

EPISODE 7 TRANSCRIPT

Hello, everyone. I'm Sonia Paul, and you're listening to Shizuoka Speaks. Here, we give a behind-the-scenes, personal account of learning and living in Japan...from students to teachers, foreigners to Japanese people. And we're doing this all based here in Shizuoka City, in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan.

Last week, we got firsthand stories of the kinds of struggles that Japanese teachers of English face. This week, we explore some Japanese attitudes toward the English language and English speakers.

As we know by now, Japanese people are very familiar with the idea of studying English...

Kotomi: Of course, here in Japan, we have to study English.

That's Kotomi. You might remember her--she's a 24 year old Japanese graduate of the University of Shizuoka.

Kotomi: ...When I was a junior high school student, I had to study English from junior high school. So they just say--in the board of education--we will study foreign language. Foreign language, but actually, the options--that only English. So, foreign language equals only English. So when I entered the university, we had a choice among seven languages as a foreign language. But, junior high and high school, only English. So from the education stage, the person who can speak English is good. That is...good educated people in Japan. That is the image. But what I learned in junior high school and high school, that is only native accent--U.S. and Canada and British.

Sonia: So native means countries in which English is spoken natively.

Kotomi: Yeah, yeah.

So just to clarify, countries that speak English "natively" are countries whose citizens have exposure to it from an early age.

Sonia: But...there are so many countries in the world that might fall under that category, though.

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Kotomi: Yeah, yeah, yeah!

Sonia: That's not necessarily represented in people's ideas of what is native.

Kotomi: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Like Philippines. They are studying English since kindergarten. So...actually, they can speak English very perfect. So now, the people from Korea--there are MANY Koreans studying English in the Philippines. Because Filipinos, they can speak English VERY GOOD.

Kotomi's views bring up a point--people in some countries may not have English as a mother tongue. But, they use it so frequently or from such an early age that one might say it's "almost" a native language for them.

Kotomi: But in Japan, you know, ALTs, or the teachers who are teaching English in the schools. That became our image. Studying English should be from native speakers...which means, from Britain, Canada, U.S., Australia...That is native. So others, that is not native. Even though they can speak English very well, that is just foreigner. That is not for teaching English.

Countries all over the world use English as an official language. However, Kotomi is speaking from her experience--and growing up in Japan, those are the countries most identified with the concept of "native" English.

Kotomi: It's so sad! Now, China's economy is really growing, so we need to communicate with Chinese people. But you know, Chinese people, their accent is really very parse and really, like, rah, rah, rah. But, you know, we are not educated to communicate with, for example, Chinese English or Singapore English, or Malaysian English or Indian English. So, I was so amazed when I talked with Indian people. Their English was really difficult to hear. Ahhh, and then--but gradually...ahh, maybe they are saying like that, like this. Yeah. I could hear their accents.

Sonia: What do you think about English in Japan?

Kotomi: English in Japan?

Sonia: Like, specifically maybe...the way they teach English in Japan.

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Kotomi: So...that is educational problem, I guess. Even we studied English in junior high school or high school, we just use for entrance exam to the high school or entrance exam for the university. That's all. So, after you chose a course--not English--we don't have to use it. So, that is completely different, like India or Malaysia or Singapore or the Philippines, they are using English in the actual life...

And this is not just for convenience. In each of these countries, English is an official language.

Kotomi: ...But in Japan, compared with them, we don't have chance to talk or to use English.

Sonia: So everyone always says we don't have a chance to use English, but there are many foreigners living in Japan, in Shizuoka, who can speak English, so...there is the chance.

Kotomi: Yeah. Maybe there is the chance, but ordinary people, maybe they don't feel that. We are just living in Japan, in the Japanese community, and foreigners--is just foreigners. And...yeah, of course, I just graduated from International Relations, and I have concern about communicating with foreign people...but ordinary people...maybe there is a chance, but I think they don't feel that.

According to the Shizuoka City Hall population records from December 2010, Shizuoka City has 725, 578 registered residents. The total population of foreign residents at the time was 8, 409. So about 700,000 people to 8400 people. That's about 1.2 percent of the population.

It may seem like a tiny percentage, but it's significant for Japan. In fact, Shizuoka Prefecture ranks third out of all prefectures in Japan for its number of foreign residents. A large population of foreigners live in Hamamatsu City, the biggest city in Shizuoka Prefecture. A majority of that city's foreign population are Brazilians who have family roots in Japan. Many second or third generation Japanese Brazilians migrated to Japan after the passing of a 1990 immigration law, which allowed them to establish more permanent or long-term residences in the country. A major attraction for coming to Japan? Work. Shizuoka is home to a number of manufacturing companies...meaning lots of factory or manual labor jobs for people who may not know much Japanese.

