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Self-presentation as an ELF user in social media: an analysis of Japanese young adults' online language practices

ソーシャルメディアにおけるELF使用者としての自己呈示:日本人の若者のオンラインの言語使用の様態の考察

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Abstract: This paper delves into the identity constructions of Japanese young adults as users of English as a lingua franca on social media, with a specific focus on Instagram, a widely utilized platform among this demographic. Grounded in the premise that social media serves as a space for self-presentation, drawing from the social constructivist idea that the self is a performative act, the study centers on three Japanese young individuals with overseas experiences. It explores how they employ English as a communicative lingua franca in a transnational space while remaining highly conscious of their Japanese followers, endeavoring to portray idealized English-speaking selves. An ethnographic approach (Netnography) to the participants' online practices involves prolonged online observations and interviews, seeking not only screen-based linguistic data but also uncovering the speakers' voices behind the online screen. The findings illuminate that their identities as experienced English users evolves into a distinct aspiration to present themselves as competent English users. This aspiration is intricately attached to English ideologies, including native speakerism and the social status of English. The study provides valuable insights into the importance of scrutinizing the complex identity construction and language negotiation among speakers in ELF contexts, particularly within the realm of everyday online discourse. It sheds light on how young online users navigate between identities as English users and learners in the dynamic context of both global and local friendships.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca; identity construction; Japanese young adults; self-presentation; social media

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論文概要: 本論文はソーシャルメディア、特に、若年層間で使用度の高く不特定多数のフォロワーが存在するインスタグラムにおける、日本の若年層のELF使用者としてのアイデンティティ構築について議論する。オンライン上のエスノグラフィーの手法(Netnography ネットノグラフィー)を用い、長期間のオンライン観察及びインタビューを実施することで、言語的データだけでなく参加者のソーシャルメディアでの英語使用に関する言語意識も調査した。海外経験の豊富な3名の日本人の若者に焦点を当て、異なる言語背景を持つフォロワーに向けたリンガフランカとしての英語使用を明らかにし、その一方で、彼女らの発言から、同じくフォロワーの日本の友人を強く意識し、自分の英語がどのように評価されるのか敏感になりながら、流暢な英語話者としての自分を見せたいという自己呈示への強い願望を明示する。その裏には、日本の友人間で構築された英語の社会的地位やネイティブスピーカリズムといった、英語を囲む言語イデオロギーが反映していることも議論する。本研究は、アイデンティティが対話者との関係によって社会的に構築されるという考えに基づき、ソーシャルメディアを使用する若者が、グローバルとローカルそれぞれの友人の存在を意識し、ELF使用者そしてEFL学習者としてのアイデンティティを行き来しながら発信する、オンライン特有の複雑なアイデンティティ構築と言語使用の様態についてその洞察を提供するものである。

キーワード: ソーシャルメディア; 自己呈示; リンガフランカとしての英語; 日本の若者; アイデンティティ構築

1 Introduction

The digital landscape has become a common theme of our everyday lives through the ubiquitous use of smartphones. A large population worldwide, including Japanese young people who are the present research participants, produce and consume texts and visual images through social media in mass quantity. Social media users demonstrate deployment of their translingual repertoires consisting of various linguistic and semiotic resources, and within that, English also plays a major part in online interactions (Baker and Sangiamchit 2019; Dovchin 2020; Dovchin et al. 2018; Sangiamchit 2018; Vettorel 2014).

In their discussion on identity construction in social media, Barton and Lee (2013) point out that we, as online users, present “not just about *who we are*, but also *who we want to be to others*, and *how others see us*” (Barton and Lee 2013: 68, italics in original). This paper develops its discussion based on this key premise that social media is a space for self-presentation, which derives from the social constructivist idea of identities being co-constructed with interactants (see Goffman 1959). Self-presentation in a social media platform is complex since a user has hundreds of “networked audiences”

(Androutsopoulos 2015) or online friends from different life stages sharing various personal experiences, but in the same virtual space where territorial boundaries are blurred. One's linguistic repertoire is a crucial component of self-presentation in designing their audiences and transferring different identities. Self-presentation through textual means is demonstrated by Japanese young adults as well (Takahashi 2014), who live in a country in a period of globalization where the mobility of people is accelerated (Nakane et al. 2015). It has become common for Japanese social media users to connect with their networked audiences, both who share and do not share the first language, through English as an internet *lingua franca*.

By focusing on three Japanese young individuals with overseas experiences, the present research explores how the youths' identities as ELF (English as a *lingua franca*) users influence their self-presentation in social media, namely Instagram, a semi-public discourse. The current study discloses their complex identity construction in the digital platform where non-Japanese and Japanese friends coexist, exploring the linguistic ideologies and the social status of English seen behind the social media screen. By reviewing literature, the following section unzips the backdrop of the Japanese young adults' self-presentation by exploring the ideological understanding of using English in the online locale where friends from different linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds co-present.

