	55	54.2
i	Cruel/Kind	77.6	65.7
j	Unsophisticated/Sophisticated	56.2	55.2
k	Impolite/Polite	66.8	64.7
l	Unsuccessful/Successful	36.5	36.1
m	Unreliable/Reliable	61.6	54.5

n	Strict/Permissive or Easygoing	37.3	44.5
o	Lazy/Hardworking	74.4	68.6
p	Uncivilised/Civilised	59.2	56.5
q	Secretive/Open	57.3	58.6
	Mean	57.78	55.7

Students' positive response ratings of Ainu people

As shown in **Table 5** There was no statistically significant difference between students with *Higher Level* STEP Test English proficiency results compared with those with *Lower Level* STEP Test English proficiency results with regard to their views of **Ainu people** ($p > 0.05$). The Ainu people are Japan's Indigenous people who are a minority group in society. Consideration of descriptive statistics shows the two groups' positive response ratings towards the Ainu people to be very similar except for the features of *colourfulness* and *kindness*. On both of these features the *Higher Level* STEP Test group rated Ainu people eight and ten percent more positively respectively, seeing them as being more *colourful* and *kinder* than did the *Lower Level* STEP Test group. On the feature of *successfulness* it is also of interest that only 36% of each group gave positive ratings. In addition, only a minority of both groups gave positive ratings for the feature of *handsomeness* with the *Higher Level* STEP Test group tending to see Ainu people as more *strict* than the *Lower Level* STEP Test group.

Students' positive response ratings of their English teachers

There was no statistically significant difference between students with *Higher Level* STEP Test English proficiency results compared with those with *Lower Level* STEP Test English proficiency results with regard to their views of **their English teachers** ($p > 0.05$) (See **Table 6**). Perusal of the descriptive statistics shows very little difference in positive percentage responses of the two groups. But worthy of note is the common view of the majority of students (approximately 70%) that their English teachers were *strict*, and also *clever* (85% and 81% respectively) and *hardworking* (83% and 80% respectively).

Table 6: Students' opinions about their English teachers: English proficiency levels and semantic differential PPRs

Item	Semantic Differential Features	Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
a	Boring/Interesting	63.1	71.6
b	Prejudiced/Unprejudiced	61.3	56.9
c	Dirty/Clean	69	69.5
d	Ugly/Handsome	57	61.6
e	Colourless/Colourful	65.9	73
f	Unfriendly/Friendly	74.4	79.1
g	Dishonest/Honest	75.7	83.4
h	Stupid/Clever	85.5	81.1
i	Cruel/Kind	70.1	73.8
j	Unsophisticated/Sophisticated	66	60.6
k	Impolite/Polite	74.7	75.9
l	Unsuccessful/Successful	67.7	69.7

m	Unreliable/Reliable	65	68.1
n	Strict/Permissive or Easygoing	32.7	30.3
o	Lazy/Hardworking	83.6	80
p	Uncivilised/Civilised	68.7	69.2
q	Secretive/Open	70	72.5
	Mean	67.67	69.19

Students' positive response ratings about themselves

Considering **Table 7** there was no statistically significant difference between students with *Higher Level* STEP Test English proficiency results compared with those with *Lower Level* STEP Test English proficiency results with regard to their views of **themselves** ($p > 0.05$). Nevertheless perusal of the descriptive statistics' similarities and differences between the percentage positive ratings of the two groups suggests the *Higher Level* STEP Test group may be more critical of themselves than the *Lower Level* STEP Test group. While ratings were similar with respect to them perceiving themselves as *interesting, unprejudiced, clean, colourful, kind, polite, successful, reliable, hardworking, civilised and open* the *Higher Level* STEP Test group were less positive about themselves by at least eight percent on the features of *handsome, friendly, honest and sophisticated* with the latter item differing by 15%. Further, both groups' ratings on the semantic differential of *Stupid/Clever* portrays an unusually low opinion of themselves (28.9% and 24.2% respectively).

