

Attitudes toward English Language Learning in Higher Education in Japan (2): Raising Awareness of the Notion of Global English¹

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Introduction

In the spring of 2001, Beverley E. Lafaye and I made a survey of Japanese students' attitudes towards English language learning by using responses from all 1st year and 2nd year students at our university. We reported a part of the results of this survey at the 8th International Conference on Cross-Cultural Communication in Hong Kong in 2002 (Lafaye and Tsuda 2002). This paper is a sequel to this research focusing on the students' attitudes toward English and written comments which have not been analyzed in our previous paper. Lafaye and Tsuda (2002) shows that two thirds of the students say that they do not like studying English. This paper tries to find why so many students do not like to study it by comparing the attitudes of the students who like English and those who do not and by reviewing their comments in the questionnaire. It also points out that it is necessary to raise students' awareness toward English that English is not only used by native speakers but it is extensively used among second and foreign language speakers as communicative tools.

MEXT's Proposal to Foster English Communication Abilities of the Japanese

In the summer of 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced a proposal "Developing a strategic plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities'" to introduce more effective English programs at all levels of English teaching in Japan. This proposal was made along the lines of the 1999 proposal "The Frontier Within: Individual Empowerment and Better Governance in the New Millennium" which caused a heated discussion on the issue of English as a second official language in Japan.

These proposals show that the political and corporate leaders are getting very impatient about the levels of the English proficiency of the majority of Japanese people after going through more than six years of English learning at junior and senior high school levels.

At the beginning of the proposal, it states that junior high school students are expected to achieve STEP third grade level (approximately IELTS3.5) and senior high school students to STEP second (Cambridge Exam PET level) or pre-second level (Cambridge Exam KET level) when they finish respective schools². University graduates are expected to be able to use their communicative English skills in their work in business matters.

In order to achieve these goals, language education specialists are urged to think of ways to improve the situation, which is considered to be insufficient by the advisory committee members. The members of academic societies such as JACET (The Japan Association of College English Teachers) are organizing working groups to make their proposals to work out the plans. MEXT's proposal also urges Japanese universities to introduce efficient English teaching methods and advises the government to give special funds to the universities that offer exceptionally good English programs.

Why don't the students like to learn English?

The questionnaire was given in May 2001 to the first and second year students of the Faculty of Humanities at Tokai Gakuen University students taking Human Behavior Course, Language Communication Course, and International Culture Course. The survey shows that the majority of the students think English is necessary for traveling, using computers, and entertainment such as movies or music. Although they understand that English is widely used in the world, two thirds of the students say they do not like studying English. Lafaye and Tsuda (2002) point out that there is a contradiction between students' understanding of importance of English and their attitudes toward it. Questionnaire results also show that the students wish they had more competence, but they do not like English as a school subject.

Table 1. Do you like learning English?

a= yes b= no

	a=group A	b=group B	n. a.	Total
Students	159	347	9	515
%	31%	67%	2%	100%

As shown in Table 1, of 515 students, 159 students (31%) answered they like learning English (group A) and 347 students (67%) said they do not like it

(group B). Even a half of the students who have chosen to take an intensive English course in our program say they do not like to study English. To an English teacher like me who had taught English language major students for a long time, this result was very shocking and hard to understand. In order to improve our program, it is therefore vital to find why they have such negative attitudes toward English learning especially in schools.

Table 2. You are now learning English to:

a=earn credits b=speak with native speakers of English c=travel d=go to graduate school e=because everybody does f=don't know g=other

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g	
A	30	54	15	2	0	6	17	124
	24%	44%	12%	2%	0%	5%	14%	
B	129	23	10	13	1	18	14	208
	62%	11%	5%	6%	0%	9%	7%	

In order to understand why so many of our students do not like to study English, students in group A and group B are compared in relation to the questionnaire items that seem to show their positive or negative attitudes toward English. Table 2 shows students' purposes of studying English at present. It tells that 44% of group A students are studying English in order to speak with native speakers of English, whereas 11% of group B students think so. Whereas 62% of group B students say they are studying it to earn credits for a bachelor's degree, 24% of group A students think so. It is necessary to realize that such a large portion of the students is studying English just for credits. Those who are interested in learning English, on the other hand, are motivated to use it for communicative purposes rather than academic or carrier purposes. What motivated these students at junior high or senior high schools?

