

# Shaping Japanese Students' Perceptions of the English-Speaking World: The Influence of Contingent Knowledge

John Guy PERREM

Brian GAYNOR

日本の学生の英語圏に対する認識の形成：偶発的知識の影響

ジョン・ガイ・ペレム

ブライアン・ゲイナー

**Abstract:** This study examines how Japanese university students perceive English-speaking countries and how these perceptions relate to engagement with such places. Building on the concept of contingent knowledge, it explores impressions shaped by media, peer discourse, and limited travel experience. A survey was administered to 122 second-year students enrolled in a compulsory English Communication course at a science and engineering university in Hokkaido. The survey included multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended items on country preferences, safety perceptions, descriptive associations, and sources of information. Results suggest that many students have a surface-level understanding of these countries, and their impressions often follow common stereotypes. For EFL educators, the findings suggest practical ways to address mediated country images in class and through low-barrier intercultural contact.

**Keywords:** contingent knowledge, EFL, English-speaking countries, university students, social influences, stereotypes

## 1. Introduction

In Japanese higher education, English as a foreign language (EFL) sits within institutional requirements, individual goals, and wider social influences. Mass media, popular discourse, peers, and family shape how students perceive English-speaking countries and what they think English can do for them. These socially produced perceptions affect how far learners engage with English and how willing they are to consider options such as study abroad or virtual intercultural contact. This lack of direct experience is especially common in regional colleges and universities, where students often have limited opportunities to

meet people from English-speaking countries. In such contexts, contingent knowledge can play an important role in shaping attitudes toward English learning and toward places where English is used. In this study, contingent knowledge refers to context-bound, socially conditioned beliefs and impressions about English-speaking societies. Such knowledge grows out of secondhand information, stereotypes, and circulating narratives rather than direct experience. Students draw on television, online platforms, short videos, games, school materials, and peer talk when they form views about which English-speaking places are attractive, safe, or worth visiting. These beliefs may support curiosity and investment, or they may encourage avoidance and anxiety, especially where firsthand intercultural contact is rare.

Research on EFL motivation and attitudes in Japan suggests that learners' views of English and of "the international" relate to willingness to communicate, effort, and performance (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima, 2002; Yashima et al., 2004). Work on international posture, the L2 Motivational Self System, and stereotype threat points to interactions between national identity, imagined futures, and classroom engagement (Dörnyei, 2009; Nall, 2021). Studies of stereotypes, foreign teacher preferences, and perceived linguistic prestige indicate that learners often attach greater value to some English-speaking communities than to others (Egitim & Garcia, 2021). However, much of this research addresses general orientations rather than country-specific impressions or the information sources that shape those impressions. Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) students at national universities also appear less often in this literature, despite their growing need to use English in technical and academic domains.

The present 2024 study addresses this gap by examining how Japanese STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) undergraduates at a national university in Hokkaido perceive English-speaking countries, how they obtain information about these places, and how those perceptions relate to their engagement with English and interest in overseas opportunities. A survey was administered to 122 second-year students enrolled in a required English communication course. The questionnaire asked about past overseas experience, preferred and least preferred English-speaking destinations, perceived safety, descriptive associations, and main sources of information.

The following research questions guide the paper:

1. What are students' overseas experiences?
2. What are students' impressions of English-speaking countries?
3. What are students' principal sources of information about these countries?
4. How do students relate their interest in English-speaking countries to their motivation to learn English?

By focusing on contingent knowledge and country-specific images in a non-elite, STEM-oriented national university, this study offers a more socially grounded view of how Japanese undergraduates position English-speaking countries in their everyday thinking. It also sets up later analysis that connects these perceptions to established motivational constructs discussed in the following literature review.

