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## ACCENTEDNESS AND ACCEPTABILITY RATINGS OF JAPANESE ENGLISH TEACHERS' PRONUNCIATION

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Non-native English teachers in the EFL setting wish to serve as models for their students; however, for both teachers and students, it is not clear what “acceptable pronunciation” of English teachers is. To this end, an experiment was conducted to investigate the acceptability of non-native English teachers' pronunciation in relation to accentedness. Ten native English-speaking teachers, ten Japanese teachers, and ten Japanese students listened to an English passage read aloud by 20 Japanese speakers. The listeners rated each speaker's pronunciation in terms of “accentedness” and “acceptability as an English teacher” on a nine-point scale. A strong positive correlation was found between “accentedness” and “acceptability” within each listener group, suggesting the possibility that accentedness plays a role in judging the acceptability of non-native English teachers' pronunciation. Native English-speaking teachers tended to give higher acceptability ratings than Japanese teachers and students. There were differences among speakers for both accentedness and acceptability, although the rank order revealed a similarity for lower-ranked speakers among all three listener groups. To fully assess acceptability, other constructs such as intelligibility and comprehensibility, as well as phonetic features such as fluency, clarity, and speech rate, should be taken into account.

### INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation is an essential component of language, and second/foreign language learners wish to acquire pronunciation that enables them to successfully communicate in their target language. To help learners achieve this goal, teachers play an important role. What, then, is the pronunciation goal for English teachers, especially non-native teachers in EFL settings? In pursuit of this question, this paper investigates the relationship between “accentedness” and a new construct, “acceptability.” A concept similar to “acceptability,” has been investigated under the term “suitability” by Boyd (2003) and Moran (2016).<sup>1</sup> Moran (2016) defined *perceived teaching suitability* as follows:

an immediate impressionistic judgment on the part of the listener as to whether the speaker would be a great or poor teacher, whether he or she would help students learn, and whether the listener would like to have him or her for a teacher (p. 10).

In her study of foreign-born teachers in Sweden, Boyd (2003) found that “teacher suitability” is closely associated with language proficiency, and in particular, accentedness. The study focused on the situation where non-native speakers teach native speakers, and thus, the findings may not be directly comparable to the English teaching context in Japan, where non-native speakers teach non-native speakers who share the same mother tongue. Nevertheless,

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Alyssa Kermad and Meghan Moran for their input on relevant resources on teacher acceptability/suitability.

Boyd's findings are insightful in that accent is found to play an important role in evaluating teacher suitability.

The relationship between accentedness and teacher suitability was also suggested in the authors' studies. To investigate Japanese teachers' ideas on their own pronunciation goals, Uchida and Sugimoto (2016, 2017) conducted studies using questionnaires targeting both in-service (i.e., currently active) and preservice (i.e., under training) teachers and found more than 80% believed it desirable for teachers to acquire native-like pronunciation. A follow-up qualitative survey on preservice teachers revealed that this belief stemmed from the perceptions of teachers' roles as an important source of input and a good model for students. Many described teachers' pronunciation should be "higher level/better (than students)" or "correct" (Uchida & Sugimoto, 2017).

Although many researchers now agree that pronunciation goals for non-native speakers has shifted from native-like pronunciation to intelligible pronunciation (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Levis, 2005), this idea is not prevalent among non-native teachers worldwide (Jenkins, 2007), including Japan. One possible reason is that the level of pronunciation non-native English teachers should aim at is not clear, and this has resulted in a deep-rooted inclination toward acquisition of native-like pronunciation.