2 Self-presentation as ELF users in social media

2.1 Self-presentation in social media

When social media users make updates about their lives through texts and images, they are less likely to display a compilation of everyday activities randomly. Rather, they refine and present themselves as digital beings worthwhile to show in public (Marwick and boyd 2014). Self-presentation derives from the motives to “construct one's public self” into an ideal one and to “present oneself ‘favorably’ according to the audience's values” (Baumeister 1982: 3). The presence of audiences is essential in self-presentation since one's performance of self is established and maintained in relation with others (Goffman 1959). In this regard, self-presentation is never fixed but fluid and dependent on one's sense of alignment with audiences. Tagg (2015) emphasizes that self-presentation online involves positioning oneself in relation to “ideas about interlocutors' beliefs and expectations” (Tagg 2015: 223). Transgression from expectations may risk successful self-presentation and construction of their public images. The same is true in the present study's context of self-presentation in ELF online communication, which requires discussion on the social beliefs surrounding English (see Section 2.2).

Self-presentation in social media is highly complex. While participants of text-messaging and e-mailing expect specific recipients of texts and sequential responses, those of social media including Instagram are uncertain about exactly who, out of hundreds of online friends, will see their contents (Graham 2020). For Instagram users, their posts, a set of a photograph and usually texts, are shared with networked audiences with different degrees of “shared histories, experiences, and linguistic repertoires” (Androutsopoulos 2015: 191). For instance, a young Instagram user’s followers can include schoolmates from a local high school and international students s/he met during an exchange program. Some users who keep their Instagram privacy setting in public may have followers who scarcely share personal histories but are connected through common interests (see Schwämmlein and Wodzicki 2012). Self-presentation through one social media post is multi-directional in that a site user addresses their networked audiences with varying degrees of personal ties, while “establishing [their] identities and alignment with [their] interlocutors” (Graham 2020: 309).

The role of visual images in computer-mediated communication (CMC) has been highlighted as a communicative means without codes (see Barton and Lee 2013). Nevertheless, Vásquez (2022) maintains “words, language, and discourse continue to serve as key resources in the presentation of self” in social media (Vásquez 2022: 68). In this light, self-presentation online can be defined as writing oneself into being (boyd 2006). The growing multilingual population in social media (see Danet and Herring 2007) has accentuated the use of an extensive linguistic repertoire based on users’ audiences and language experiences, including nationally bounded languages, local dialects, and online youth language particular to a local area. Kramsch (2016) states that ELF is a medium through which internet users express their worldviews of the multidimensional self by considering “whom they affiliate themselves with and whom they want to please and what they want to talk about” (Kramsch 2016: 181). In this way, the self as an ELF user is not pre-given and fixed but, as Baker (2017: 131) puts it, “something we do” just as the online self. One’s self-presentation as an ELF user is negotiated depending on the audiences and their shared understanding as to using English, which will be now discussed.

2.2 Being an ELF user in social media

The identity construction and the voices of ELF users have been empirically investigated. In Sung’s (2014) investigation on ELF users’ identity in Hong Kong, the participants considered English as a means of global communication to show local identities, which influences the positive attitude towards having local accents or mixing Chinese vocabularies. Likewise, building on Sung’s (2014) study of glocal

identity, Nabilla and Wahyudi (2021) reported Indonesian ELF users' voices and revealed that they also acknowledged English as a language to connect with global community while some preferred to maintain their accents. In a Japanese context, Iino and Murata (2016) investigated voices of students, including returnee and *jun-Japa* (those educated primarily in Japan), who were "going through a transitory period from EFL learners to ELF users, simultaneously having both identities" (Iino and Murata 2016: 114). Their interviews revealed that through experiences of ELF communication such as studying abroad or conversing with other students at the researched international department, the participants' language attitude gradually shifted from norm-oriented to "confidently using ELF for their communication, owning it as their own" (Iino and Murata 2016: 127; see also Widdowson [1994] on the concept of ownership). These studies vividly disclosed the fluid identity construction of ELF users, mostly in speech contexts. It is worthwhile to investigate their voices in textual discourse, particularly in a context as everyday as social media, which dominates the lives of the age population on which the aforementioned research has focused.

The communication in social media is shaped by the myriad of experiences that users bring regarding English. What follows delves into the discourses and ideological positioning concerning English, which may influence online users' self-presentation. Specifically, the discussion focuses on two different facets of the role of English: its role in transnational digital spaces and its role in the local Japanese society surrounding young individuals.