Table 3 In your experience of English learning at school you were most motivated by

a=exams b=teachers c=textbooks d=possibility of communication with native speakers or others e=to do the same as everyone else f=other

	a	b	c	d	e	f	
Group A	71	2	6	51	4	22	156
	46%	1%	4%	33%	3%	14%	
Group B	218	7	31	36	10	36	338
	64%	2%	9%	11%	3%	11%	

It is clear that examination was the strongest motivation for both groups but more so for Group B (64%) than Group A (46%). The next strongest motivation

was to communicate with native speakers or speakers of other languages, and Group A students were more motivated (33%) than Group B students (11%). The table shows that examinations can make the students to take English courses, but cannot motivate them to be interested in learning it.

Table 4 Are you satisfied with your proficiency?

a=very satisfied b=satisfied c=not either d=unsatisfied e=very unsatisfied

	a	b	c	d	e	n.a.	
Group A	1	2	21	83	48	4	159
	1%	1%	13%	52%	30%	3%	
Group B	2	3	37	124	171	10	347
	1%	1%	11%	36%	49%	3%	

In order to use a language for communication, some basic proficiency is necessary even for a very simple conversation, and we asked if the students are satisfied with their proficiency. Table 4 shows that the students of neither group are satisfied with it and group B students are even less satisfied than group A students are. It is clear that there are not very many people who are interested in what they do not excel in. In our university, students must choose between English and Chinese and they are required to take 12 credits of either language before they graduate. It is necessary to improve their proficiency so that they would feel more comfortable in using English and more satisfied with the results of their studies.

Table 5 Your feeling about people who can speak English well

a=respect b=envy c=indifference d=scorn e=other

	a	b	c	d	e	
Group A	68	75	7	0	5	155
	44%	48%	5%	0%	3%	
Group B	132	163	32	3	9	339
	39%	48%	9%	1%	3%	

Table 5 shows students' feeling about people who can speak English well. It shows that most students in either group respect or envy good speakers of English, which seems to mean that the reason for not liking to study English is neither because they do not like English language nor English speaking countries and people.

Table 6 Do you want to make friends with foreigners?

a=yes, b=no

	a	b	na	
Group A	145	12	2	159
	91%	8%	1%	100%
Group B	233	114	1	348
	67%	33%	0%	100%

Table 2 shows that about half of the students are not motivated to learn English other than earning credits for graduation, and we asked if they are interested in making friends with non-Japanese residents or people overseas. Table 6 shows that group A students are more interested in making friends with foreigners than group B students. It still shows that both group A and B students are interested in making friends with foreigners rather than avoiding them.

Table 7 Do you feel that foreigners are annoying?

a=yes, b=no

	a	b	
Group A	8	151	159
	5%	95%	100%
Group B	21	325	346
	6%	94%	100%

In order to find out further about the students' feeling towards the non-Japanese, we asked them if they would find foreigners annoying. More than 90 % of the students in both groups answered that they are not annoying, which shows that xenophobia is not the reason that they do not like studying English. Why then do few students like to study English? If they are interested in making friends with foreigners, there should be more students who are eager to learn English or other languages. Do the students consider English really useful?

Table 8 Frankly speaking, English is not necessary in my life.

a=strongly agree, b=agree, c=cannot say, d=disagree, e=strongly disagree

	a	b	c	d	e	
Group A	1	27	70	28	33	159
	1%	17%	44%	18%	21%	100%
Group B	30	110	97	28	80	345
	9%	32%	28%	8%	23%	100%

Table 8 shows that 41% of group B students think that English is unnecessary in their lives while only 19 % of group A students think so. If one thinks that the

subject that he or she is studying will not be useful in the future, it is not likely that he or she will study it hard. A few group B students, however, comment that they felt happy when they were able to understand some part of English songs or movies, or when they were able to communicate with foreigners in English. It is therefore important to appreciate such positive attitudes of the students and try to find ways to encourage them to experience such feelings more often. It would be necessary to give the students various programs according to their needs. Those who plan to go on to graduate school would need academic reading, for instance, whereas students who are more interested in using English for traveling or fun would like to study basic oral conversational and listening skills.