## 2. Literature Review

In EFL contexts such as Japan, students' knowledge of English-speaking countries is often built less through direct contact than through mediated representations. This paper uses the term contingent knowledge to refer to context-bound, socially conditioned beliefs and impressions that learners hold about English-speaking societies. Unlike textbook knowledge or language aptitude, contingent knowledge is assemblage-like in that it draws on fragments from television, short videos, manga, online platforms, and classroom anecdotes, and is highly sensitive to local ideologies and peer discourse. This conceptualisation overlaps with work on multilingual socialisation and ideological framing. Duff (2019) argues that language learning is embedded in broader processes of multilingual socialisation, where learners acquire linguistic forms alongside the values, ideologies, and identities associated with particular languages and communities. In low-contact settings, the "communities" in question are often mediated ones such as news feeds, YouTube channels, and social media timelines rather than face-to-face intercultural networks. Kramersch (2009) similarly emphasizes that language learning produces "multilingual subjects" who make sense of themselves through symbolic associations attached to different languages and cultures. From a cultural-psychological perspective, Zittoun (2007) describes such media narratives, stories and images as symbolic resources that people use to manage transitions and make sense of unfamiliar worlds. When considered together, these perspectives support the idea that students' ideas about English-speaking countries are contingent on whatever symbolic resources happen to be most salient and legitimate in their immediate environment.

In the Japanese university context, this sense of distance from "real" intercultural engagement has been documented in several studies. Morita (2013) found that Japanese undergraduates recognised globalisation and intercultural interaction as important phenomena but tended to treat them as abstract and optional, and many struggled to picture themselves as active participants in global spaces. More recent identity-oriented work in Japanese higher education shows that students negotiate national and global identities in ways that reflect both *nihonjinron*, a body of discourse that frames Japan as culturally unique and homogeneous, and newer cosmopolitan aspirations (Mielick, 2022). These studies suggest that learners' knowledge of "the global", and by extension English-speaking societies, is often indirect, uneven, and filtered through local ideological frames, which makes it contingent on the resources available in their immediate environment.

### 2.1 Stereotypes and images of English-speaking countries

Research on stereotypes and country images shows that learners' attitudes toward target-language communities are closely related to their learning orientations. Nikitina (2019), in a mixed-methods study of foreign language learners in Malaysia, found that students held predominantly positive attitudes toward target-language countries and that these images correlated strongly with integrative motivation. Importantly, these impressions were seldom grounded in direct experience, they emerged from media, popular culture, and school narratives. Other studies have pointed to the way learners' images of who counts as a legitimate English speaker are entangled with race, geography, and perceived prestige. In the Japanese context, Egitim and Garcia (2021) reported that university students tended to prefer native English teachers from North

America and Western Europe, viewing them as more authentic than Asian or non-white teachers. Students' comments linked this preference to perceived pronunciation quality and to cultural desirability, and learning from a Western teacher was framed as a way to access Western culture. Similar patterns appear elsewhere in East Asia, Lee and Hsieh (2018) found that Taiwanese and Korean undergraduates endorsed the idea of English as an international language but still attached higher status to inner-circle accents and varieties, even while recognizing the legitimacy of diverse Englishes. These findings echo Jenkins' (2007) broader argument that English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) speakers and non-inner-circle varieties remain symbolically marginalized despite the global spread of English.

Such hierarchies of desirability are not limited to speakers, they also apply to countries. Work on attitudes toward foreign cultures suggests that learners differentiate sharply between attractive and unattractive destinations, often based on thin information. Tseng (2013), for example, showed that Taiwanese EFL learners with more positive attitudes toward foreign cultures tended to have higher English proficiency, and that these attitudes were shaped by personal, family, school, and wider social influences rather than direct intercultural experience. In the Japanese setting, Tajima's (2022) analysis of the Skype eikaiwa industry, commercial online English conversation lessons, illustrates how the Philippines and Filipino teachers are discursively positioned as peripheral, despite the Philippines being a major English-speaking country. This body of work suggests that country images and stereotypes about English-speaking societies are structured along lines of economic status and geopolitical prestige. These images are typically assembled from contingent sources, media, hearsay, and school discourse, and can shape which countries students imagine as suitable or desirable sites for language use and study abroad.

In semi-rural or regional universities such as those in Hokkaido, these dynamics are amplified by limited direct contact with international communities. Duff (2019) notes that in such low-contact environments, ideologies about language and culture are often transmitted through school, media, and policy discourse rather than through lived interaction. Morita's (2013) finding that globalisation is perceived as distant and optional shows how contingent and fragile Japanese students' images of "global" English-speaking spaces can be.

