

Student Expectations Regarding English-Language Use in Life after University

「なぜあなたは英語を勉強しますか」

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Abstract

Over the past three decades extensive research has been done analyzing foreign-language learner beliefs. These studies have primarily shown which language teaching methods and class room activities students find most beneficial to their success as language learners. These results have often been in stark contrast to what language teachers have believed to be most beneficial to students. Keeping with this same theme of “learner beliefs” this research aims at discovering how students believe English language will play a role in their future. Surely, language professors have strong opinions about the need for English language education and the success of their students. However this research is meant to show exactly how students view English language ability and their own lives in more concrete terms. The participants in this survey were all first year language students at Akita National University. This research’s sampling method is purely one of convenience—the participants were all students of the researcher at the time of the survey.

University language professors traditionally decide curriculum based on a variety of factors. In the case of creating a curriculum for university English language courses in Japan, these factors include but are not limited to national standards (set by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), department-specific language needs, and what individual professors

feel is “essential.” These decisions then lead to selecting textbooks, creating class evaluations and assessments, and other peripheral arrangements needed to progress students through the established curriculum. Although this is considered to be the default, traditional method of planning curricula, modern educational practices indicate a very different pedagogical approach to designing curricula. The modern pedagogical approach to curriculum design allows for student input when preparing curriculum goals. This student-centered approach is a more futuristic approach (as opposed to the traditional approach) and signifies a major shift in educators’ and education-policy makers’ (e.g. politicians) education worldview.

Learning English in university is part of the core curriculum in most if not all universities in Japan. Graduation is contingent upon successfully completing the respective university’s English language requirements. Unfortunately, due to stress being placed on educators from the highest levels of nation education institutions, down to the department level, language professors rarely if ever probe students (current students and graduates) in order to discover what education methods the students found most beneficial. Similarly, language professors rarely survey students’ beliefs concerning how they envision actually using the language in their future.

Therefore this brief survey was designed to gauge how first year students at Akita National University

(herein referred to as AU) imagine English in their future. It goes without saying that the English language professors at AU design the various course curricula in order to set students up for success both during their college careers and when they have entered the world outside the university walls. However, how frequently (if ever) do they solicit feedback from students evaluating specific components of the curricula (e.g. the textbook, oral assessments, writing assessments, etc.)?

One would think that surveying upwards of six hundred first-year students' individual beliefs about the role of English in their post-graduate lives would be a Sisyphean task, that curricula would have to be newly written year after year, and that professors would need to be re-trained year after year. But these assumptions are based on the notion that students' beliefs are so extremely diverse. Perhaps the students' beliefs are not as individualized and unmanageable as is currently thought. Perhaps critical masses of students have enough in common (in terms of their goals on using English in the future) that English language classes can be formed by grouping students with similar goals together.

The main English course in which all students at AU must enroll is called English for Academic Purposes (EAP). As it is, all first year students taking EAP are divided into sections based on their English language ability. This method has the obvious benefit of grouping students together with the same ability to make it easier for the language professor to move the class through the material at a steady pace. Also when performing pair work or group work, students are more likely to benefit by the challenge offered by their peers. However, more advanced language learners may also be more independent and may have already formed goals about how they will use the language in their future. If this is the case, then grouping students together in what was thought to be a streamlined method is not really so streamlined at all. Perhaps if students' goals were surveyed and evaluated rather than their language proficiency, then EAP students could be grouped together in sections that share common goals. If this were the case, one could speculate that first year students with low English language proficiency would

benefit more from being in a class with like-minded students rather than being surrounded by students with similar low-proficiency.

Adopting such an approach to creating EAP sections would not be that different from what is done now to divide students based on language proficiency. Surveys could be conducted during the school entrance exam (or at another opportune time *before* the first-year students were divided into EAP sections). This type of approach to organizing class sections symbolizes an abrupt shift in traditional pedagogical approaches. If such an approach were deemed too radical, then there is another way that language professors could assess students' beliefs concerning English in their future that would be less disruptive to the status quo. If sections [determined by language proficiency] were surveyed immediately (in the first week or two of the first semester), then the remaining twenty-eight weeks of the academic year could be spent making the subtle adjustments needed to meet the classes' needs.

Aim of this research

The purpose of this research is to compare why language professors think English will be necessary in students' futures with students' ideas why English will (or will not) be necessary in their futures. Professors most often take their own experiences and interests into account when designing curricula and rarely if ever take student's experiences, interests, or desires into account. While this approach is not inherently wrong, it poses a pedagogical predicament, namely, what is the most effective way of reaching students and engaging them in the class material?