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Shizuoka City also has a fair number of factories, and lots of foreigners work for them. But, as Kotomi said, ordinary people feel that there are not a lot of foreigners in the city...

A reason for this--at least on a superficial level--may be that most of the foreigners who live in Shizuoka City are from other Asian countries. The top ten most represented countries in Shizuoka City, in order of population, are as follows:

China. Korea. Philippines. Brazil. Vietnam. Myanmar. Indonesia. United States. Peru. Nepal.

Only the first four countries--China, Korea, Philippines, and Brazil--have a population exceeding 1000 residents. And only one country on that list--the United States, with a registered population of 166 people--fits that understanding of a country with "native" English.

It's required for the residents in all of these countries to learn English to a certain degree...so many of them can speak it. Why then, don't ordinary people feel like they have the chance to speak English with foreigners?

Kotomi: In my case, I like southeast Asian countries. So of course, I have friends from U.S. and Canada...I like them...but...in Japan, white people is really ideal style to talk...like, in terms of English? Yeah. You know, because if you watch the tv, and then in the English school, who is advertising? That is the white people, right? Like AEON or NCC, ECC...

AEON, NCC, and ECC are all Japan-based private companies. They hire native speakers of English to teach as Assistant Language Teachers, or ALTs, in Japanese schools.

Kotomi: ...Yeah, so from media and from education in Japan, so that made us...ideal style...

Obviously, even within the countries in which English is a native language, not all the people who live there fit the "white people" image that Kotomi is describing. And we know that there are many countries in the world in which English, though not a native language, is a common spoken language.

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So what happens when people challenge the general understanding in Japan of who can speak English?

Manasi: Actually, when I came to Japan, I was looking for part-time jobs, and somebody told me that teaching English was an option. And so I thought, I can do that, probably, because I did that in India as well for a little while...

Here's Manasi to tell us about her experience.

Manasi: ...And I thought it would be more interesting than working in a factory or working in a supermarket because it's really stressful...I met this guy called Martin, and he's from Slovakia, and he told me that there's these websites, and you can just register yourself and you can find people on the net. So I thought it's a good idea, and then I gave the TOEIC test, and I happened to score a full score in it---

Sonia: Congratulations!

Manasi: Yeah, I just like, slept right there and gave the exam. It's quite, quite easy, okay, it's not a big deal that I got a full score. But, when I put that on the net, again, these Japanese people gave it so much weightage, which is again so weird. I just don't understand why. TOEIC is just not the exam to really test your English ability. And it doesn't show the people that you can teach English. It's a different thing! But they don't understand that, you know.

So emails flooded, my inbox, and then, you know, I chose students to try classes, and it worked out pretty nice. And I met lot of different kinds of Japanese people, and I got to know them closer, and they really help me a lot. They're very sweet, and I'm still teaching them, and I really enjoy it.

Sonia: So, were they really surprised to find YOU as their English teacher?

Manasi: Yeah! They told me that I was the only Indian they ever found on the net saying I teach English and got a full score. So yeah, they were quite surprised, and they were like, "Are you, how, did you ever travel abroad?" And I said, "No, not really," and they said, "Well then how do you know English?" And so I was like, "Uh, okay..." And so I told them. Actually, people don't know much about this whole English thing. But it's quite natural for Indians to know English. So I told them, and then they were quite fine about it. They didn't really mind it. Actually, I was pretty cheap, also, so I think that's why they chose me.

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So even though Manasi--who has light brown skin, dark hair, and dark eyes--does not fit the white ideal model of English speakers in Japan, she was still able to meet and form relationships with Japanese people. And, as she said herself, her students are very sweet. She has good relationships with them.

*But it makes you wonder--would she have been able to form these relationships with Japanese people **had** she not advertised herself as an English teacher?*

*Before we can examine this question further, though, we got to take a step back. We need to talk about Japan, the country, a bit more. How do people--both Japanese and foreigners--perceive it? How does it compare with other countries? And what do these views say about Japan that can help us understand the way **it** views the world? We'll talk about those questions in the next coming episodes.*

Thank you to Manasi and Kotomi, again, very much, for sharing their views with us. I'm Sonia Paul, your host for Shizuoka Speaks. Thank you for listening.