Table 7: Students' opinions about themselves: English proficiency levels and semantic differential PRRs

Item	Semantic Differential Features	Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
a	Boring/Interesting	43.9	48.1
b	Prejudiced/Unprejudiced	51	55.2
c	Dirty/Clean	76.6	77.7
d	Ugly/Handsome	32.2	45.9
e	Colourless/Colourful	54.2	53.5
f	Unfriendly/Friendly	58.9	68.9
g	Dishonest/Honest	60.8	69.2
h	Stupid/Clever	28.9	24.2
i	Cruel/Kind	67	73.4
j	Unsophisticated/Sophisticated	36.2	51.5
k	Impolite/Polite	65.4	65.9
l	Unsuccessful/Successful	31.3	38.3
m	Unreliable/Reliable	53.7	60
n	Strict/Permissive or Easygoing	39.7	34.6
o	Lazy/Hardworking	53.5	58.3
p	Uncivilised/Civilised	52.6	49.3
q	Secretive/Open	52.8	55
	Mean	50.51	54.65

Commonly held views about language learning and cultural diversity in society

Students provided a rating of agreement with each of twelve commonly held views on cultural diversity in society. As shown in **Table 8** a comparison of the *Higher Level* STEP Test group's positive agreement ratings with those of the *Lower Level* STEP Test

group suggests that the latter group tend to be more conservative in their outlook. The items are ordered on the basis of the *Higher Level STEP Test* group's extent of agreement from strong agreement to limited agreement. The *Higher Level STEP Test* group agreed much more strongly with the following items:

l Despite racial and cultural differences, I believe that all people are basically the same. (70%)

k People from different cultural backgrounds can learn to understand each other well and live together peacefully. (51%)

j Cultural unity is essential before a strong national identity is possible. (41%).

To a lesser extent the *Higher Level STEP Test* group were also more positive with respect to a further two items:

a Sometimes I can't see much sense in putting so much time and effort into education. (16%)

b In today's world, it is very difficult to plan for one's future career. (12%)

The *Lower Level STEP Test* group provided much more positive ratings in agreement with the following items:

e It is natural for people to think that their own way of living is better than any other. (61%)

g Foreigners are generally less well educated than the Japanese. (54%)

h Foreigners who settle in Japan should leave behind their old cultures and traditions when they settle here. 42%)

f Japan has one of the best education systems in the world. (35%)

d Allowing other cultures to settle in Japan endangers our traditional Japanese way of life. (34%).

To a lesser extent this group was also more positive than the *Higher Level STEP Test* group in response to:

c In the future, it will be essential to know at least two languages in order to get a job. (18%) and i The Japanese are cleaner and healthier than foreigners. (8%)

Table 8: Students' percentage positive agreement with opinions about cultural diversity in society and English proficiency level

Item	Opinions about cultural diversity in society	Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
l	Despite racial and cultural differences, I believe that all people are basically the same.	100	30
k	People from different cultural backgrounds can learn to understand each other well and live together peacefully.	93	42
j	Cultural unity is essential before a strong national identity is possible.	81	40
a	Sometimes I can't see much sense in putting so much time and effort into education.	72	55
b	In today's world, it is very difficult to plan for one's future career.	72	60
i	The Japanese are cleaner and healthier than foreigners.	51	59
c	In the future, it will be essential to know at least two languages in order to get a job.	48	66
d	Allowing other cultures to settle in Japan endangers our traditional Japanese way of life.	44	78
h	Foreigners who settle in Japan should leave	40	82

	behind their old cultures and traditions when they settle here.		
e	It is natural for people to think that their own way of living is better than any other.	30	91
f	Japan has one of the best education systems in the world.	19	54
g	Foreigners are generally less well educated than the Japanese.	6	60

Students' views on learning English as a foreign language

An analysis of the two sub-groups' responses to two questions about learning foreign languages and time spent on different in-class English language learning experiences are reported here. Interestingly, according to the students' responses none of them in either group had been taught English by a native speaker in Japan.