Thus, we decided to further investigate the relationship between the two constructs: "accentedness" and "acceptability." The definition of "accentedness" in our study follows that of Derwing and Munro (2015, p. 175): "the extent of difference perceived by speakers of one linguistic variety when listening to speakers of other varieties." The construct of "acceptability" in this study refers to "how acceptable a non-native speaker's pronunciation is as a teacher." By asking three listener groups (native English-speaking teachers, Japanese teachers, and Japanese students) to participate in rating tasks, the following two research questions were explored: (i) *Do "accentedness" and "acceptability" ratings differ from each other within a listener group?* and (ii) *Do "accentedness" and "acceptability" ratings differ across the three listener groups?* We hypothesized that listeners' evaluations of "acceptability" are influenced by "accentedness," and that while listeners with different background may evaluate "accentedness" in the same way (cf. Munro et al., 2006), they may evaluate "acceptability" differently.

## METHOD

### Materials

In a typical English class in a Japanese junior high school, a teacher is often required to read aloud a passage from a textbook to provide a model pronunciation. Having this teacher's role in mind, materials for the experiment were selected from an English textbook (Togo et al., 2013, p. 80). The passage is an excerpt from the speech originally delivered by Severn Suzuki at the UN Earth Summit in 1992.

- *I am here to speak for starving children around the world.*
- *I am afraid to breathe the air because I don't know what chemicals are in it.*
- *Did you have to worry about these things when you were my age?*

These three sentences were specifically chosen because they include segments that are often said to be difficult for Japanese speakers (e.g., /ʌ:/, αə, l, r, θ, ð/) and have sentence structures that can be used to test appropriate rhythm and intonation.

## Speakers

For the current experiment, we prepared 20 speech samples, 13 of which were recordings made by preservice teachers enrolled in a phonetics course for a teacher's certificate. The rest were supplemented from a pool of recordings by 57 students who recorded the same passage as an assignment for another class. Recordings with hesitations or misread words, which are reported to have a great impact on listeners' evaluations (Matsuura, Chiba, & Ara, 2012), were not chosen because those features were not our main focus. All the students were from two universities in Tokyo, and their profiles are as follows: gender (11 female, 9 male); CEFR level measured with the Cambridge English Placement Test (A2 = 6, B1 = 7, B2 = 6, C1 = 1). The script was given in advance for speakers to understand its meaning and to practice reading.

## Listeners

Three groups, each consisting of ten listeners, were recruited to participate in the experiment: ten native English-speaking teachers (ET), ten Japanese teachers (JT), and ten Japanese students (JS). Of the ten native English-speaking teachers (age range: 37–56,  $M = 44.7$ ; 3 female, 7 male), four were from the United States, two from Australia, and one each from the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, and Spain.<sup>2</sup> All ten teachers, having had experience of both living and teaching in Japan, were familiar with the Japanese accent; their mean length of stay in Japan was 13.4 years (range: 4.8–20 years), and the mean length of teaching experience in Japan was 12.4 years (range: 4.8–20 years). Ten Japanese teachers (age range: 34–60,  $M = 47.9$ ; 9 female, 1 male) were all active teachers at the college or university level in Japan, but none specialized in phonetics/phonology or pronunciation teaching. Last, the ten Japanese students (age range: 20–21,  $M = 20.4$ ; 10 female) were all university students majoring in English with the following level of English proficiency: CEFR A2 = 7, B1 = 1, and B2 = 2.

## Procedure

Before starting the experiment, all listeners read the test passage. The Japanese listeners (JT and JS) were also introduced to the model recording from the CD that accompanied the original textbook.<sup>3</sup> After that, the listeners were provided with the instructions.

In the experimental session, the listeners were first asked to listen to the 20 recordings of Japanese speakers in a randomized order and evaluate the accentedness of each speech sample on a nine-point scale (1 = *heavily accented*, 9 = *not accented*). Next, they listened to the same 20 speakers again in a randomized order, and this time they were asked to evaluate how acceptable the speaker's pronunciation was as an English teacher, again on a nine-point scale (1 = *not acceptable*, 9 = *very acceptable*). The listeners were allowed to listen to each speech sample only once. To familiarize listeners with the scaling, a practice session with three trials preceded each rating task.