This research aims to identify some student beliefs regarding the practical need for English in students' futures, from the students' perspective rather than from the researcher's own preconceived notions. The survey questions used in this study seem to fit into two areas: English language and its necessity in one's private/social life and its necessity in one's business/professional life. These two broad groups were formed *after* the actual survey questions were established. Future research may prove that these groups are sufficient or may very well prove that having only two

groups is insufficient and that more specific groups are necessary. What should be kept in mind is that this research is in its very early stages and is far from any substantial conclusions. Instead the research that this article is based on will most likely be more valuable in directing future research, rather than influence any changes in education methods at AU.

Method

Participants

Participants in this survey were twenty-two first year students at AU. Of these twenty-two participants, six students were enrolled in the Faculty of Education and Human Studies, and sixteen were enrolled in the Faculty of Medicine. The Education and Human Studies Students had a variety of majors, such as Japanese, Human Development and Education, and General Education. The Medical students were exclusively Nursing majors. The fact that the Medical students outnumbered the Education and Human Studies students was random, due to the method the university uses to place students in multiple sections, which will be explained below. The students were typical first year, ranging in age from eighteen years old to nineteen.

The participants in this study were enrolled in a class the researcher was teaching called English for Academic Purposes II (EAP II) during the second semester of the 2012 academic year. All first year students are required to take EAP I & II and successfully complete the course as a condition of graduating. Consequently, the first year student body is divided into sections based on their Faculty (or, “academic department”) and English language ability. Upon entering the University and being assigned to an EAP class, the students are first split into groups based on their Faculty. In this case students are split into two groups: the A-group (the Faculty of Education & Human Development and the Faculty of Medicine) and the C-group (the faculty of Engineering and Resource Science). Based on English entrance exam results and their past academic records, these two groups are further divided into sections. AU has wisely chosen to limit language class enrollment to around thirty students

per section to accommodate a student to teacher ratio more effective for teaching foreign languages. As a result, the number of sections depends on the total number of students with majors in either the Education & Human Development and Medicine faculties, or with majors in Engineering & Resource Science faculty. Consequently, there are approximately fourteen sections of Education & Human Development and Medicine sections, numbered A1 to A11. The A1 section had the least English language proficiency while A11 has the most proficiency (based on the University’s placement system). Therefore the students in the A11 section who participated in this study are considered to be among the most proficient students in the first year class.

The actual number of students enrolled in the A11 section for the second semester is twenty-eight. However, since the survey was carried out during class time, conducting the survey was limited to the last twenty minutes of one class period. The twenty-two students present in class at the time graciously took part in the survey, which had no bearing on their semester grade or their attendance record: it was strictly on a volunteer basis. It should also be noted that while AU’s student body is very diverse with full-time degree seeking students from a variety of countries, all twenty-two participants were native Japanese and spoke Japanese as their primary language. Therefore, it may be said that the results of this research reflect specifically what first year, native Japanese university students believe about how English will benefit them and/or what role it will have in their lives post-university.

Materials

The material used to gather this data was a four-page survey created by the researcher. The survey had two sections: one section used to gather background information, and another used to assess the students’ beliefs (see, Appendix A). Aside from collecting information about the students’ Faculty and major, the first section asked background questions specific to the student’s English language background experience, such as their *Eiken* level, TOEIC/TOEFL scores, and study abroad/ foreign travel experience. One question also asked whether or not they participated in the

University's ALL Rooms, which is a type of multimedia language lab for students wanting to work on their English ability (note: "ALL" stands for Autonomous Language Learning). The questions in this section were mostly YES/NO questions, although space was provided for students to write-in information such as test scores and, if they had been abroad, where they had travelled to. The second section of the survey comprised of fifteen Likert-scale type questions, allowing the surveyed students to gauge their response to questions on a 1 to 5 scale ("5" for most strongly agreeing and "1" for least likely to agree).

Designing the survey happened in three steps that ultimately produced a final bilingual survey with an English translation immediately following each Japanese question. In the first step, I created the English and Japanese versions of both the first section of the survey and the second section. Then a native Japanese speaker with near native English proficiency evaluated the Japanese questions for clarity. Finally, an upper classman at AU read over the survey.

After the native speaker check, changes were made in how the Japanese versions of the English questions were phrased and worded. Although the students taking the survey are regarded as having very high level English comprehension and ability, the researcher deemed it beneficial to have a bilingual survey for ease-of-use, and to pose the questions as clearly as possible. Also, while the students in the higher ranking A11 section may have no problems understanding the survey, if this study is to be expanded to include all sections, a bilingual, if not exclusively Japanese version, will be necessary to assure that all survey participants thoroughly understand the questions.