What kind of English do the students like to learn?

For any non-native speaker of English, it is difficult to become a native-like English speaker by studying only in classroom environment, but in the past, school education often concentrated on teaching ‘perfect English’ which is based on a native English model. As Table 2 has shown, students seem to believe that they would most likely to use English to communicate with native speakers of English. Table 9 shows which variety of English the students would like to learn. The result is shown without distinguishing A and B groups.

Table 9 Which variety of English would you like to learn as your goal?

a= native (textbook) English b*=educated non-native English c=** International English

a	b	c	
137	132	237	506
27%	26%	47%	

* non-native English used by Japanese teachers of our university, for example

** English not belonging to one nationality and used internationally as in ASEAN conferences or in international business settings

As shown in Table 9, about half of the students choose international or lingua-franca English as their goals. Since it is neither possible nor desirable that they should attain native-like proficiency by attending classes three times a week, this would not be a realistic goal. About one third of the students chose non-native English as their goals, and another one third say they would like to aim for native or textbook variety of English. Do the students really tell the difference between non-native and native English?

Table 10 Can you notice when English is not standard British/US English?

a=yes b=no

a	b	
28	484	515
5%	94%	

94% of the students say that they cannot tell standard British/US English from other varieties as shown in Table10. For communicative purposes, therefore, it seems more important to focus on fluency rather than accuracy especially in oral communication at low or lower intermediate levels. If accuracy is stressed too much as it had been done in the past, students lose interest in using the target language because they are afraid of making mistakes or of being corrected by teachers.

As for the variety of English for the Japanese, it does not seem to matter whether it is native or non-native English for the learners to acquire as long as a certain level of standard is maintained. In a sense, it is safer and better to keep some non-native traits to show others that there may be some behavior that does not conform to a norm expected of a native speaker.

Table 11 Japanese people are likely to use English to communicate with
a=native speakers of English b=people whose first language is not English

a	b	
370	134	504
73%	27%	

Table 11 indicates that the students think that they would more likely to use English to communicate with native speakers even though they say their goal is to become proficient in international English. This shows that they are not aware of the facts that there are more second or foreign language speakers of English in the world than native speakers (Crystal 1997, Graddol 1997, Honna1999) and it is used extensively among non-native speakers in the world where English is not spoken as native language. If a Japanese business man goes to Korea to do business, for instance, it would not be very important to speak like a native speaker or behave like a native speaker because there may not be any native speakers involved in such communication even if English may be used as a medium.

Students' Comments

Seven questions were asked for the students to answer freely in writing at the end of the questionnaire. Among the positive comments about English, students' experience of having been able to communicate with non-Japanese people in English is predominant. They also say that they felt happy to have understood a

part of English movies or lyrics of popular songs. There are also comments that English will be useful in their future.

Most common negative comment is that the students do not think English will be necessary in their lives. It is not possible to force all the students to be enthusiastic in studying English, but it is necessary to give a very basic English in case it becomes necessary for them to use English in their future career.

A few students comment that they feel American influence becomes too strong when they study English. There is always a danger of language imperialism when we talk about a powerful language such as English, and the teachers must be careful not to impose native speakers norms without distinguishing teaching English as a global language and a native variety with its own cultural background. It is not always possible to distinguish these varieties, but it is important to keep the differences in mind.

A number of students explain that they do not like to study English mainly because it is difficult, and they have never enjoyed studying grammar. They also explain that studying English in Japan is not communicating in English but studying for examinations. Others comment that only their teachers speak and there has not been much chance of using English.

Majority of the students say that they would like to study conversation with native speakers. They also say that they would like to learn English through popular songs or movies. They also say that they do not want to English to be a compulsory subject.