Firstly, discussing English in the scope of digital spaces leads us to the role of the language as the primary internet lingua franca worldwide. Bearing in mind that social media users demonstrate flexible linguistic actions transcending conventional linguistic and semiotic boundaries (Garcia and Li 2014; Li 2011), there is also a shared understanding among online participants that English reaches a broader readership (see Leppänen et al. 2009). Since worldwide online users from various linguistic and sociocultural backgrounds type in English, written language in social media is translingual in that language users "brin[g] together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology" (Li 2011: 1223; see also Canagarajah 2020). Unlike formal writings, including academic writings, whose languages are "polished" (Turner 2018) by gatekeepers, most often based on Standard English of British or American norms (Horner 2018; Mauranen 2012), language in social media is generated mainly by the users themselves until they publish the content. With English being the most preferred language of the diverse population on the platform, social media users often deploy creative language plays, such as reformulation of orthography in Chinese and English (Li and Hua 2019) and a mix of languages (Leppänen et al. 2009). Likewise, Lee (2017) explored the use of English and Chinese on Flickr and how the online users

“participate in the global online networks through English (even with the limited knowledge of it) without giving up their existing local identities” (Lee 2017: 59). Innovative English practices by various users are the medium through which meaning making and self-expression are most extensively achieved.

Another facet of English is in relation to the potentially shared ideas and values about the language which is pervasive within the Japanese society. With the growth of international residents and tourists, linguistic landscapes in Japan, especially the urban areas, has become substantially multilingual (Backhaus 2010; Otsuji 2015). Nevertheless, on the political role of language in Japan, Sugimoto (2021 [1997]: 160) argues that English has remained to be the “means of status attainment” for career paths, despite the questionable correlation of English and socioeconomic status. Consequently, English competence is often required for Japanese university students before graduation (Iino 2018). Within English, Kubota (2015) points out that the language has been linked to aspiration for “Western or American culture and Inner Circle varieties of English, which are regarded as *cool* objects of desire” (Kubota 2015: 70, italics in original). Standard English ideology is still prominent in Japanese English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts, where “‘English’ is what is believed only to be the English of ‘native speakers’” (Konakahara and Tsuchiya 2020: 9). In a classroom, students are highly conscious about their own and peers’ English (Katayama 2015) and they are often constrained by perceptions of correct usages (Murata et al. 2018). Iino (2021) also discusses that overseas experiences such as studying abroad is perceived as a symbolic power of prestigiously learning a language in a “real” country where locals speak the language. In these respects, acquiring English and having been abroad have remained, for Japanese young people, a special asset that they aspire to achieve.

While it is crucial to avoid essentializing their backgrounds, Japanese young adults may hold shared opinions about English with their local friends, who are likely to have undergone similar experiences in certain English educational contexts with a particular set of ideological assumptions and positioning in relation to English. When communicating online, Japanese youth are bounded with different discourses regarding English. Online communication is realized by “realistic English” (Seidlhofer 2003), reflecting the current global role of English used by a variety of speakers who play with the language regardless of type and level of proficiency. This occurs while youth are surrounded by the discourse of “real English” (Seidlhofer 2003), linked with the fallacy of the singular native speaker English, which continues to be prevalent in Japan. On one hand, they creatively use English as a lingua franca to engage with international friends online. On the other hand, they perceive English through a lens of standard language ideology and the belief about English as an asset constructed in the local society of Japan, requiring them to demonstrate a particular kind of competence in front of their Japanese followers. In this respect, just as Norton (2013: 161) puts it, presenting identity online is “a site of struggle”.

Texts in social media are entangled with various ideological thoughts on English, which requires a holistic understanding of language practices. Thus, this study applied an ethnographic perspective to explore “the social meaning of different ways of using language by taking into account participants’ awareness and interpretation of their practices” (Androutsopoulos 2008: 3), which is further discussed in the following.

3 Methodology

3.1 Netnography: data collection, analysis and researcher’s role

In conducting this study, I applied Netnography (Kozinets 2002, 2015), which investigates social and cultural phenomena manifested in online discourses and explores online users’ contextual identities constructed through human relationships. In my Netnography, a set of online observations of Instagram posts, interviews, and a questionnaire was conducted for each participant. The online observation lasted approximately four to nine months depending on the participants’ online practices, investigating their linguistic deployments for sharing their lives on Instagram. I especially observed their posts, which remain on their profile pages permanently unless deleted, retrieved screenshots to “capture the original format of the post” (Kreis 2022: 80), and kept observation notes continually.

The online observation was complemented by one to two 60-min semi-structured individual interviews through Zoom. Interviews explored the text-making process of their posts and their voices as English users and members of the online platform. I partially applied focused interviewing to have the respondents discuss their linguistic use while reviewing their Instagram posts together on the spot (Page et al. 2014). The interview topics always expanded to their everyday language practices and daily lives such as code choices online, daily exposure to English outside social media, and friendships. Additional questions and confirmations about the remarks from the interviews were occasionally made through message exchanges. The questionnaire on their English backgrounds and social media usage supported the interviews. In accordance with a transtextual perspective (Pennycook 2007), which considers writers’ pre-textual history, as well as ideologies and cultural frames, all of which influence their texts on screen, I visited each data item interchangeably to bridge the participants’ online language practices and “inner views, voices, identifications and claims” (Dovchin 2020: 28). Combining multiple data added a layered background to the linguistic data and built deep documentation of the participants’ accounts.