Table 9 compares the two groups' percentage positive agreement ratings on eleven *ideas about learning foreign languages*. The items are ordered on the basis of the *Higher Level STEP Test* group's extent of agreement from strong agreement to limited agreement. These percentages show that the two groups had approximately the same extent of agreement on only two items:

d Learning another language helps people to better understand people of other cultures.

i All children should learn another language in addition to Japanese.

The *Higher Level STEP Test* group were much more positive with respect to:

h Speaking more than one language helps people to get better jobs. (53%)

k My parents are in favour of my learning another language. (32%)

b I like speaking a language other than Japanese. (22%) and ten percent more positive with respect to c Knowing more than one language makes people cleverer.

Table 9: Students' percentage positive agreement with opinions about learning foreign languages and English proficiency level

Item	Opinions about learning foreign languages	Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
d	Learning another language helps people to better understand people of other cultures.	92	87
k	My parents are in favour of my learning another language.	90	58
h	Speaking more than one language helps people to get better jobs.	78	25
c	Knowing more than one language makes people cleverer.	74	64
f	People who know more than one language can have more friends than those who speak only one language.	72	90
i	All children should learn another language in addition to Japanese.	68	70
b	I like speaking a language other than Japanese.	64	42
g	Learning another language helps people to accept people of other cultures as equals.	63	81
a	People need to know only one language.	25	85
e	I feel sorry for people who know only one language.	21	92
j	My friends like hearing me speak another language (other than Japanese) outside class.	18	68

These responses also show that the *Lower Level* STEP Test group were more in agreement with the following items compared with the *Higher Level* STEP Test group:

- e *I feel sorry for people who know only one language. (71%)*
- a *People need to know only one language. (60%)*
- j *My friends like hearing me speak another language (other than Japanese) outside class. (50%)*
- f *People who know more than one language can have more friends than those who speak only one language. (28%)*
- g *Learning another language helps people to accept people of other cultures as equals. (18%)*

Students’ recommendations for changing the amount of time spent on different English language learning experiences in class

The *Higher Level* STEP Test group’s ratings showed a preference for spending an average of 10% more time across these learning experiences compared with the *Lower Level* STEP Test group (Table 10). The items are ordered on the basis of the *Higher Level* STEP Test group’s extent of agreement from strong agreement to limited agreement. The nature of the learning experiences selected in each case by each group provides an insight into the students’ perceived language learning needs and views about language learning of which success at learning English may be a factor.

Table 10: Students’ percentage positive agreement on time spent on different in-class English language learning experiences and English proficiency level

		Higher STEP TEST	Lower STEP TEST
Item	English language learning experiences	More time	More time
n	Learning to use English for everyday purposes.	67	49
c	Talking with native speakers of English.	65	42
i	Listening to songs in English.	60	47
e	Practising accurate pronunciation.	54	39
j	Learning English for the job I want to do in the future.	52	37
d	Learning about the culture of English-speaking countries.	50	29
f	Practising accurate grammar.	48	40
b	Writing.	47	29
g	Using the internet to communicate with students in countries where English is spoken.	41	30
a	Reading.	41	27
s	Testing ability to understand spoken English.	36	27
h	Playing language games in English.	33	30
q	Testing ability to read English.	30	23
r	Testing ability to write English.	28	20
p	Testing ability to speak English.	26	24
l	Using the internet in English for research purposes.	25	16
k	Using English in studying other subjects in school.	23	13
m	Talking in English about Japan and Japanese culture.	22	19
o	Studying the set textbooks.	17	17
Mean		40.26	29.36

Positive response ratings show that 60% or more of the *Higher Level STEP Test* group preferred to spend more time on the three items that would involve them in communicating in English in more authentic ways:

n Learning to use English for everyday purposes.

c Talking with native speakers of English.

i Listening to songs in English.