After completing the experiment, all listeners filled out a language background questionnaire. In addition, they answered two questions on the rating tasks: "On what basis did you evaluate 'accentedness' of the speaker's pronunciation?" and "On what basis did you evaluate

<sup>2</sup> One participant was born in Spain but we confirmed that his first language was English.

<sup>3</sup> We decided to provide Japanese listeners with a model pronunciation simply because some of them (mostly students) might not have known the correct pronunciation of some words (e.g., *breathe*).

‘acceptability’ of the speaker’s pronunciation as that of an English teacher?’

Each listener from the ET and JT groups received an experiment package (a consent form, instruction sheets, and a USB stick with audio files) by mail and was asked to send it back upon completion. In the case of the JS group, each listener individually took the experiment in a quiet room in the presence of the first author. All listeners were offered payment. The experiment took less than 30 minutes, and the listeners were advised to take a few minutes’ break after completing the accentedness rating.

## RESULTS

The final data set did not include ratings for two speakers; one listener from the ET group left one acceptability rating blank, and another chose an inappropriate value for one accentedness rating. These two missing values were replaced by the median of the other speakers’ ratings given by the listener in question.

### Correlations between Accentedness and Acceptability within Each Listener Group

After confirming high inter-rater reliability (Cronbach’s  $\alpha > .80$ ) between the listeners within each group, mean scores of accentedness and acceptability ratings were obtained from the three groups (Table 1). A strong positive correlation was confirmed for all three groups between accentedness and acceptability ratings: *Pearson*  $r(18) = .93$  for NT,  $r(18) = .87$  for JT, and  $r(18) = .93$  for JS,  $p < .001$  (Figure 1). Notably high correlations for all three groups indicate that the listeners’ ratings for accentedness and acceptability were fairly similar.

Table 1

*Means and Standard Deviations of Accentedness and Acceptability Ratings by the Three Listener Groups*

	ET	JT	JS
Accentedness	5.28 (1.51)	5.48 (1.66)	5.46 (1.65)
Acceptability	6.21 (1.64)	5.31 (2.35)	5.32 (2.37)

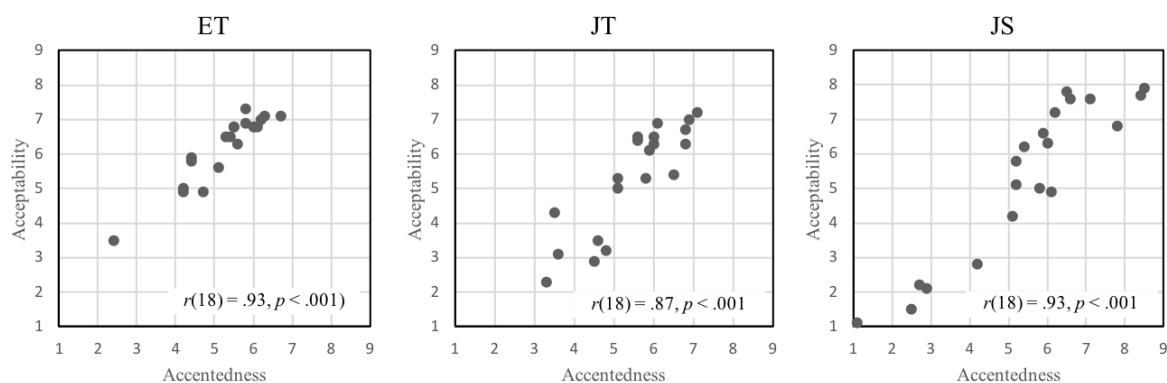


Figure 1. Correlations between accentedness and acceptability by the three listener groups.

