

Learner Native-Speakerism at the *Eikaiwa Gakkou*

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Reference Data:

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This paper presents the results of an investigation into 32 Japanese learners' perceptions of native and nonnative English-speaking teachers conducted at a central Tokyo branch of a large *eikaiwa gakkou* (conversation school) chain. Findings indicate that participants may hold some discriminatory beliefs aligning with Holliday's (2006) concept of native-speakerism, an ideology upholding the view that native English-speaking teachers are superior instructors due to their speakerhood and knowledge of Western culture and teaching methodologies. Results show that native English-speaking teachers were more often regarded as better at teaching pronunciation, speaking, listening, reading, writing, and grammar than nonnative English-speaking teachers. The study also found that approximately half of the respondents believed qualifications gained in countries where English is a first language are preferable to those acquired elsewhere. Results are mixed on whether respondents recognised the potential of nonnative teachers to be better positioned to understand why learners make mistakes.

本稿は、大手英会話学校首都圏校で実施された日本人学習者32名を対象としたネイティブ講師とノンネイティブ講師に対する意識調査結果である。調査結果は、ネイティブ講師の方が欧米文化についての知識だけでなく教授法も優れているという見解を支持するイデオロギーであるHolliday (2006) のネイティブスピーカー中心主義と合致する差別的信条を回答者が持っている可能性を示している。また、ネイティブスピーカー講師の方がノンネイティブ講師よりも、発音、スピーキング、リスニング、リーディング、ライティング、文法指導で優れているとみなされ易い事を示している。更に、回答者の約半数が英語を母国語とする国で取得された資格の方が、他の場所で取得されたものより好ましいと回答した。ノンネイティブ講師の方が、学習者が間違える理由を把握している点で、より良い立場にいる可能性を回答者が認識しているかについては、混在する結果となっている。

Most English teachers in Japan are aware of the ubiquitous *eikaiwa gakkou*, large chains of English conversation schools that, together with the JET program, offer the most common point of entry for non-Japanese into ELT. Recruited primarily from the inner circle (Nelson, 2011) of the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) are key to these companies' marketing strategies, featuring prominently in their print, TV, and Internet advertising (Bailey, 2006). Because NESTs appear to be central to the success of these corporations, I wanted to understand what advantages, if any, learners believe these teachers offer. With the approval of management and the assistance of receptionists, I was able to collect data for small-scale research projects from a central Tokyo branch of an *eikaiwa gakkou* chain where I had been working for several years.

Eikaiwa Gakkou: An Underresearched Field

Despite its scale and importance in the Japanese language-learning landscape, the *eikaiwa gakkou* system is an incredibly underresearched area (Nagatomo, 2013), likely due to a lack of professionalism within the sector (Bueno & Caesar, 2003) and the difficulty for outsiders to secure permission to conduct research (Kubota, 2011). Indeed, I believe there are currently only two insider studies on the large chains published in English: the dated work of Lummis (1976) and Bailey (2007). Lummis wrote a first-person account describing racist, unprofessional environments. Bailey's study portrayed *eikaiwa gakkou* as sleazy places where predominantly heterosexual Japanese females went to satisfy *akogare* (desire) for Caucasian men, often through sexual relationships. Despite the collapse of a major *eikaiwa* chain in 2007 (McNeill, 2007), major corporations still do not require teaching certificates as prerequisites for employing foreign teachers and emphasise the opportunities for teacher travel on recruitment websites (www.eccteachinjapan.com/; www.nova.co.jp/hd/teachinjapan/).

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Native-Speakerism

A preference for native-speaker English teachers regardless of their professional qualifications could be due to the ideology of native-speakerism (Holliday, 2006), a form of discrimination whose upholders regard NESTs as gatekeepers of a racist white culture and possessors of superior ELT methodologies. Learners holding native-speakerist views believe that NESTs have greater teaching ability than teachers from countries outside the inner circle.