Premised on the nature of social media profiles being a personal sphere for many, Lee (2022) necessitates consideration of researchers' roles and reflexivity since CMC research is constructed through the relationships with a sense of trust between researchers and participants (see also Tagg and Spilioti 2022). I consider my profile as an active Instagram user in the participants' generation who speaks their first language as a relative factor that contributed to my research and treatment of the data. My background also fostered a smooth rapport with the young adults, enabling me to delve into their language practices with an insider-perspective familiar with the platform.

3.2 Participants

The present study is part of ongoing research into online language practices among young adults in Japan. The research participants, 30 in total, are all in their twenties except freshman-year students aged 18 or 19, an age group that accounts for a major percentage of social media users in Japan (Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication 2021). They were recruited at a private university in Tokyo, which is one of the largest universities in Japan with a diverse student population. The present article develops its discussion around three of the participants, Seina, Erika, and Nana (pseudonyms), who exhibited strong consciousness about presenting idealized versions of selves online. They are all frequent Instagram users who have followers worldwide whose first languages include Japanese, English, Korean, Chinese and German, just to name some. While the three speak Japanese most comfortably, they all report having had a significant degree of exposure to English communication in their lives.

Seina, a 22-year-old senior year student at the researched university, is enrolled in the international liberal arts department, which offers English medium instruction (EMI) courses. She went through what she explained as grammar-based English lessons in secondary education in Japan and spent one year as an exchange student in the United States while in high school. She also studied in an undergraduate EMI program in Germany for half a year.

Erika is 21 years old and enrolled in the education department of the researched university as a junior student. She had lived in the US with her family for nine years, attending local schools until she returned to Japan for high school. Now, she does not use English outside classrooms except when she reunites with friends from the US and chats with them online.

Nana is a 20-year-old junior year student at the researched university, majoring in education. She states that most of her friends are Japanese and have limited international backgrounds. At home, she usually speaks and texts in English with her

mother, who is an L1 English speaker. She spent three years going to a Japanese kindergarten in Singapore and was about to depart for a one-year exchange program in the US at the time of the investigation.

Although the entire body of research captures the participants’ multitude use of different languages and communicative modes, including photographs, this paper focuses on how these three young adults illustrated their complex thoughts on self-presentation as ELF users on the online platform. For spatial reasons, I only present the English translation of excerpts from the Japanese interviews, which two Japanese-English bilingual speakers verified.

4 Findings

4.1 Using English studied at school is “corny”: Seina

Through the observation, it became apparent that Seina was conscious about how her English reflected her identity as an experienced English user. On her private account with 459 followers, Seina periodically posted updates to share significant life events, including piano recitals, trips and study abroad. Over the nine months of observation, she used the platform as a journal, often composing relatively dense

| Seina’s Instagram post caption | Translation |
|--|---|
| <p>Mein Leben in Deutschland war unvergesslich. Es ist sehr, sehr schade, dass mein Austauschjahr wegen Coronavirus zerstört wurde 😞 [...]</p> <p>Because of the current situation regarding Coronavirus, I had to make a decision to suspend my further study in Germany and go back to Japan. Even though the end was not as I wanted, I still had unforgettable experiences with a lot of people I got to know in Germany [...]</p> <p>あまりにも突然の終わりで正直今も気持ちの整理はついてないけど、半年間ドイツで過ごした日々はとても貴重なものでした。[...]</p> | <p><i>My life in Germany was unforgettable. It is very pity that my exchange year was destroyed because of Corona virus 😞 [...]</i></p> <p>I’m honestly still having a hard time sorting out my feelings about the way it ended so sudden, but every day of the half year I spent in Germany was very precious.</p> <p>[...]</p> |

Figure 1: Seina’s Instagram post caption with my translation. Gloss of font styles: translation of *German*, and **Japanese**.

texts for her updates. In the interviews, Seina revisited an Instagram post (Figure 1) in which she summarized her stay in Germany, her second study abroad, which was suspended halfway through due to the pandemic.

Seina often wrote in English when she wanted international friends to read her posts and used Japanese for posts that described her local memberships such as university circles. She says she added the English sentences to make the post inclusive (see the Appendix for the transcription conventions).

- (1) S: If it is only in German, there are people who wouldn't understand, so I wrote in English.
[...] Yeah, like this time when I wrote about study abroad, I think I wanted to let many people know so I wrote in three languages, looking back.

She indicated that her English sentences played a role as a lingua franca so her post could reach as many people as possible. Her study abroad experience, particularly in the US was a pivotal life event for her to become aware of the gaps between the English usage she learned in Japanese schools and the one employed by locals in the US. When questioned about her thoughts on writing online, Seina expressed a preference for using the English she acquired in the US over the one taught in schools in Japan.

- (2) S: I try not to make my English look like the rigorous English grammar I studied at school. It would be a little corny. When I write in English, I want to use expressions that native speakers would use and those who studied grammar at a normal Japanese school would not come up with.