## **2.2 Motivation, international posture, and mobility**

Motivation has long been recognized as a core construct in second language acquisition. Gardner's (1985) distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation provided an early framework for thinking about learners' reasons for studying a language. Subsequent work has argued that this dichotomy is too blunt to capture the complexity of contemporary learners' experiences, especially in contexts where English is tied to high-stakes testing, academic progression, and globalised labour markets (Dörnyei, 2009). Building on socio-psychological models of willingness to communicate (WTC; MacIntyre et al., 1998), Yashima (2002) proposed the construct of international posture to describe Japanese learners' general orientation toward the international community. In her model, international posture, interest in international affairs, foreign cultures, and using English with non-Japanese others, supports WTC and, ultimately, L2 communication. Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide and Shimizu (2004) further showed that positive attitudes and affect toward foreign cultures

facilitate L2 communication in and outside the classroom. Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System reframed motivation in terms of self-concepts, emphasizing the ideal L2 self (who the learner would like to become) and the ought-to L2 self (who significant others expect them to be). This framework is particularly relevant for Japanese university students who may imagine futures involving international work, research, or travel, even if they have little immediate opportunity to experience such contexts. Studies in Japan suggest that motivational profiles are heterogeneous across proficiency levels and disciplines. Yamamoto and Ohba (2018), for instance, found that lower-level university EFL learners displayed notably low intrinsic motivation, but that pedagogical intervention could shift motivational orientations over time. Kirkpatrick, Kirkpatrick, and Derakhshan (2024) reported generally positive attitudes toward English among Japanese elementary and junior high school students but also emphasized that learners' motivation depended on whether they saw English as relevant to their personal lives and futures.

Attitudes toward target cultures are a key part of this motivational landscape. As noted earlier, Tseng (2013) found that positive attitudes toward foreign culture were associated with higher English proficiency among Taiwanese learners. In Japan, Sakuragi (2008) and Sullivan and Schatz (2009) both note that pro-English orientations do not automatically translate into lower social distance or cosmopolitan engagement. From the perspective of the L2 Motivational Self System, this can be interpreted as a misalignment between an abstract ideal self that "knows English" and a more concrete imagined future that involves actual mobility and intercultural contact. Learners may want to be "good at English" without wanting, or feeling able, to inhabit English-speaking spaces. This is precisely where contingent knowledge intersects with motivation. If students' images of English-speaking countries are mainly assembled in bricolage fashion from media and peer talk, and if those images frame some destinations as attractive and prestigious and others as dangerous or "not interesting," then the range of imagined futures in which English feels usable will be unevenly distributed. Country preferences, safety perceptions, and stereotypes thus function as a kind of motivational filter on top of more general orientations like international posture or the ideal L2 self.

### 3. Research Questions

Despite substantial work on motivation, identity, and stereotypes in EFL learning, several gaps remain. First, relatively few studies examine learners' country-specific images of English-speaking nations in a systematic way, particularly within Japan. Nikitina (2019) and Tseng (2013) link general country stereotypes and cultural attitudes to motivation and proficiency, but they do not focus on how particular English-speaking destinations (e.g., the United States vs. the Philippines) are evaluated or how these evaluations are built from specific information sources.

Second, sources of contingent knowledge are often treated in aggregate ("media," "school," "friends") rather than being disaggregated into the platforms and genres that now dominate students' daily lives: short-form video, influencer content, game streams, and algorithmically curated news. There is limited empirical work on how such media ecologies shape concrete impressions of English-speaking countries and how those impressions feed into decisions about study abroad, perceived safety, or willingness to pay for programs.

Third, disciplinary differences are underexplored. Much Japanese motivation research has focused either on English majors or mixed cohorts; science and engineering students, who may view English as useful but peripheral, feature less prominently. Their orientations toward English-speaking countries may be more instrumental, more risk-averse, or more tightly constrained by perceived economic and academic demands. Although models such as international posture (Yashima, 2002) and the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009) implicitly recognize the role of imagined communities and destinations, relatively few quantitative studies explicitly connect country preferences and safety perceptions to specific motivational measures (e.g., intended effort, willingness to study abroad).

The present study addresses these gaps by examining how Japanese students at a regional science and engineering university in Hokkaido describe and evaluate English-speaking countries; what sources of information they draw on when forming these evaluations; and how such contingent knowledge relates to their orientations toward English learning and potential overseas engagement. In doing so, it brings together strands of research on cultural stereotypes, media influence, and learning motivation to provide a more contextual account of the broader factors influencing tertiary EFL education in Japan.