The upper-classmen check did not elicit much constructive feedback. However after considering some of the responses the survey collected, a more thorough student-check will be implemented in the future. Potentially, this could be in the form of a check done by several upper classmen, followed by a group feedback session with the researcher. By implementing a group feedback session, perhaps students will be more willing to voice their concerns that they may have with elements of the survey.

Procedure

After finalizing both the Japanese and English survey-question versions, the survey was created as a paper version using Microsoft Word. While this tradition paper and pencil survey procedure is tried and true, an online survey procedure could be implemented in future surveys for two reasons, one pedagogical and one practical. The first reason would be to model for first year students how educational technology should be appropriately utilized in the modern classroom. The second reason is that by using digital, online software specifically created for conducting surveys, a larger number of responses may be more effectively organized and the data they yield more easily analyzed. For a small test sample of twenty eight students, paper and pencil surveys are fine, but utilizing software will prove to save valuable time on the part of the researcher. Also, if a student takes an online survey (potentially) alone at their personal computer and at their leisure, they may (in theory) be more prone to answering the questions more accurately.

As mentioned earlier, the paper surveys were handed out during class time, specifically at the last twenty-minutes of class. The researcher provided an explanation for the survey, made it clear that students were not required to do the survey, and finally that participating or not participating had nothing to do with the students' grades and/or course evaluation. It appeared as though twenty-minutes was too much time to complete the survey. Regardless, after the allotted twenty-minutes, the surveys were collected together, at which point the class came to a close and the students were dismissed.

Later, using an Excel spreadsheet the survey results were organized appropriately for assessing the data. Since the surveys were anonymous, the results were entered into the spreadsheet under entries listed Student 1, Student 2, Student 3, etc. (this sequence is completely arbitrary and bears no relationship to the identity of the participant).

Analysis

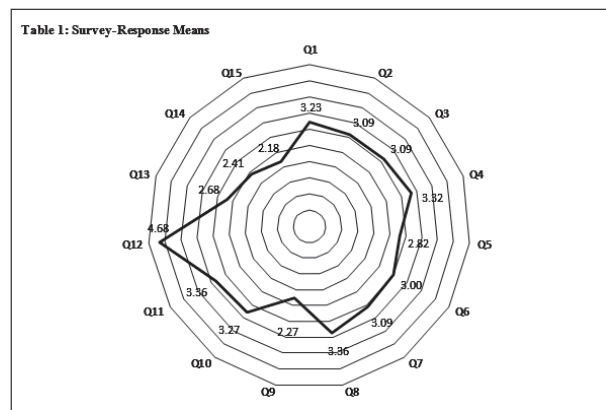
Since this is a rather limited, initial study of first year students at AU, the results were analyzed

in a closed-setting, meaning that the results were not compared to results found in outside surveys, nor were they compared to findings outside the researcher's own data. In future studies that collect more comprehensive data across the student body, the data will be more closely scrutinized. In such broader studies as are expected to be carried out in academic year 2013, one may conjecture that larger test samples across disciplines and language-ability levels will yield results that are more beneficial to course curriculum planners. Such detailed results will also potentially have a greater influence over English language educational policies at all levels, i.e., those decisions made at the University level, the department level, and at the individual language professor level.

Three measurements were used to analyze the survey data. The resulting hypotheses are based on the researcher's interpretation of the data. The three, rather standard, measurements are the statistical mean, median, and standard deviation.

Results

The questions that elicited the highest statistical means were Questions 12 (English will be necessary when you travel abroad) at 4.68, Questions 8 (After university some of your customers will be foreign customers) and Question 11 (After university you will travel to a foreign country) at 3.36 each. This indicates that the average student believes that English will most likely be useful to them in their private life (Questions 12 & 11) and possibly in their work life (Question 8). Question 12 also has the highest median, 5.00, which is not a surprising result given the Likert-scale survey method and the small test sample. Although the means of Questions 8 & 11 are the same the medians are different, with Question 8 at 3.50 and Question 11 at 4.00. Since Questions 11 and 12 both have the highest means *and* medians, it may be surmised that first year students believe they are more likely to use English in their private lives (for travel) than for their work life or family life. A visual depiction of the statistical means is found in Table 1 and clearly shows that Question 12 drew stronger responses than the rest of the questions.



However, one glaring issue is with the wording of Question 8, specifically the use of the word “customers.” This survey was designed with the notion that it would be used to survey students with a broad range majors, ranging from engineering, to education, to nursing. While “customers” could be interpreted to mean “students” or “patients” in the case of education and nursing majors, assuming that students will interpret the question in that manner is a flaw in the researcher's question design. In the future, a wider range of upper classmen reviewers prior to conducting the survey may help correct this flawed term. The fact that Question 8 had the second highest standard deviation (1.29, the highest being 1.59) further shows conflict on the part of the students in answering this question. Perhaps it is the term “customer” that accounts for the high deviation.