Native-speakerism is currently an expanding field of research. There are some published studies on learner perceptions of NESTs and nonnative-speaking English teachers (NNESTs) that indicate that learners show a general preference for native-speaker teachers because of their linguistic competence (see Chun, 2014; Javid, 2016). Despite the perception of English as a global language, varieties spoken by NESTs are believed to be in some way “purer” than other Englishes (Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009). The issue of speakerhood is problematized by a lack of academic agreement on how a native speaker can be defined (Holliday, 2006, 2013).

Discriminatory Hiring Practices

Native-speakerism often manifests itself in discriminatory hiring practices and is prevalent despite statements against it by the TESOL organisation (1992, 2006) and the growing awareness of the issue in ELT (Houghton & Rivers, 2013). As an example in the *eikaiwa gakkou* industry, Coco Juku currently has an English instructor job posting online (www.cocojuku.jp/recruit/) advertising different salaries depending on applicant speakerhood. Monthly salary ranges for a NEST are ¥195,000 to ¥255,000 and for a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) ¥200,000 to ¥215,000. There is also inequality in hourly part-time rates: NESTs receive ¥1,740 to ¥2,100 compared to ¥1,540 to ¥1,800 for their Japanese colleagues. No information is given regarding payment for NNESTs who are not Japanese nationals.

Potential Benefits of Nonnative English-Speaking Teachers

Due to discrimination and the problem of defining native speakers, some, such as Holliday (2006, 2013), believe it would be better if the term *native speaker* were dropped. A number of NNESTs, however, are proud of their label because they believe that they offer key advantages over NESTs (Matsuda, 2003). These include the potential for locally trained teachers to (a) have greater understanding of appropriate methodologies (Holliday, 2013); (b) be better role models for learners having acquired English through study

(Mishima, 2009); and (c) better understand why learners make mistakes, particularly if they share the learners’ L1 (Mishima, 2009). I find these arguments persuasive and investigated the latter point specifically in this study.

Research Questions and Methodology

I asked the following research questions related to native-speakerism:

- RQ1. How do *eikaiwa* learners define a native English-speaking teacher?
- RQ2. Do *eikaiwa* learners believe it is possible for a learner to attain a “native level” of English?
- RQ3. Do *eikaiwa* learners regard teaching qualifications from countries where English is spoken as a first language as superior?
- RQ4. Do *eikaiwa* learners have a preference for NESTs, NNESTs, or JTEs for pronunciation, speaking, listening, reading, writing, or grammar instruction, and do they believe these teachers understand why learners make mistakes in these areas?

Participants

A total of 22 female and 10 male learners participated in the research, which in my experience of working in the sector is a typical school gender ratio. Further participant data is included in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants

Category	Subcategory	Number
Gender	Females	22
	Males	10
Age	16 – 24	4
	25 – 34	7
	35 – 44	11
	45 – 54	1
	55 – 64	6
	65 +	4

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Category	Subcategory	Number
English ability level	Foundation	2
	Elementary	16
	Pre-intermediate	6
	Intermediate	3
	Upper intermediate	3
Estimated teacher numbers experienced by participants in primary, secondary, tertiary, and post-tertiary domains	Advanced	2
	NESTs	179
	NNESTs	81
	JTEs	161

Note. NEST = native English-speaking teacher; NNEST = nonnative English-speaking teacher; JTE = Japanese teacher of English

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire, written in Japanese, consisted of three components: an open question at the beginning asking learners to define a NEST, an open section for comments at the end, and the bulk of the form consisting of 102 statements requiring participants to state how strongly they agreed or disagreed with various propositions. A 4-point scale was used for the statements in the main body, with an additional *don't know* option. This investigation is part of a larger study, so not all statements are within the scope of this paper; those that are have been included in the Appendix. Relevant statements concerned NESTs, JTEs, and NNESTs, and were in random order in terms of topic content to prevent participants neatly contriving responses. I chose to split the nonnative teacher category into two in order to see whether there were different responses for nonnative teachers who shared an L1 with the learners and those who did not. For the purposes of this study, my definition of a NNEST was an individual who grew up outside of Japan, the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand and holds an English teaching certificate. Similarly, a JTE was defined as someone who grew up in Japan and holds an English-language teaching certificate. Respondents also completed a survey providing the personal details included in Table 1.