### Accentedness and Acceptability Ratings across Listener Groups

A two-way ANOVA was conducted to evaluate the effects of speaker and listener group. The independent variables were speaker, listener group, and the interaction between speaker and listener group, and the dependent variables were accentedness and acceptability ratings. As for accentedness, the main effect for speaker yielded  $F(19, 513) = 24.40, p < .05$ , indicating a significant difference between 20 speakers. The rating was the highest for S02 ( $M = 7.2, SD = 1.58$ ) (Table 2). In contrast, the main effect of listener group was non-significant,  $F(2, 27) = .14, p > .05$ . The interaction effect was significant,  $F(38, 513) = 2.70, p < .05$ .

Table 2

#### *Accentedness Ratings by the Three Listener Groups*

Code	CEFR	<i>M (SD)</i>			
		ET	JT	JS	Overall
S01	B1	6.7 (1.57)	6.5 (1.72)	5.9 (2.42)	6.4 (1.90)
S02	B2	6.3 (1.34)	6.8 (1.75)	8.4 (0.70)	7.2 (1.58)
S03	C1	6.2 (1.69)	6.1 (1.45)	6.2 (1.87)	6.2 (1.62)
S04	B2	6.1 (1.52)	5.9 (1.10)	6.0 (1.76)	6.0 (1.44)
S05	B2	6.0 (1.83)	6.8 (2.30)	6.5 (2.64)	6.4 (2.22)
S06	B1	6.0 (1.41)	5.6 (1.65)	6.1 (1.66)	5.9 (1.54)
S07	B1	5.8 (1.81)	6.0 (1.89)	7.8 (0.91)	6.5 (1.80)
S08	B1	5.8 (1.14)	6.9 (1.85)	6.6 (2.22)	6.4 (1.79)
S09	B2	5.6 (1.58)	7.1 (1.66)	8.5 (0.71)	7.1 (1.80)
S10	A2	5.5 (1.90)	5.1 (1.97)	5.1 (2.42)	5.2 (2.05)
S11	A2	5.5 (1.43)	4.6 (2.01)	5.2 (2.04)	5.1 (1.83)
S12	B1	5.4 (1.84)	5.6 (1.58)	5.2 (1.62)	5.4 (1.63)
S13	B2	5.4 (1.35)	5.8 (1.40)	5.8 (1.48)	5.7 (1.37)
S14	B2	5.1 (1.37)	6.0 (0.94)	7.1 (0.88)	6.1 (1.34)
S15	B1	4.7 (1.42)	5.1 (1.37)	5.4 (1.78)	5.1 (1.51)
S16	A2	4.4 (1.58)	4.8 (1.81)	2.7 (2.06)	4.0 (1.99)
S17	B1	4.4 (1.08)	3.5 (1.35)	4.2 (2.15)	4.0 (1.59)
S18	A2	4.2 (1.62)	3.6 (1.58)	2.5 (1.18)	3.4 (1.59)
S19	A2	4.2 (1.62)	4.5 (2.32)	2.9 (2.13)	3.9 (2.10)
S20	A2	2.4 (1.08)	3.3 (1.57)	1.1 (0.32)	2.3 (1.41)

Note: The speaker codes (S01 to S20) are assigned based on the ET group's rank order of accentedness.

With regard to acceptability, the main effect for speaker yielded  $F(19, 513) = 30.71, p < .05$ , indicating a significant difference between 20 speakers. The rating was the highest for S05 ( $M = 7.1, SD = 1.95$ ), S08, ( $M = 7.1, SD = 1.32$ ) and S09 ( $M = 7.1, SD = 1.94$ ) (Table 3). The main effect for listener group yielded  $F(2, 27) = 3.96, p < .05$ , indicating a significant difference between listener groups. The ET group showed the highest acceptability rating of all three groups ( $M = 6.21, SD = 1.64$ ) (Table 1). The interaction effect was significant,  $F(38, 513) = 4.26, p < .05$ .