Discussion: Raising Students' Awareness

We have compared several differences in the attitudes of group A and B students, and observed a brief description of students' written comments. Having understood how students at our university feel about English, what can English teachers do to improve students' language proficiency, which is required in the MEXT proposals and make them satisfied with the English programs offered to them? It is vital to improve the proficiency of these students because they feel their competence is very low and wish they could use English to communicate with people overseas. In order to improve this situation, it is not only necessary to consider what methods can be employed to improve their proficiency but also to think of ways to motivate the students and make them feel more comfortable in using English as a tool to communicate and to obtain academic, political or social information from inside and outside Japan.

In a country where most communication is in Japanese, exposure to English is very limited and it is not possible to expect the students to master basic oral communication skills by using what they have learned outside the classroom. Traditionally, English was taught by teaching sentence structure and vocabulary, and students later developed conversational skills when given a chance to practice them. Yoshifumi Saito (Saito, 2001) still seems to believe that the

Japanese can acquire high competence by such a traditional method, but he does not seem to be familiar with ordinary students and he does not know what is happening in non-elite universities. Non-elite students today seem to be fed up with grammar instruction, which they have never understood, and such grammar work that Saito believes useful is the major reason why these students do not like studying English. As described in the summary of students' comments, one of the most common reasons for not liking English was grammar instruction and another is studying English for examinations.

As Table 8 shows, 41% of group B students think that English is not necessary and it might be true for their whole life. However, it is also true that any students might go overseas and be required to do business using English or other languages whether they like it or not. If they had some proficiency in English at least, they would be able to build more competence later in their life. Therefore, it is important to show the students how English is used in Asia or Africa where there are more non-native speakers than native speakers who use English for communicative, or academic purposes. Students think that they understand what international English means, but actually they are not aware that it is used in Japan or any other Asian countries for more extensively than they realize.

It is also important to set an attainable goal for them. It is evident that these students will not be able to pronounce English nor manipulate English grammar like native speakers by only meeting three times a week in our English program. Perfectionism discourages students and they lose interest in trying to use the target language for communicative purposes. A lot of our students answered the question "what is your positive experience in learning English?" that they felt happy when people understood what they said in English, when they understood what they heard in a movie, or when they understood English lyrics of a song they listened to. It is important for us teachers to give them opportunities to improve their competence by using various materials available to us, i.e. songs, movies, magazines, or comics that they are interested in.

There has been a shift in attitude toward English in the world that English belongs not only to native speakers but also to non-native speakers who use English as their second or foreign language (Bautista, 1997, Honna, 1999, Honna ed.2002). English has many faces according to its users; for native users, it is a language with its cultural, social, historical and political backgrounds, which are not always relevant to its non-native users, and there has been a growing awareness that English belongs to Asia as well as to the English speaking countries. From such perspective, the goal for Japanese learners of English has to be modified from a native-speaker model to a non-native speaker model such as Singaporean or Indian English. Since English is not spoken in Japan as widely as in these countries, and we may not be able to say that there is an independent variety of Japanese English in a sense as Singaporean or

Philippine English is used. In any case, Japanese students will find it easier to speak English without being afraid of making mistakes or feeling inferior for not being able to speak like native speakers if they are made aware of the presence of varieties of Asian Englishes used intra and internationally. Teaching materials and models may depend on a standard or native English, but the outcome may not be as perfect as the models and some characteristics of learner's language and culture will influence the output variety of the learner. If the students become aware that it is natural that their variety of English is different from a model that is based on one of the native variety of English, the learning process will not be as painful as it has been. As their learning proceeds, more accuracy may be required according to the situation in which English is used, but still it will be different from any native varieties of English.

Conclusion

The questionnaire results show that two thirds of A and B group students do not like to study English because they have not had much feeling of success in their learning experience. At the same time, many of the students are interested in speaking with people overseas and they do not have any hostile feelings against English or English speaking countries. In order to improve such situations, it is necessary to offer the students a less painful environment for learning English, where teachers and students share a place to use English for communication. At the same time, it is necessary to ease students' mind from making mistakes by raising their awareness that English is widely used by non-native speakers in Asia, Europe or Africa and native English is not the only variety that is spoken in the world.