Distribution and Collection

The school receptionists assisted me by asking random learners studying with other teachers if they would complete the questionnaires. None of my own learners participated. In order to obviate the Japanese concept of *seken* (surveillance), which can give rise to *tatema* (inauthentic) responses (Bailey, 2007), participants were asked to complete the questionnaire and survey privately at home. A self-addressed envelope was provided, allowing completed forms to be returned to my home address. I hoped that this process would encourage the provision of *honne* (truthful) data. Of 35 questionnaires given out, 32 were returned. In three cases, most likely because of the number of statements on the form, participants failed to tick boxes recording responses. In one of these instances, an entire page was returned incomplete.

Results and Discussion

Participant Belief in Learner Potential

A total of 87.5% of participants agreed that it is possible for learners to attain a native level of English; no participants disagreed. The 12.5% who answered “don't know” could have chosen this option because they were not sure of what exactly constituted a “native level,” as this was undefined. This strong belief in the potential of students to achieve proficiency equivalent to a native speaker suggests a lack of discrimination in the participants.

Learner Definitions of a NEST

When participants were asked to write a definition of a NEST, responses were similar and typically short. The most common, occurring 17 times (53%), described NESTs as *mother tongue* English speakers from the inner circle countries, which is not surprising as the Japanese term *mother tongue speaker* is synonymous with the term *native speaker* in English. Superior pronunciation was mentioned 12 times (37.5%) and cultural knowledge, including slang terms, seven times (22%). Language teaching methodology was mentioned three times (9%). These references to methodology were negative, implying some dissatisfaction with the *yakudoku*/grammar-translation approach, which would have been common in Japanese state education at the time when the majority of the participants were within the system.

The concept of native-speakerism can be identified in the wording of a number of responses, particularly those regarding pronunciation. A representative sample translated into English follows:

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- The biggest difference is that I can learn the real sound of English from them.
- They can teach me the correct pronunciation.
- They teach the correct pronunciation and grammar.
- Native speakers teach pure English.
- A person who speaks English without an accent
- If I have the opportunity to learn the real pronunciation and intonation from them, I can improve my English faster.
- A person who speaks English correctly

Some of the participants' ideas about the purity and correctness of native-speaker English echoed the findings of a study conducted in Thailand (Todd & Pojanapunya, 2009). Because the participants seemed to elevate NEST English, we may infer that NNEST English and world Englishes (Nelson, 2011) were perceived by some of these *eikaiwa gakkou* learners as having inferior status.

Perceptions of ELT Qualifications

Participants were asked to respond to three statements on this topic. The first of these was *The best ELT qualifications are from countries where English is spoken as a first language*; results show that in contrast to *eikaiwa gakkou* customers of the 1970s (Lumms, 1976), only 15.5% of the participants believed professional qualifications were unnecessary for NESTs. This indicates that learner expectations regarding professionalism may have risen substantially. Respondents were also asked how far they agreed or disagreed with *The best English language teaching qualifications are from institutions in countries where English is spoken as a first language*. A total of 47% regarded qualifications from English L1 countries as the best; 33% were unsure. To discover how much participants knew of non-Japanese ELT certificates and ascertain how far their responses were based on knowledge as opposed to belief, I also included the statement *I know what a Cambridge CELTA or Trinity CertTESOL is*, having chosen these qualifications because they featured in the marketing materials of the *eikaiwa gakkou* where this study was conducted. Results showed that only three participants (9.5%) were aware of the certificates, suggesting that the assumption of inner circle institutional superiority may be an example of native-speakerism.

Perceptions of Teaching Competency

The following sections present results and discussion of perceived teaching ability. Statements in the questionnaire were as follows: [*Teacher type*] *is good at teaching [skill area]*,

and [*Teacher type*] *understands why I make mistakes with [skill area]*. The teacher types were NESTs, NNESTs and JTEs. Skill areas were pronunciation, speaking, listening, reading, writing, and grammar.