Table 3

*Acceptability Ratings by the Three Listener Groups*

Code	CEFR	<i>M (SD)</i>			
		ET	JT	JS	Overall
S01	B1	7.1 (1.29)	5.4 (1.51)	6.6 (2.01)	6.4 (1.73)
S02	B2	7.1 (1.52)	6.3 (2.98)	7.7 (1.83)	7.0 (2.21)
S03	C1	7.0 (1.16)	6.9 (1.10)	7.2 (0.79)	7.0 (1.00)
S04	B2	6.8 (1.14)	6.1 (1.52)	6.3 (1.89)	6.4 (1.52)
S05	B2	6.8 (1.69)	6.7 (2.26)	7.8 (1.87)	7.1 (1.95)
S06	B1	6.8 (1.23)	6.4 (1.17)	4.9 (1.79)	6.0 (1.61)
S07	B1	7.3 (0.82)	6.5 (2.01)	6.8 (1.69)	6.9 (1.57)
S08	B1	6.7 (1.64)	7.0 (1.15)	7.6 (1.07)	7.1 (1.32)
S09	B2	6.3 (1.49)	7.2 (2.44)	7.9 (1.60)	7.1 (1.94)
S10	A2	6.8 (1.32)	5.0 (1.89)	4.2 (2.44)	5.3 (2.17)
S11	A2	6.8 (0.63)	3.5 (1.78)	5.1 (1.52)	5.1 (1.93)
S12	B1	6.5 (1.27)	6.5 (1.51)	5.8 (2.30)	6.3 (1.72)
S13	B2	6.5 (1.08)	5.3 (1.83)	5.0 (2.11)	5.6 (1.79)
S14	B2	5.6 (1.35)	6.3 (1.34)	7.6 (0.84)	6.5 (1.43)
S15	B1	4.9 (1.79)	5.3 (2.11)	6.2 (1.81)	5.5 (1.93)
S16	A2	5.8 (1.14)	3.2 (1.81)	2.2 (1.55)	3.7 (2.13)
S17	B1	5.9 (1.52)	4.3 (2.45)	2.8 (1.23)	4.3 (2.17)
S18	A2	5.0 (1.70)	3.1 (1.97)	1.5 (0.97)	3.2 (2.12)
S19	A2	4.9 (1.60)	2.9 (1.91)	2.1 (1.85)	3.3 (2.10)
S20	A2	3.5 (1.84)	2.3 (1.64)	1.1 (0.32)	2.3 (1.70)

For both accentedness and acceptability, the interaction effect was significant. To further investigate differences between speakers, accentedness ratings by the three groups were sorted in terms of ranking. With the exception of S02 (ranked the second highest by both ET and JS), variability in accentedness was observed among the highly ranked speakers. One

example is S09, who was ranked the highest by both JT and JS groups but was ranked only ninth by the ET group. In contrast, the lowest rankings were more or less consistent across the listener groups. S18, S19, and S20 were all within the lowest four for all three groups.

Turning to acceptability, inconsistency was also found regarding the speakers who received high rankings across the listener groups. The speakers who were ranked high by ET were not always ranked high by JT and JS, and the rankings of JT and JS did not coincide either. The only exceptions were S02 (ranked the second highest by ET and the third highest by JS) and S09 (ranked the highest by both JT and JS). In contrast, the lowest rankings of acceptability were consistent. Here again, S18, S19, and S20 were among the lowest four in all three groups.

### Comments on Accentedness and Acceptability

At the end of the experiment, the listeners described the basis on which they evaluated accentedness and acceptability. As expected for accentedness, many of them wrote well-known segmental and suprasegmental features that are said to be problematic for Japanese learners (e.g., /l/-/r/, rhythm, flat intonation). For acceptability, four (ET = 2, JT = 1, JS = 1) listeners wrote that they used the same criteria when judging accentedness and acceptability, six (ET = 3, JT = 2, JS = 1) wrote that they used similar criteria but incorporated other features as well, and the remaining 20 wrote that they used different criteria. Interestingly, the four listeners who mentioned speed were all Japanese students; three wrote that slower rate is preferable, whereas one mentioned that the rate should not be too slow. The features that repeatedly appeared in the comments to describe accentedness and acceptability are summarized in Figure 2.