While these items were also rated the highest for more time for the *Lower Level STEP Test* group less than half the group were of the opinion that more time was required for these items.

Approximately half the *Higher Level STEP Test* group indicated they wanted to spend more time on a further five items that reflect their recognition of the importance of pronunciation, grammar and writing, the need to relate the language learning to their future practical needs (work) and also the importance of culture:

e Practising accurate pronunciation.

j Learning English for the job I want to do in the future.

d Learning about the culture of English-speaking countries.

f Practising accurate grammar.

b Writing.

Again a smaller proportion of the *Lower Level STEP Test* group rated these items as requiring more time although the order of priority was similar. Approximately 40% of this group required more time for e, j and f. and only 29% saw a need for more time for learning about culture (d) and writing (b).

Approximately 40% of the *Higher Level STEP Test* group indicated they wanted to spend more time on *using the internet to communicate with students in countries where English is spoken* (g), reading (a) and *having their ability to understand spoken English tested* (s) compared with approximately 30% of the *Lower Level STEP Test* group opting for more time on these items. Approximately one third of both groups wished to spend more time *playing language games in English* (h).

Both groups responded in a similar way to the need to spend more time on the remaining items which focused on testing (q, r and p) and various purposes for using English (internet research (q), talking about Japan (m), learning other school subjects in English (k) and studying the set text (o). It is interesting to note that *studying the set text* was rated the lowest in terms of the need for more time.

Discussion and conclusion

In summary, although far from conclusive, these results provide some evidence that the students with higher levels of proficiency in English tended to be more open to Western cultures and Western people and more critical of their own culture, the culture of Asian people and themselves by comparison. They viewed European people as being more *successful* by ten percent and their ratings were eight percent more positive with respect to Europeans being *interesting, handsome, colourful, friendly, clever, kind, successful, hardworking and open*. Similarly, the *Higher Level STEP Test* group were eight percent more positive in their views of English speaking people with respect to the majority of the same features: *interesting, handsome, colourful, friendly, honest, kind, sophisticated, successful, reliable and open*. On the other hand, compared with the *Higher Level STEP Test* group responses those with lower level English proficiency viewed both Europeans and English speaking people as more *permissive or easy going*.

With respect to their own culture the *Higher Level* STEP Test group's ratings suggest that they viewed their own culture as less *unprejudiced, interesting, friendly and open* but more *clean and polite*. To some extent these views are mirrored in the two groups' perceptions of Asian people. Overall both groups' were approximately 15% more positive towards European people compared with Asian people (see Mean PPRs). However, the *Lower Level* STEP Test group rated Asian people more positively by approximately eight percent on two features, seeing them as being *cleaner* and *more civilised*. On the feature of *cleanliness* it is also of interest that only a minority of students from both groups gave positive ratings (26% and 26%). Similarly, the features of being *handsome* and *successful* with respect to Asian people also received a distinct minority of each group's positive ratings. Nevertheless both groups of students were very positive towards their English teachers who were Japanese people, seeing them as *strict, clever* and *hardworking*.

As a minority Indigenous group in Japan the Ainu people were viewed in a similar way to the Japanese people and Asian people in general, on the basis of mean PPRs. Even though the *Higher Level* STEP Test group rated Ainu people as more *colourful, kinder* and *strict* both groups viewed them as relatively *unsuccessful* and less *handsome*. The negativity in this regard may be influenced by societal values as was found in the research of Ingram and O'Neill (2000) in relation to students' views of Australian Indigenous people although no firm conclusion can be drawn here.