For Seina, using English like native speakers in a sphere as everyday as social media is one of the ways to distinguish herself from those who have only learned English at Japanese school. She further talked about her willingness to use complex sentences on the online site.

- (3) A: What are the examples of grammar we study in Japan?
S: When you are only learning English in Japan, you don't have much of a repertoire of expressions for English compositions, like everything starts with "I" and the sentences are short. I wrote in that way as with others until I studied abroad. I think it would be uncool to go like that [using "I" sentences] when you go out of your way to use English on Instagram. [...] So, I try not to repeat short sentences, but write longer and more difficult ones that would be a bit complicated for Japanese people to understand.

Her comments indicate that the use of compound sentences and those with a relative clause in her post (see Figure 1) serve as a marker of her identity as a student who learned English outside Japanese classrooms. She crafted the online posts with sentences that were "complicated for Japanese people to understand", implying that

her English was not necessarily meant to be understood but rather to be recognized by her Japanese friends. In this regard, her English sentences seemed to fulfill two distinct roles. On the one hand, her English served a communicative purpose; she wrote in English to convey the messages to her transnational friends. On the other hand, her English sentences played a representational role, exhibiting herself as an experienced English user in the eyes of her Japanese friends online.

Seina's study abroad experiences and enrollment in the EMI undergraduate course raised her consciousness about herself having an international background and hence being proficient in English. This often makes her feel sensitive about writing in English on Instagram.

(4) S: My friends from junior high and high school know that I studied abroad, so [they might think] “even you studied abroad, this is all you can write in English”. Since I studied abroad, I want to write in impressive English. I know it's silly.

A: = No, not at all.

S: Well, all of my friends who follow me know that I studied abroad, and besides, I am enrolled in the international undergraduate program [whose students] are good at English. I have friends from my circles and other departments as well. I also think I can speak English well and I want to live up to that. I know that people around me think I am a little different from ordinary people who have studied English in Japan, so I want to be true to that.

Her account above illustrates that through her English use on Instagram, she aimed to portray her identity as an English speaker who was once an exchange student and is currently a student in the EMI course. Despite having 450 followers on Instagram, her consciousness about being an “impressive” English user is particularly influenced by the presence of Japanese friends from junior and high school. It should be noted that she was uncertain if her junior and high school friends, in reality, expected her to be a proficient English speaker. She anticipated the followers' perceived expectations and tried to live up to the presumed English-speaking self she wished to embody. Seina's accounts exemplify that social media is a platform where individuals aspire to present themselves as a specific type of persona (Barton and Lee 2013). This aspiration becomes even more pronounced if followers know each other only online, as the following section further discusses.

4.2 “I run away from [English] to Japanese”: Erika

Erika maintains her account as public, allowing everyone on the site, including her 1,099 followers, to access her posts. She frequently travels with her best friend across

Japan, sharing pictures taken at local spots. Despite having considerable experience in the English-speaking country and having non-Japanese speaking friends on Instagram, Erika rarely used English on the platform throughout the observation. When questioned about her language choices on Instagram, it was revealed that she tended to avoid using English. She believed she did not possess an up-to-date English repertoire sufficient for active use on the site.

- (5) E: I came back from the US for high school. I haven't used it [English] for long time and I don't have confidence now.
 A: I see.
 E: So, I feel like I don't want to share it [English] on SNS.¹
 A: I see. Why do you not have confidence?
 E: Well, I haven't used it for long and I don't know about cool Instagram English which is in trend for people. I can't come up with it, so I don't use it.
 A: I see. When you use it, you want to use trendy English.
 E: Yes, I think so. Like I want to come up with cool sentences like everyone, but I can't.
 A: Can I ask what would the cool sentences be like?
 E: Ah, like "photo dump". I saw it the other day, "recent photo dump". Recent photo and then dump, I was like "oh cool" @@@

Erika's confidence in English has diminished since she has not used the language for an extended time, and she has now decided not to use it online. While she occasionally speaks and texts in English with her old-time friends from the US, she believed her English was not "cool" or up to date enough for use in social media with a fluid and evolving linguistic culture (see Varis 2016). As an example of cool English, she listed "photo dump", a term referring to a trend popularized by US celebrities and Instagram influencers, posting random everyday pictures at once in a single post.

Further in the interview, it was found that the driving force for avoiding using English on the platform is, interestingly, her self-identification as a returnee English speaker.

- (6) E: [...] Because I can't come up with English sentences, I run away from it to Japanese.
 A: I see.
 E: It's humiliating to make mistakes in front of followers.
 A: Mistakes in English.
 E: I don't want to use wrong English, you know, I'm a returnee.

1 SNS = Social networking sites.

A: I see. What would wrong English be like?

E: Like, awkward English, let's see, yeah like "the best day ever". Isn't it embarrassing? @@@
[...]

A: I see, I see, what kind of embarrassment?

E: Well, I think I just don't want to be a part of *jun-Japa* who is trying to use English.