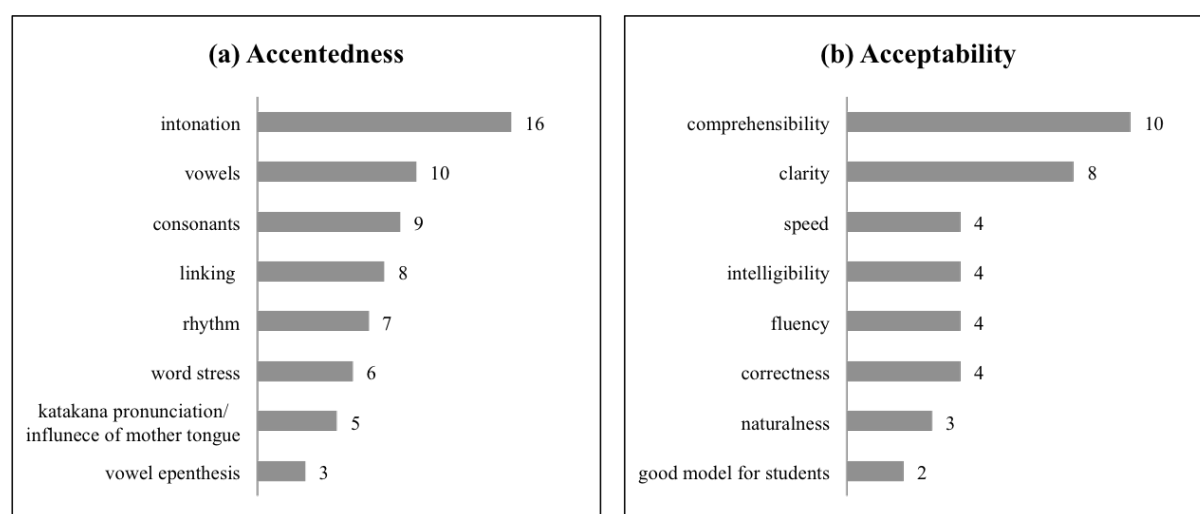


Figure 2. Comments on accentedness and acceptability. The numbers indicate the frequency. “Katakana pronunciation” in accentedness is a term often used to describe English with a typical Japanese accent. In acceptability, comments such as “easy to understand” and “can be correctly understood” were included under “comprehensibility” and “intelligibility” respectively following the definitions given by Derwing and Munro (2015).

## DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, this section answers the research questions. A discussion on the concept of acceptability follows.

**Research Question 1: Do “accentedness” and “acceptability” ratings differ from each other within a listener group?**

High correlations between accentedness and acceptability were found regardless of listener groups. In fact, one-third of listeners commented that they judged both accentedness and acceptability on the same or similar criteria, and this was reflected in the high correlations between the two constructs. Less accented speech was considered more acceptable, and more accented speech was considered less acceptable by all three groups. As anticipated, the results suggest that accentedness may be one factor that affects judgment of acceptable pronunciation as a teacher.

One possible problem with the current study, however, was the effect of task order (i.e., accentedness ratings followed by acceptability ratings). This could have biased the listeners' judgments on acceptability, which may have led to conspicuously high correlations between the two. To provide more evidence for the strong correlation between accentedness and acceptability ratings, it will be necessary to recruit the same numbers of listeners for each group and counterbalance the task order.