Conversely, the three questions that elicited the lowest means were Question 15 at 2.18 (Now or after university you will have a girlfriend/boyfriend who is a foreigner and speaks English), Question 9 at 2.27 (Your foreign customers will be fluent in Japanese), and Question 14 at 2.41 (Now, or sometime after university you will have family members who are foreign and speak English).

The wording in Question 9 shares the same flaw as Question 8: how do the surveyed students interpret the word “customers”? However, it is noteworthy that this question has the least standard deviation (0.70) showing that students responded to this question the most consistently despite the ambiguous “customers.”

Furthermore, the researcher acknowledges that questions such as numbers 14 & 15 are biased.

However, questions like these that reflect a more multicultural (or multilingual) Japan in the future and represent AU students as global citizens rather than students following Japan's societal status quo, are worth researching. Frankly, researchers spend too much time tracking the history of languages, and language learners' backgrounds, rather than the *future* of foreign languages and language learners' futures. Future research will ideally be able to articulate these notions more accurately through more thorough native speaker checks that address the nuances of the English word choice and Japanese word choice, as well as at the upper classmen review level, at which time more authentic student visions of Japan's future societal make-up may be gleaned.

Conclusion

The fact that the questions which elicited the strongest responses (Questions 11 & 12) are both related to overseas travel, show that the students in this survey still by-and-large are of the opinion that speaking English is something that will happen [only] if they go somewhere else to do it, namely overseas and *not* necessarily in Japan. It may be conjectured that if the participants thought of speaking English (and English language ability, in the more general sense) as having a more prominent role in their future, then questions about the need for TOEIC and/or TOEFL scores in life after university would have ranked more prominently (they ranked 4th and 5th highest, respectively). It is alarming that after three years of English language education in middle school and three more years of English education in high school, first-year college students do not consider English language as having a more ubiquitous role in their professional and family/personal life. Instead it seems as though English language training in elementary school, middle school, and finally at AU, is just a very elaborate, institutionalized training for going on vacation.

Of course, "institutionalized training for going on vacation" could be too much hyperbole. But, further studies drawing on a wider range of language abilities, over broader academic disciplines, and over future years of new students, will yield more concrete

conclusions. In any case, when language professors have a more realistic understanding of how students imagine English language and how they will use it (or not use it) in their futures, only then will they be able to design more appropriate curricula, lesson plans, and assessments. It will be under those conditions that universities will be able to produce the most adept graduates who will be capable of maintaining Japan's competitive role in the global society.

In closing, while there are no wrong responses to a survey such as this, the survey does show that language professors and high school teachers may need to reassess how they approach English language teaching. Of course there is nothing wrong, *per se*, if a common citizen who does not attend a university (let alone a *national* university) believes that English serves them best as a tool to be used when going abroad. But, if young students are entering university with the expectation that English is only for travel and that it will be non-essential for their careers, then that should surely raise some red-flags within the higher education community. If future research shows this to be the case, then surely AU's approach to English language teaching will certainly have to be re-imagined.

Appendix A: "The Expectation of English in Life after AU" Survey (English version)

(note: the questions below do not exactly appear as they did in the actual survey)

Eiken Level: _____

TOEIC Score: _____

TOEFL Score: _____

Have you studied abroad?

If so, where?

Have you travelled to a foreign country?

If so, where?

Do you take private English lessons?

Do you use the ALL Rooms?

What Faculty are you in?

What is your major?

For the following questions (1-15) please answer with a rating of 1 to 5, like this:

5. Yes, most likely.

2. Probably not.

4. Yes, perhaps.

1. No, definitely not.

3. I'm not sure.

1. TOEIC will be necessary for my work after university.
2. TOEFL will be necessary for my work after university.
3. *Eiken* will be necessary for my work after university.
4. After university I will continue to study or practice English.
5. After university I am likely to have foreign co-workers.
6. My foreign co-workers will be fluent in Japanese.
7. I will have to speak English to my foreign co-workers.
8. After university, some of my costumers will be foreigners.
9. My foreign customers will be fluent in Japanese.
10. I will have to speak English to my foreign customers.
11. After university I will travel to foreign countries.
12. English will be necessary when I travel abroad.
13. After university I will have foreign friends who are English speakers.
14. Now or sometime after university, I will have family members who are foreign and speak English (for example, a brother/sister-in-law, an aunt/uncle, etc.)
15. Now or after university I will have a girlfriend/boyfriend who is a foreigner and speaks English.