#### **4. Methodology**

A predominantly quantitative approach was adopted for data collection through the use of a survey questionnaire. The survey was administered to undergraduate second-year students at a science and engineering university in northern Japan. A total of 122 students completed the survey. The questionnaire was paper-based and administered on the final day of a compulsory English Communication course. The course is taught by L1 speakers of English from Ireland, the United States, and Australia.

##### **4.1 Questionnaire**

The questionnaire survey contained both open and closed questions in order to elicit students' attitudes to, and information sources for, countries where English is an officially designated national language. The survey was initially compiled in English, then translated into Japanese. It was checked by two native speakers of Japanese and based on their feedback, further refined.

The survey was divided into three sections. Section 1 focused on students' overseas experiences to date and preferences for visiting English-speaking countries. It also asked students to report their sources of information about these countries.

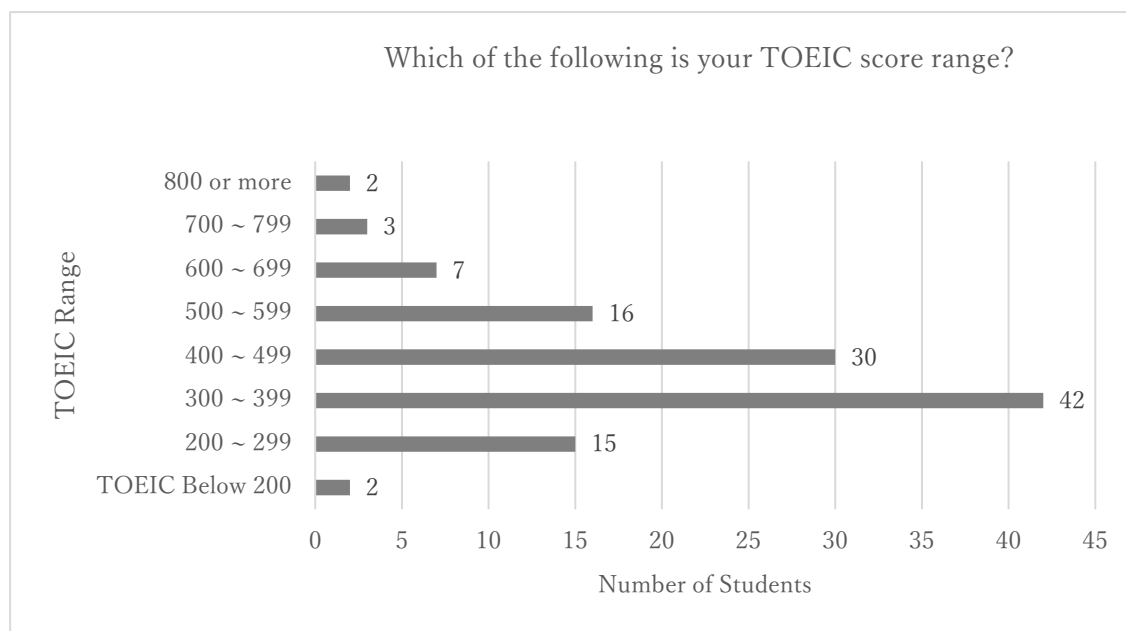
Section 2 consisted of a series of six statements designed to obtain students' attitudes toward English-speaking countries in relation to their ongoing learning of English as a foreign language. Using a six-point Likert scale, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement for each statement. There was also an open-ended question which sought to determine students' interest (or not) in various cultural aspects of English-speaking countries. Two background items asked about TOEIC score and contact with foreign English speakers (excluding teachers).

Section 3 invited students to participate in an interview to further investigate their thoughts and opinions about English-speaking countries. No students volunteered, so this part of the study could not be conducted.