Further in the interview, Erika mentioned that she was particularly conscious of her university friends on the platform who knew her as a returnee. The excerpt highlights that she felt humiliated making "mistakes" in English as a returnee student in front of these followers. However, the example she labeled as "wrong" English, "the best day ever", was by no means grammatically or orthographically non-standard of course. For her, the phrase conveyed a sense of *jun-Japa*-ness, or 'pure Japanese'-ness along with the impression that people who grew up primarily in Japan are trying to use English, which to her mind is "embarrassing". Erika preferred to distinguish between a returnee who can use English and a *jun-japa* who tries to use English. For self-presentation as a returnee, her language choice on Instagram fell into a dichotomy: use English or not ("run away"). She chose the latter to avoid the risk of using "awkward English" so that she could maintain her identity as an experienced English speaker. She gatekept herself regarding which languages she used for her self-presentation as an English user in the online realm.

Moreover, Erika's aspiration to perform herself as a competent English user affected her perspective on her friend's use of English. In the interview, Erika recounted an experience involving a best friend of hers who posted a photo on the best friend's Instagram account. The friend shared a picture of her and Erika together, along with text containing a spelling error, causing discomfort for Erika. Erika discussed her apprehension unique to social media where individuals can connect without being well acquainted with each other.

(7) E: [My friend] wrote "every" with "l" instead of "r" in her Instagram post. It was written "evely" with "l". I was like, "oh no, she is my friend, nooo". I thought, "please don't make English mistakes when posting the picture of meee" @@@
[...]

A: Why did you think "please don't make mistakes when posting the picture of me"?

E: Well, you know, it will remain on the internet, and people whom I only know on the internet are seeing the posts too, so, that kind of thing makes me look bad. People I meet in real life, they know me, but those who only see me on Instagram, they just see what's on Instagram. So, I don't want to make mistakes in that part.

The striking aspect of Erika's situation is that because she desired to be deemed as a proficient English user, she was concerned about her friend's English. Her consciousness may stem from the digital environment, in which she sets her account in public, allowing anyone to access her profile through the best friend's tagging. She additionally expressed that the online space serves as a platform for presenting her idealized self, which she perceives as distinct from her identity constructed in offline life.

- (8) E: [...] It's like I want to share what I think is perfect. Maybe it's my pride, maybe it [bothers me] that I'm not the ideal of me.

This "pride" as an experienced English speaker leads her to disapprove of the possibility that viewers of her best friend's post might associate her with the friend who used English incorrectly. The commonplace error of substituting *r* with *l* undermines her ideal sense of self-presentation on Instagram. Consequently, her reaction, "Oh no, she is my friend, noo" contextually implies, "Oh no, she is MY (the one who is a returnee and knows English) friend, NO (so please don't make mistakes for the sake of my self-presentation)". In the subsequent section, the third participant explores the rationale behind such determination in self-presentation in relation to the nature of written communication.

4.3 English mistakes as "digital tattoo": Nana

When asked about language choice online, Nana stated that she usually chooses either English or Japanese, whichever language that expresses her feeling or the situation better. Nana further mentioned that she is usually conscious about using English because over 600 followers on Instagram are, as she put it, "watching". The young adults' high consciousness about their English is closely tied to the nature of CMC, which involves, unlike ephemeral speech interaction, durable posts that remain indelibly on the internet (Baron 2000). For Nana, making English mistakes on Instagram is almost a tattoo-like action; they remain on the internet permanently.

- (9) N: [...] No one would bother and point out [my English mistakes on my posts] and I don't like that. It's like digital tattoo on SNS. [...] SNS, in general, once you upload the contents, they will be never deleted. It's spread and cannot go away, like tattoo, so digital tattoo.

The term "digital tattoo", coined by Juan Enriquez (2013), refers to the issue of the pervasiveness and permanency of our personal information on the internet. Nana applied the term to describe what it feels like to use 'incorrect' English on Instagram. To prevent her English from being 'tattooed' on her posts, Nana has her English Instagram posts checked by a native English speaker, primarily her mother.

| Nana’s Instagram post caption | Translation |
|--|---------------------------------|
| <div>So blessed to be having the week that I’m having 🥂</div> <div>みんなありがとう〜🥂#20</div> | <div>Thanks everyone〜🥂#20</div> |

Figure 2: Nana’s Instagram post caption and my translation. Gloss font styles: translation of Japanese.

Throughout the interviews, Nana consistently exhibited her admiration for her mother, who speaks English as a first language. She views her mother as an ideal speaker-self, given the privilege of using English daily compared to other Japanese friends. Conversation with her mother represents one of the only opportunities in which she is exposed to what she considers “authentic” English, which as she defined, is well-used usages by those who speak English effortlessly. Nana requested her mother to check her English when uploading a post on her twentieth birthday, indicated with the champagne emoji of two clinking glasses and hashtag (Figure 2).