Pronunciation

Results show that in addition to believing that NESTs speak a "pure" variety of English, respondents also thought that these instructors were good at teaching pronunciation: 53% strongly agreed that they were very good at pronunciation teaching, with a further 44% agreeing (see Table 2). Indeed, only one respondent expressed disagreement with the statement. This contrasted significantly with perceptions of JTEs: Only 6% agreed, 62% disagreed, and 10% disagreed strongly. A total of 44% expressed uncertainty about the pronunciation teaching skills of NNESTs, reflecting a lack of familiarity with the group; twice as many respondents disagreed with the statement than agreed, however.

We cannot be sure why these learners lacked faith in the ability of JTEs to teach pronunciation, although the tendency for native-speaker assistant language teachers (ALTs) to be primarily used for pronunciation modelling in public schools may have contributed to the perception that JTEs are not effective in this area. If we include the NNEST data, we can see that it is also possible that the 2:1 ratio of negative to positive responses could have been due to learners' regarding nonnative English accents as lacking purity.

Table 2: Learner Responses to Pronunciation Statements (Percentages)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
NESTs are good at teaching pronunciation	53	44	3	0	0
NESTs know why I make pronunciation mistakes	3	59	10	0	28
JTEs are good at teaching pronunciation	0	6	62	10	22
JTEs know why I make pronunciation mistakes	0	56	19	0	25
NNESTs are good at teaching pronunciation	0	19	37	0	44
NNESTs know why I make pronunciation mistakes	0	22	34	0	44

Note. NEST = native English-speaking teacher; NNEST = nonnative English-speaking teacher; JTE = Japanese teacher of English

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When considering the ability to recognise why learners make pronunciation mistakes, respondents gave NESTs and JTEs a broadly equal number of positive responses (59% and 56%, respectively) and NNESTs only received 22%. This suggested that participants believed sharing an L1 was helpful here.

Speaking

The biggest contrast in learner perceptions of teachers was found in speaking data. Results (see Table 3) show that 90% of participants felt NESTs were good at teaching this, but 84% disagreed regarding JTEs. Coupled with pronunciation, this appeared to be the main reason why these learners felt NESTs were desirable. Native-speakerism cannot be assumed to be the reason JTEs scored low here; their association with grammar translation may have been a contributing factor. Negative sentiment towards NNESTs (more disagreed than agreed) indicates that native-speakerism cannot be ruled out, however.

Table 3: Learner Responses to Speaking Statements (Percentages)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
NESTs are good at teaching speaking	34	56	10	0	0
NESTs know why I make speaking mistakes	6	63	6	0	25
JTEs are good at teaching speaking	0	10	28	56	6
JTEs know why I make speaking mistakes	0	56	19	0	25
NNESTs are good at teaching speaking	0	28	34	0	38
NNESTs know why I make speaking mistakes	0	25	31	0	44

Note. NEST = native English-speaking teacher; NNEST = nonnative English-speaking teacher; JTE = Japanese teacher of English

Despite data indicating that participants had a lack of confidence in JTEs' teaching of speaking, 56% felt these teachers recognised why they made mistakes although NESTs scored slightly higher at 63%.

Listening

Table 4 shows 78% of respondents felt NESTs were good at teaching listening, which is much more favourable than the 19% agreement about JTEs and NNESTs. Results revealed, however, that participants believed JTEs were more able than NESTs when it came to understanding why listening mistakes were made.

Table 4: Learner Responses to Listening Statements (Percentages)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
NESTs are good at teaching listening	6	72	6	0	15
NESTs know why I make listening mistakes	3	47	22	0	28
JTEs are good at teaching listening	0	19	56	0	25
JTEs know why I make listening mistakes	0	63	9	0	28
NNESTs are good at teaching listening	0	19	22	0	59
NNESTs know why I make listening mistakes	0	34	19	0	47

Note. NEST = native English-speaking teacher; NNEST = nonnative English-speaking teacher; JTE = Japanese teacher of English

As in the other categories, there were a large number of NNEST *don't know* responses. Despite this, the data indicate that participants perceived these teachers to be likelier to understand why listening mistakes were made than to be good listening teachers, similar to JTEs.