#### 4.2 Participants' TOEIC Context and Intercultural Contact

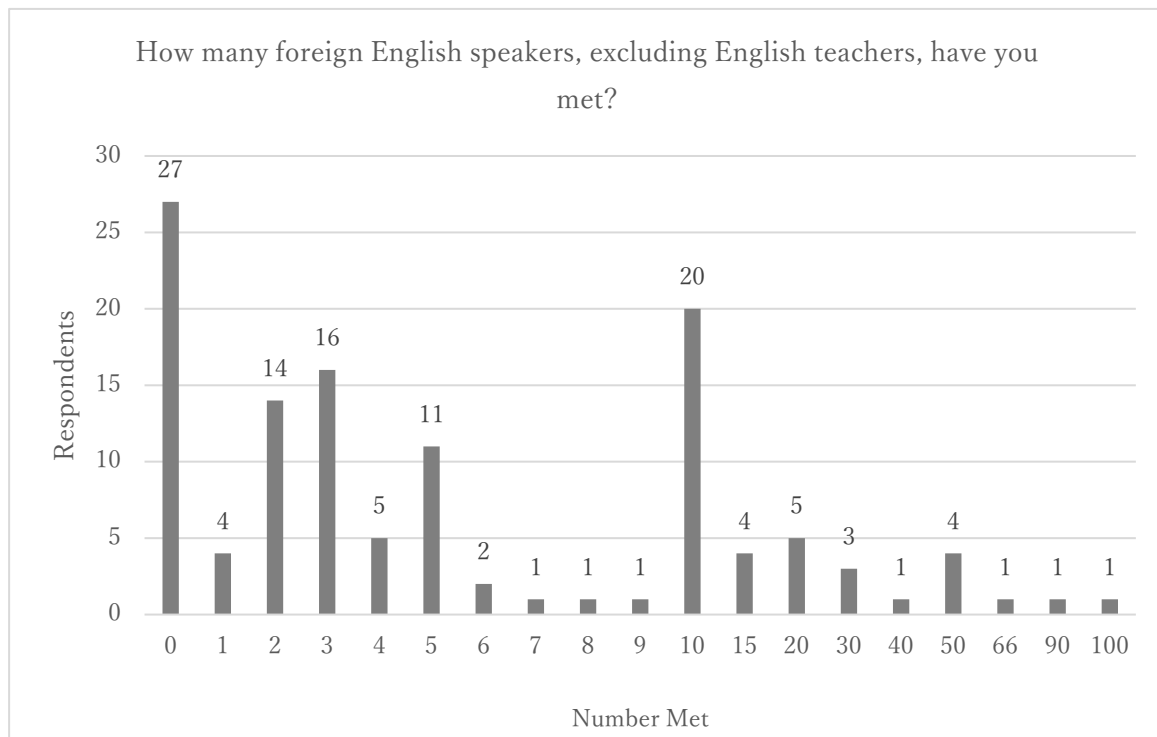
TOEIC self-reports from the participants indicate a mid-range proficiency profile: around 59% reported scores between 300 and 499, with roughly one quarter at 500 or above and only a small minority below 300.

Figure 1: TOEIC Scores of Participants



Direct intercultural contact with foreign English speakers (excluding teachers) was limited. Just over one-fifth of students reported never meeting a foreign English speaker. Half of the sample had met three or fewer, while only about 16% reported having interacted with 15 or more. This pattern suggests that for many respondents, English and “English-speaking countries” are still primarily mediated through institutional and media channels rather than through repeated face-to-face intercultural encounters. Responses above 10 should be interpreted as approximate estimates.

Figure 2: Foreign English Speakers Met (Non-teachers)



### 4.3 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed according to whether they were quantitatively or qualitatively generated. Closed questions and Likert-scale ratings were manually compiled into a CSV file and analyzed using JASP, an open-source statistical software package, to produce descriptive statistics. Open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic content analysis.

Research Question 1: What are students' overseas experiences?

Only 29% of the students had ever travelled abroad, the majority, 71%, had never ventured outside of Japan. Of the 35 students who had been overseas, the main purposes for travel were holidays (14 responses), study (10 responses), and visiting family (6 responses). The remaining four students did not specify a reason.

As the majority of students had not been overseas, the survey also asked whether they had a desire to travel abroad in the future. Including the students who had been overseas, 87% of respondents said that they would like to travel overseas in the future. For the 13% of students who declared no interest in leaving Japan, the questionnaire asked for reasons, and multiple responses were permitted. The two most common deterrents, with ten responses each, were “too expensive” and the perceived “language barrier”.

When students were asked to specify what country they would like to visit, the United States was the most popular destination, followed by the UK, France, and Australia (Figure 3). Country labels in Figure 3 reflect student-entered spellings and abbreviations.

Figure 3: “What country would you like to visit?”

As multiple answers were permitted, there was a long tail of countries chosen by only one student. To provide a broader overview of popular destinations, countries were grouped by continent. As can be seen from Figure 4, Europe is the most popular destination. Although beyond the scope of the present study, this suggests that culture, in its different manifestations, for example architecture, design, fashion, food, and music, exerts an equal or greater pull than foreign language learning. Besides English, the only other foreign languages taught in the university are Chinese and German. Yet, despite this, France was the third most popular choice for students.