By typing in English and Japanese, she received over 20 comments wishing her a happy birthday from online friends worldwide. She said that her heart was so fulfilled that she decided to use the emoji with hearts whose facial expression looked like herself in the photograph of this post. Her delighted emotion led her word choice of “bless”, as she stated in the interview.

- (10) N: For this one, I wanted to use the word “bless”, and I asked my mother who is native [English speaker], “is it correct?”. I think this one was corrected a bit, or I think it was passed as it was.
[...]
- A: Is there any time when your mother doesn’t give you a green light, like “it’s not correct”?
- N: Yeah, sometimes she doesn’t. But “this is what I like to write about”, you know, in such cases, I change [my post] into Japanese. I’m like, “oh, well, let’s just use Japanese then”. Even if it is authentic, if I don’t feel comfortable with it, then it’s not my Instagram. So, why not just use Japanese.

Prior to releasing the post, she discussed with her mother who “passed” (or not) her English to be publicized online. Nevertheless, she said that she usually does not adopt the suggestion when her personal gatekeeper’s phrasing does not represent her intention. She writes, instead, in Japanese which she feels expresses herself better than in the ‘corrected’ English. While she wishes her English to be polished for her perceived audiences, she ensures her language is hers, because after all, Instagram is a personal and self-expressive space. In this way, she negotiates her English user self and Instagram user self.

While exploring her high consciousness about using authentic English, it was gradually revealed that she considered using English as part of a social status in Japan; the opinion built upon her experience as a job applicant. She stated that companies she had applied valued hiring people who spoke English, and she felt she was being “flattered” during the application process. In the interview, she questioned people’s positive evaluation of her English speaker skills because she believed her English was not yet authentic enough.

- (11) N: I don’t think I have a problem in communication, but I don’t think I should be too lenient with that. I think it is a manner to be as accurate and precise as possible when using the language. I don’t like to make others put effort in interpreting [my English].
[...]
A: You said it’s a manner for others. Can I, can I ask who are the others?
N: = Ah, for example, in English, those who use English regularly and speak English just the way I speak Japanese, like I don’t quite think when I speak Japanese, and I refer to those who speak language or English in such a way.

Nana further stated she was far from the group of people who speak authentic English without “thinking”. She appeared to question her complete legitimacy in using English, as evidenced by her tendency to seek corrections from her mother.

Further, when she shared her experience of reading her Japanese friend’s Instagram post in English, it was uncovered that she had her opinion about who may use English in social media. Her Japanese friend recently shared a photograph of paintings with a caption, “Works spending time with Treasure”. Nana explained her reaction to the friend’s English and the consciousness that grew within her when imagining herself writing an English caption on the platform.

- (12) N: [...] I have seen her post [in English] and I was trying to guess what she wanted to say but I was like “there is a huge mistake”. And I thought, because I saw her in this way as her follower, if I make mistakes [my followers] would see me in the same way too. @@@
A: Like an example of what not to do. @@@
N: Yeah, yeah, yes.
A: How did you think? A little bit embarrassing?
N: Yeah, well, embarrassing, I thought, like for 95%, “wow, this would be how people might think about me. I would be humiliated.”

Nana’s reaction to her friend’s language, or what she regarded as a “huge mistake”, was responsive. That is, given how she evaluated her friend’s English, Nana is now

conscious of how her followers might evaluate her if she uses English in a non-standard way. She further elaborated on finding her friend's English intolerable.

- (13) N: I wouldn't mind about people who use English on a daily basis [using English on SNS], but if someone who does not have a relationship with English uses English [on SNS], I would think like "good try". Here is my point! They are using a language that they don't use, and they get it a bit wrong. For something which remains [like SNS], I don't quite understand why [my friend] couldn't at least put it in the correct form [...]

Her account above suggests that she evaluates differently when someone who "does not have a relationship" (which she seems to conceptualize in a very narrow sense) uses the language in social media. She further added that the sense of belongingness to the language was granted only to those who use it daily or constantly study it but not to others.

- (14) N: If you are studying it, it is totally fine. But I am talking about people who don't use it at all. Those who don't have a relationship with the language.

She considers herself away from the group of people who speak authentic English and asks her mother to check her usage; however, she differentiates herself from those who do not regularly use English and does "good try" at using English online. The participants' accounts show their self-presentation as ELF users in the transnational digital discourse where their local friends also reside. In taking account of the young adults' Instagram practices, the following section will develop discussion on what using English online means to the participants and how their ideological thoughts shape their self-presentation through textual means.

5 Discussion and concluding remarks

This paper has explored the Japanese young adults' self-presentation through English on the relatively under-researched yet very popular social media platform, Instagram, whose number of users reach more than 2 billion worldwide and 45 million in Japan.² The data discussed in this paper has embossed that the three participants manipulated their self-presentation as English users through texts online. Due to the nature of the digital platform with networked audiences from many

² <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/instagram-users-by-country> (accessed 30 November 2023).

various backgrounds, the Instagram users in this study were highly conscious about the invisible eyes of their friends, especially Japanese friends.