Reading

Unlike pronunciation, speaking, and listening, reading activities are rarely done at *eikaiwa gakkou*, unless set for homework and checked at the beginning of class. Despite this, 78% of respondents believed NESTs were effective reading teachers, with only 6% disagreeing (see Table 5). JTEs were rated poorly here. Opinion was split on NNESTs.

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Table 5: Learner Responses to Reading Statements (Percentages)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
NESTs are good at teaching reading	3	75	6	0	16
NESTs know why I make reading mistakes	1	50	16	0	33
JTEs are good at teaching reading	0	19	47	0	34
JTEs know why I make reading mistakes	8	54	13	0	25
NNESTs are good at teaching reading	3	29	26	0	42
NNESTs know why I make reading mistakes	0	48	8	0	44

Note. NEST = native English-speaking teacher; NNEST = nonnative English-speaking teacher; JTE = Japanese teacher of English

Although reading is a receptive skill, it is possible that some participants regarded reading aloud as a core component of it. If so, respondents' perceptions of instructor speaking and pronunciation teaching abilities would have influenced the data, which could have accounted for the strong NEST result. As with listening, more respondents thought JTEs and NNESTs were better at recognising why learners made mistakes with reading than at teaching the skill. As regards understanding why learners make mistakes, results were close for NEST and NNEST groups; more participants saw JTEs as being good at recognising why reading mistakes were made than NESTs (by 11%) and NNESTs (by 13%).

Writing

As *eikaiwa* translates as “English conversation,” writing is very rarely taught in the *eikaiwa* classroom. Moreover, because some *eikaiwa gakkou* chains pay little or nothing for class preparation, teachers seldom set writing tasks as homework due to the time required for marking. Despite this, Table 6 shows that participants felt NESTs were better writing teachers than were JTEs or NNESTs. It is possible, therefore, that this is a native-speakerist assumption.

Table 6: Learner Responses to Writing Statements (Percentages)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
NESTs are good at teaching writing	0	59	22	0	19
NESTs know why I make writing mistakes	0	50	6	0	44
JTEs are good at teaching writing	0	39	32	0	29
JTEs know why I make writing mistakes	0	62	16	0	22
NNESTs are good at teaching writing	3	28	28	0	41
NNESTs know why I make writing mistakes	3	28	16	0	53

Note. NEST = native English-speaking teacher; NNEST = nonnative English-speaking teacher; JTE = Japanese teacher of English

Understanding why learners make writing mistakes is another area where results were more favourable towards JTEs than NESTs, in this case by 12%. The NESTs scored better than the NNESTs, however, indicating that participants did not recognise the potential advantages of NNESTs here.

Grammar

Although most *eikaiwa* teaching focuses on developing learner fluency with limited grammar work done in class, more participants felt that NESTs were good at teaching grammar than were JTEs (see Table 7), though results were reasonably close.

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Table 7: Learner Responses to Grammar Statements (Percentages)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Don't know
NESTs are good at teaching grammar	3	63	15	0	19
NESTs know why I make grammatical mistakes	3	50	19	0	28
JTEs are good at teaching grammar	10	52	19	0	19
JTEs know why I make grammatical mistakes	6	70	9	0	15
NNESTs are good at teaching grammar	3	25	22	0	50
NNESTs know why I make grammatical mistakes	0	29	26	0	45

Note. NEST = native English-speaking teacher; NNEST = nonnative English-speaking teacher; JTE = Japanese teacher of English

The JTEs' strongest result compared to NESTs was the belief that JTEs were able to understand why their students made grammatical mistakes. The poor NNEST results suggest that this is specific to Japanese teachers amongst NNESTs, which is a further indication that the participants did not appreciate the potential benefits of teachers in this group.