Figure 4: Students' favored destination by continent

Research Question 2: What are students' impressions of English-speaking countries?

For this question, the analysis focused on six English-speaking countries, Australia, Canada, the Philippines, Singapore, the UK, and the USA. The aim was to include a range of contexts where English is an official national language, varying in size and geographical location. Figure 5 shows students' preferences for visiting these countries (n=119; three students did not respond to this item).

Figure 5: "What English-speaking country would you like to visit?"

To clarify students' choices, the questionnaire also asked which country they would least like to visit. The Philippines was by far the least popular destination with 58 responses. It was followed by Canada, with 18 students indicating that they did not want to visit the country.

An additional question asked students to write their reasons for not wanting to visit these countries. Thematic analysis of students' responses found that the Philippines was perceived as being "too hot" and "unsafe". In addition, many students indicated that they simply did not know enough about the country and so were reluctant to travel there. Similarly, students gave two main reasons for not wanting to visit Canada: the country is "too cold", and "not interesting". Interestingly, for the UK, an analysis of the responses given by the 10 students who did not want to visit the country, 7 specifically described British food as being "not tasty".

Research Question 3: What are students' principal sources of information about these countries?

For the approximately 80% of respondents who had never been out of Japan, direct experience could not play any part in shaping their perceptions of, and attitudes to, these six English-speaking countries. Even

for the students who had travelled overseas, none of them had visited all six countries. Hence, their sources of information about these countries would be of especial significance.

As Figure 6 shows, the internet and social media accounted for most of their knowledge about the world outside of Japan. By contrast, education-based sources such as overseas study programs and intercultural activities played a minimal role in informing students about these countries. Given the emphasis placed on intercultural understanding at both secondary school and university, it would appear that the impact of these programs and classes on students is quite limited.

Figure 6: Sources of information about the six English-speaking foreign countries

Research Question 4: How do students relate their interest in English-speaking countries to their motivation to learn English?

To examine students' self-reported link between country interest and motivation, respondents rated the statement, "I am motivated to learn English because of my interest in English-speaking countries", using a six-point Likert scale. In response, 102 out of 122 respondents agreed with the statement, with over half indicating strong agreement. Given the variation in willingness to visit particular countries, this result suggests that interest in English-speaking countries functions for many students as a general motivational resource rather than as commitment to a specific destination.

## 5. Discussion

The results confirm that Japanese STEM undergraduates in this context construct their knowledge of English-speaking countries largely in the absence of sustained direct contact. Around half of the sample has met at most three foreign English speakers outside the classroom, and only a small subset reports extensive interaction. Participants report heavy reliance on the internet, social media, and audio-visual media as primary sources of information.

This configuration closely matches the construct of contingent knowledge described earlier, beliefs and impressions shaped by second-hand information, stereotypes, and media narratives rather than lived

intercultural experience. It also resonates with Morita's observation that globalization and intercultural contexts are often conceptualized as distant and abstract by Japanese university students, and with Duff's emphasis on discourse networks that transmit cultural ideologies and social expectations in low-contact settings (Morita, 2013; Duff, 2019). In such environments, country images are vulnerable to sensationalised or stereotyped representations, for example media focus on U.S. gun violence or generic depictions of danger in parts of Southeast Asia, and to gaps in knowledge that students fill with labels like "not interesting" or "don't know about the country." The preference and avoidance data suggest a hierarchy of Anglophone destinations. Classic inner-circle countries, the USA, UK, and Australia, occupy the top tier of desirability, followed by Singapore and Canada, with the Philippines positioned at the bottom. Although Canada is an inner-circle country, students ranked it fifth in this dataset. The USA result is especially revealing. It remains the most desired destination, yet media narratives about gun violence can add a sense of risk in the absence of sustained contact.

These patterns come together with earlier findings that learners' attitudes toward target-language countries are shaped by wider social narratives and are strongly linked to motivation (Nikitina, 2019). They also echo research showing that learners often orient toward prestigious varieties of English and powerful centres (e.g., the U.S., U.K.), while devaluing other English-speaking contexts (Lee & Hsieh, 2018).