**Research Question 2: Do “accentedness” and “acceptability” ratings differ across the three listener groups?**

A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference across listener groups for acceptability but not for accentedness. We found a higher acceptability rating by the ET group, which may suggest their more lenient attitude toward acceptable pronunciation of non-native teachers. For both accentedness and acceptability, consistency was observed in speakers who received low ratings across the three groups. This may imply that a clear image of “strongly accented pronunciation” and “unacceptable pronunciation as a teacher” is shared among all the listener groups. By conducting a preliminary observation in an attempt to investigate the phonetic characteristics that low-rated speakers share, we found that these speakers demonstrated problems in both segmentals and suprasegmentals and spoke with a slow speech rate. The three speakers (S18, S19, S20) who received low ratings had CEFR A2 level. Nevertheless, we cannot say anything conclusive about the relation between English proficiency and accentedness/acceptability, because other A2 level speakers did not receive lower ratings compared to speakers with higher CEFR level. Further analyses will be necessary to reach definitive conclusions.

In contrast, although the ratings themselves did not show much difference, variability was found for speakers who received high rankings across the three groups. To introduce one example, S09 was ranked the highest by JT and JS in terms of both accentedness and acceptability, but not by native English-speaking teachers. The notable characteristic of this speaker was her use of a wide pitch range. To the Japanese teachers and students, compared to a flat and monotone speech often criticized in Japanese speech, her excessive use of pitch range was regarded as favorable and may have sounded more English-like. However, S09's speech was found to contain segmental errors (confusion of /l/-r/ and vowel epenthesis), and this may have resulted in the ET group's lower judgment of her speech in terms of both accentedness and acceptability. This is in line with Riney, Takagi, and Inutsuka's (2005) findings in that Japanese listeners tended to judge Japanese accent based on suprasegmentals, whereas native listeners did so on segmentals.

**Defining Acceptability**

Although accentedness plays a role in evaluating acceptability of non-native teachers'



pronunciation, the comments provided by the listeners in this study revealed that not only phonetic features but also other features impact acceptability. As introduced in Figure 2, listeners' evaluations of acceptability were based on various features such as comprehensibility, clarity, speed, and intelligibility.

The fact that "acceptability" may be a composite of diverse features was also suggested in a qualitative survey of Japanese preservice teachers (Uchida & Sugimoto, 2017). Some mixed views on "teacher's pronunciation" were reported. For example, some voiced that it is important for teachers to possess pronunciation that sounds "familiar" and "attainable" to students. One preservice teacher commented that pronunciation that is clear to students, even with a deliberate Japanese accent, is suitable when teaching Japanese students. The concept of "acceptability" needs to be further investigated, not only in relation to accentedness but also to other constructs such as intelligibility and comprehensibility.

### **Limitations**

Although the current experiment was carefully designed and conducted, a few limitations in methodology should be noted. Experimental conditions were not fully controlled across listener groups; for example, only JT and JS were instructed to listen to the model recording. In addition, because of participant availability and time constraints, both ET and JT were not monitored during the experiment. Thus, there were possibilities such as listeners not fully following the instructions.

Another limitation is data interpretation. The differences among speakers were discussed based on rankings, instead of ratings, in an attempt to compare the evaluation across listener groups. Another reason for using rankings was to avoid directly comparing the absolute statistical values of ratings between groups that differ in both means and standard deviations. However, it is true that the values were similar in a few cases even though the rankings were different. To further clarify the difference between accentedness and acceptability, and to expand this experiment to more diverse listener groups (e.g., those who are not familiar with Japanese-accented English) or different constructs (e.g., intelligibility, comprehensibility), these limitations should be overcome.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study found strong correlations between accentedness and acceptability ratings in all three listener groups: native English-speaking teachers, Japanese teachers, and Japanese students. In addition, listeners with different backgrounds were found to evaluate acceptability differently, but all listener groups seemed to have a shared image of "strongly accented pronunciation" and "pronunciation not acceptable as a teacher."

To fully evaluate teachers' pronunciation, we need to take into account speech styles (analyzing not only read speech but also spontaneous speech), phonetic features (both segmentals and suprasegmentals), and global features (e.g., clarity, fluency). Although the concept of "acceptable pronunciation as an English teacher" is not yet fully understood, setting a clear pronunciation goal for non-native teachers will be an important step toward devising a framework to assess and improve their pronunciation.

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