Seina anticipated her friends' expectations regarding her English, presenting her English-speaking self by using complex English sentences. While these English sentences were crafted for a broader online readership, they also created a distinction between her and her Japanese friends, especially those from junior and high school. Erika opted to stick to Japanese on Instagram to avoid the perceived risk of using what she considered awkward English. This linguistic decision allowed her to define herself as a US returnee student, particularly *jun-Japa* who grew up and primarily studied English in Japan. Nana felt that she did not belong to those who speak authentic English like her mother, while she viewed herself differently from her Japanese friend who was "trying" to use English. This highlights her negotiation of linguistic identities by positioning herself in relation to native speakers, who are traditionally considered in relation to the ownership of English (Widdowson 1994), and to other speakers in ELF contexts with different social access to English.

The sentiment among the three individuals suggests that they are attempting to distinguish themselves as English users from their local Japanese friends, implying that they consider having overseas experience and 'command' of English as a certain privilege. English usage, often strongly attached to and underpinned by native-speaker ideology, functions as a means of such demarcation. Such attitude of the three experienced ELF users discussed in this paper does little to echo that of the Japanese undergraduates in Iino and Murata's study (2016), who became more communicatively cooperative rather than aspiring to native speakers' English after experiencing an ELF environment offered by an international undergraduate program. This is interesting, since especially Seina belongs to the exact department of the same university investigated in Iino and Murata (2016). The difference in attitudes possibly derives from the purpose of language use in one-to-many social media, tending to present an ideal part of self (Barton and Lee 2013), just as Erika discussed (see Section 4.2), and thus, to one-sidedly showcase linguistic competence (as conventionally and normatively perceived) rather than to mutually accommodate for discursive goals. Additionally, the preservable nature of written texts, which Nana mentioned (see Section 4.3), relates to their determined self-presentation since posted texts, unlike speech, involve less negotiation of interpretation (Widdowson 2004). This suggests that the different linguistic attitudes and identities can be observed in interactive classroom discourse and the multi-party digital sphere.

Traveling across global and local identities in an online discourse (see Baker and Sangiamchit [2019] for transcultural communication research) has been discussed with ELF users' positive attitudes demonstrating a mix and merge of both identities through their social media contents and language uses. Sung (2014) also discussed the participants' accounts on embracing local identities to be a global-minded person,

e.g., introducing their lifestyles to international friends. In contrast, the present study captured behavior of the participants who are constrained by the presence of their Japanese friends, while in a profoundly global space. With self-presentation being reflexive to the other person's expectations, the three projected themselves according to the Japanese people's idea of how English users should use the language. While being English "users" of online communication with friends from different language backgrounds, they are constrained by the monolithic understanding of English "learners" once there are Japanese friends present online. The findings show that language practices are indeed "acts of identity" (Kramsch 2001 [1998]: 70) and online identity is intricately tied with space and relationships with others (Norton 2013).

This study has underscored the significance of investigating the complex identity constructions of speakers in ELF contexts. ELF research has contributed to the reconsideration of competence in English within multilingualism, shifting from pre-scriptivism towards adaptability and fluidity, and addressing the pluricentric nature of language ownership (Jenkins 2015). The present study has illustrated struggles of Japanese youth who, while ostensibly participating in a lingua franca communicative context, exhibit attitudes that are constrained by conventional norms and ideologies associated with English. Jenks (2022) emphasizes the importance of incorporating emic perspectives of speakers when discussing the language identities in a lingua franca encounter. By amplifying the participants' voices, the present research has illustrated their complex identity construction as English users/learners.

While acknowledging the limitations of the presented data derived from only three and predominantly female participants, it is hoped that this paper sheds valuable light on discussions regarding how English ideology penetrates in the everyday language use and identity construction among young online ELF users in Japan, whose viewpoints have so far been under-researched. The findings relating to the online presentation of an English user-self as introduced in this paper are possibly relevant to other populations outside Japan. For instance, one of the Indonesian ELF users in Nabilla and Wahyudi's study (2021: 6) stated that using English, preferably "standard" one, in social media is an advantageous "branding" of an English-user self, with the participant reporting that they "fe[lt] proud" of using the language in front of friends online. Further empirical research will develop an understanding of the identity construction of online ELF users of a country like Japan (and outside) whose young adults have long been in a transitional period of moving beyond being English learners and becoming English users in their own right (see Iino and Murata 2016). Such research is necessary since young people's linguistic identities in a digital community entail a high degree of complexity through the negotiation of their affiliations with the role of English. It is invaluable to explore their lived experiences of globalization, connecting with worldwide networks.

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Note: This article is derived from the PhD thesis submitted by the author in November 2023. The analysis and findings presented herein are part of the extensive research conducted during the course of the doctoral program.

Appendix: transcription guide

| | |
|---------|----------------------------------|
| [...] | omitted texts |
| @ | laughter |
| = | latched comments |
| [words] | words supplemented by the author |

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