The values of *cleanliness, honesty, kindness* and *politeness* were uppermost in both groups' ratings about themselves. This was in keeping with the main study's findings as was their portrayal of themselves as not very clever. Interestingly, the *Higher Level* STEP Test group were more critical of themselves with respect to the features of *handsome, friendly* and *honest* (eight percent less positive). They were most critical about their level of *sophistication* with only 36% positive compared with 51% of the lower proficiency group. One may surmise that learning English for four years and having reached a measurable level of proficiency on the STEP Test could have contributed to this group's seemingly more critical response. Similarly, it is not surprising that those with limited proficiency in English may have different views, particularly if they have experienced difficulties learning the language to date (bearing in mind that the lower proficiency group had spent less time learning English).

Differences were also evident regarding the two groups opinions about cultural diversity in society, learning foreign languages and how much time should be spent on various in-class English language learning experiences. The higher level proficiency group tended to be more tolerant and positive towards living in a multicultural society in contrast to the more conservative outlook of the lower proficiency group. But it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions since the lower proficiency group's ratings surprisingly indicated they were much more convinced that *in the future it will be essential to know at least two languages in order to get a job*.

On the general issue of learning foreign languages responses showed that the majority of students appreciated the usefulness of learning another language and 92% of the high proficiency group believed that it would help them better understand the culture. Responses for this group also showed their parents were in favour of them learning another language and that they liked speaking another language. They were also of the opinion that learning English would be an asset for their future work and that people with more than one language were cleverer. Interestingly, the lower proficiency group was not as sure that knowing another language would assist with acquiring a job and in contrast to the higher proficiency group they were not so keen about speaking another language. In addition, while 92% felt sorry for people who only knew one language 85% agreed that

people need to know only one language. These responses may reflect this groups lower level English proficiency causing one to question whether their responses reflect some feeling of failure mixed with hope for future success. This is supported by their strong belief that people who know more than one language can have more friends than those who speak only one language and recognition that learning another language helps people to accept people of other cultures as equals.

Students' recommendations for changing the amount of time spent on different in-class English language learning experiences suggest that those with higher proficiency levels were better placed to comment on what works best. They clearly isolated the experiences that would involve them in communicating in English in more authentic ways besides recognising the importance of pronunciation, grammar and writing. They also made the connection between learning English and its usefulness for future work and also the need to learn about the culture. While both groups recognised the limitations of the text book students with lower proficiency were not as supportive of more time for the items identified by the higher proficiency group and only 29% indicated more time for cultural understanding. However, a small proportion of both groups did recognise the opportunity to communicate in English over the Internet as a preferred pedagogy. All-in all it would seem feasible to consider that the gap between these two groups proficiency levels is to some extent responsible for the contrasting responses to preferences for language learning experiences. The responses also suggest that the positive views and understanding of pedagogical aspects of language learning is accumulative as the learners become more proficient. Similarly, for those who have not progressed at the desired speed one would expect less enthusiasm and discernment of strategies, and also some hope of acquiring English in this case where there is considerable pressure to perform and testing is emphasised.

In conclusion, these results show that those students who had achieved higher levels of English proficiency on the STEP Test were more positive towards English speaking people and Europeans in general, and to a little extent more critical of their own culture, Asian people in general and themselves. There was also evidence of students who had higher proficiency levels recognising the need to engage more frequently in learning experiences that involved the English language and culture. The findings also raise the issue of teacher professional learning in terms of ensuring teachers of EFL have regular experience in English speaking countries. This would enable them to use their own English in authentic ways and acquire and/or enhance their intercultural literacy and at the same time share pedagogical insights. Regular participation in such professional learning would better prepare them to work with students who may be somewhat isolated from other cultures and opportunities to communicate in English for authentic purposes (apart from the current opportunities via the Internet). While these research findings remain inconclusive they are thought provoking with regards to language teaching being able to foster positive cross-cultural attitudes and the importance of listening to students' views on language learning. They are also relevant to those involved in writing language education policy and syllabus. In providing encouragement to continue this research it is recommended that focused discussions on these findings be held with teachers and students with a view to designing further longitudinal research that involves the teaching of languages in different linguistic contexts such as in Australia, Asia and Europe.

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