The particularly negative portrayal of the Philippines is significant. Rather than drawing on nuanced socio-economic or cultural information, students mostly rely on crude tropes (heat, danger, poverty, "not interesting"), which fit wider regional stereotypes. That the same dataset shows very low reliance on overseas study programmes and intercultural activities, and high reliance on online media, suggests that these views are being formed at a distance, with minimal corrective experience. From an intercultural-communication perspective, this aligns with the cognitive-affective-behavioural pathway described by Ikeguchi and Robinson (2019): surface-level stereotypes (e.g., "unsafe," "boring") evolve into negative affect (lack of interest, anxiety) and ultimately avoidance behaviours, such as refusing to consider certain destinations despite their practical advantages (e.g., cost, proximity).

Because the study uses a single self-report item to capture the perceived link between country interest and English learning motivation, it does not allow a direct test of how particular country preferences predict motivation. Interpretation therefore remains cautious and connected to related work in L2 motivation.

Students' strong orientation toward the USA, UK, and Australia is compatible with an ideal L2 self-anchored in culturally prestigious English-speaking communities, which can support integrative or internationally oriented motivation. Pronounced fear and distrust of some English-speaking contexts may narrow the range of imagined futures in which English is seen as usable, which can reduce the perceived payoff of language study. Heavy reliance on media, alongside limited real-world contact, means that many of the images that might energise or demotivate English study remain surface-level. Japanese research suggests additional constraints on motivation, including stereotype threat around "Japanese being bad at English" (Nall, 2021), limited identification with globalized futures (Morita, 2013), and the finding that positive attitudes toward language study do not automatically translate into lower social distance or "worldmindedness" (Sakuragi, 2008). The present data fit this pattern, students express curiosity about

Anglophone countries, but also give risk-averse, stereotype-driven reasons for avoiding engagement, especially with less familiar destinations.

### 5.1 Limitations

Several limitations in the study should be noted. The sample was drawn from a single STEM-focused national university in Hokkaido and from students enrolled in a compulsory communication course, so the findings should be interpreted as context specific. The study also relies on self-report data, including TOEIC scores, estimates of intercultural contact, and reported information sources, which may include recall error and social desirability bias. The open-ended count of foreign English speakers met may be less accurate for larger numbers; future work could use binned response options and/or focus on recent contact. Some items had small amounts of missing data, which is why sample sizes differ across figures (e.g., Figure 5). In addition, planned interviews could not be conducted because no students volunteered. Finally, preference items were treated descriptively, and some questions permitted multiple responses, so the analyses do not test whether differences between destinations are statistically significant.

## 6. Conclusion

The findings support the claim that contingent knowledge is not a trivial side-effect of media exposure; it is a central component of how learners imagine what English can do for them and where it can take them. Those imaginaries can either reinforce or undercut motivation, depending on whether English-speaking countries are seen as appealing, safe, and accessible.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the survey suggests two immediate needs. One is to make contingent knowledge visible and discussable, teachers should not assume that students' images of English-speaking countries are accurate or benign. Classroom tasks that elicit, examine, and gently challenge stereotyped beliefs, for example about the Philippines or about safety in different countries, can help students move beyond vague second-hand narratives. A second need is to create mediated forms of authentic contact. Given that very few students reported intercultural activities or overseas programs as major information sources, there is room to expand virtual exchanges, guest talks, and project-based work with partners abroad. Even low-intensity contact may help recalibrate country images that are currently formed largely through algorithmically curated media feeds.

For research, a useful next step is to include a broader set of motivation measures and test how these relate to country preferences, safety perceptions, TOEIC scores, and reported information sources. That would allow the fourth research question, whether interest in target countries affects learning, to be addressed more robustly in future studies and would clarify whether particular country images are linked to differences in intended effort, willingness to communicate, or interest in study abroad. Longitudinal or qualitative follow-up, including interviews with students who report especially positive or negative country images, would also help trace how contingent knowledge changes over time and how it interacts with new intercultural experiences.

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Author's Information

Name: John-Guy Perrem

Faculty: Muroran Institute of Technology

Email: [jgperrem@muroran-it.ac.jp](mailto:jgperrem@muroran-it.ac.jp)

Author's Information

Name: Brian Gaynor

Faculty: Muroran Institute of Technology

Email: [bgaynor@muroran-it.ac.jp](mailto:bgaynor@muroran-it.ac.jp)