Limitations of the Study

When considering the findings, it should be remembered that the number of participants was limited to 32 learners. A larger sample from more than one language school would allow greater confidence in drawing conclusions and may also include more participants with greater experience with NNESTs. The study was conducted at a single branch of one *eikaiwa gakkou* chain; were it repeated at another branch of the same chain, or at one of its rivals, different results could emerge.

Conclusion

The study explored the potential for *eikaiwa gakkou* learners to hold native-speakerist views and found some indication that they may. The most overt expressions were found in learner definitions of NESTs, revealing that many participants associated these teachers with a pure, accent-free English variety. The belief held by almost half the

participants that qualifications from English L1 countries were superior also aligns with Holliday's (2006) native-speakerism; data indicate that this is likely based on assumption. Further native-speakerism is suggested by data showing that more participants believed that NESTs are better at teaching every aspect in the study than are JTEs and NNESTs. There is some evidence that respondents believed having a teacher who shares their L1 enables the instructor to know why they make mistakes: In the listening, reading, writing, and grammar categories, participants believed that JTEs were better at this than were the other teachers, but NESTs still scored highly. Furthermore, despite NNESTs having acquired English through study, few respondents agreed that they were good at teaching or recognising why learners make mistakes in all areas explored.

It is undoubtedly in the interests of both the wider ELT community and global society for Japanese learners to recognise that accent-free English is a myth. This would increase learner self-esteem and free learners to use English more confidently as a lingua franca to communicate with others around the world. Recognition that qualified teachers, whatever their background, are preferable would raise standards across the public and private education spheres and reduce workplace discrimination. As long as ELT continues to profit from propagating the myth that native-speaker teachers have greater value, however, transformational change is unlikely to be initiated by the market.

Bio Data

Based in Japan, **Martin A. Cater** has been teaching English since 2004. His research interests include learner development, language teaching methodology, and native-speakerism. <m.a.cater@outlook.com>

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Appendix

Japanese Statements Used in the Study

- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語を教えるための公的資格がなくてもよい。
- 英語教育のための最も良い資格は、英語を公用語とする国により認められたものである。
- 私はCELTAやTrinity CertTESOLが何か知っている。
- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語の発音を教えるのが上手い。
- 日本人の英語講師は英語の発音を教えるのが上手い。
- ノンネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語の発音を教えるのが上手い。
- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語のスピーキングを教えるのが上手い。
- 日本人の英語講師は英語のスピーキングを教えるのが上手い。
- ノンネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語のスピーキングを教えるのが上手い。
- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語のリスニングを教えるのが上手い。
- 日本人の英語講師は英語のリスニングを教えるのが上手い。
- ノンネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語のリスニングを教えるのが上手い。
- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語のリーディングを教えるのが上手い。
- 日本人の英語講師は英語のリーディングを教えるのが上手い。
- ノンネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語のリーディングを教えるのが上手い。
- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語のライティングを教えるのが上手い。
- 日本人の英語講師は英語のライティングを教えるのが上手い。
- ノンネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語のライティングを教えるのが上手い。
- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語の文法を教えるのが上手い。
- 日本人の英語講師は英語の文法を教えるのが上手い。
- ノンネイティブスピーカーの英語講師は英語の文法を教えるのが上手い。
- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師はなぜ生徒が英語の発音を間違えるのかを理解している。
- 日本人の英語講師はなぜ生徒が英語の発音を間違えるのかを理解している。
- ノンネイティブスピーカーの英語講師はなぜ生徒が英語の発音を間違えるのかを理解している。
- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師はなぜ生徒が英語のスピーキングを間違えるのかを理解している。
- 日本人の英語講師はなぜ生徒が英語のスピーキングを間違えるのかを理解している。

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- ネイティブスピーカーの英語講師はなぜ生徒が英語のリスニングを間違えるのかを理解している。
- 日本人の英語講師はなぜ生徒が英語のリスニングを間違えるのかを理解している。
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- ノンネイティブスピーカーの英語講師はなぜ生徒が英語の文法を間違えるのかを理解している。