Notes

¹ This paper is based on a paper presented at AILA 2002 in Singapore.

² Information on the comparison of the STEP and IELTS scores was obtained from the following site. <http://www.cambridge.exam.co.jp/cambridge.html>

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Appendix: Sample Questionnaire

What do you think of English?

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out what opinions you have about English. The results of questionnaire will be published, but your personal information will not be publicized.

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About yourself: please check appropriate items.

- 1) Year: a. First year b. Second year
- 2) Sex a. Male b. Female
- 3) Languages chosen a. English b. Chinese
- 4) If you are studying English now, which class do you belong?
 - a. Basic First year ①~④, Second year 21~24
 - b. Intermediate First year ⑤~⑩, Second year 25~28
 - c. Intensive English First year ⑪~⑫, Second year 29~30
- 5) What was your TOEFL ITP Score? ()

Please answer questions 1-25 by choosing only one answer which is closest to your response. When it is necessary, please fill in your comments in ().

- 1-a. Would you have preferred to study another language at Tokai?
 - a. yes ⇒ please proceed to 1-b.
 - b. no ⇒ please proceed to 2-a.
- 1-b. If you answered yes, which language would you have chosen?
 - a. European: e.g. French, German, Spanish, etc.
 - b. Asian: e.g. Korean, Thai, etc.
 - c. African: e.g. Swahili, Arabic, etc.
- 2-a. Would you have preferred to study another language at high school?
 - a. Yes ⇒ please proceed to 2-b.
 - b. no ⇒ please proceed to 3.
- 2-b. If you answered yes, which language would you have chosen?
 - a. European: e.g. French, German, Spanish, etc.
 - b. Asian: e.g. Korean, Thai, etc.
 - c. African: e.g. Swahili, Arabic, etc.
3. Which variety of English (see note) would you like to learn?
 - a. the native (textbook) English variety now being taught
 - b. educated non-native English (ex. Yuki Kudo, the Japanese teachers of English of this university)
 - c. International English*—lingua franca
*International English is not identified with specific variety/nationality.
4. Have you ever talked with another Asian (in English)?
 - a. Yes b. No
5. Can you notice when English is not standard British/US English?
 - a. Yes b. No

- 6-a. Have you studied English outside junior/senior high school or university?
- Yes ⇒ please proceed to 6-b.
 - No ⇒ please proceed to 7.
- 6-b. If you answered 'yes', where did you study English?
- Kindergarten
 - Elementary school
 - Language school
 - Private lesson
 - Study abroad/ Home stay
 - other ()
7. English should be taught in Japan.
- from age 6
 - from age 10
 - from age 12
 - from age 15
 - not at all
 - other ()
8. English should be the compulsory first language taught in Japan.
- Strongly agree
 - agree
 - cannot say either
 - disagree
 - strongly disagree
9. English should be introduced as an official language* in Japan.
- * A private committee assigned by the late Prime Minister made a proposal "A Vision for 21st century Japan" in January, 2000 that "we must make every effort to make English as a working language for the Japanese. In the future, we may have to consider a possibility of making English as an official language of Japan."
- Strongly agree
 - agree
 - cannot say either
 - disagree
 - strongly disagree
10. You first noticed English in life through
- television
 - films
 - cartoons
 - music
 - books
 - katakana English
 - family member
 - friends
 - Other ()
11. You first noticed English through at age
- 0-3
 - 4-6
 - 7-12
 - 13 and up
 - do not know
12. Your present interest in English is
- very strong
 - strong
 - cannot say either
 - weak
 - nil
- 13-a. Are you studying English now?
- yes ⇒ please proceed to 13-b.
 - no ⇒ please proceed to 14.
- 13-b. You are learning English (to)
- pass exams
 - speak with native speakers of English
 - travel
 - go to graduate school
 - because everybody does
 - don't know
 - other ()
14. Regarding your English proficiency you feel:
- very happy
 - happy
 - cannot say either
 - unhappy
 - very unhappy
15. Do you like learning English?

- a. yes b. no
16. Would you like to travel abroad?
a. yes b. no
17. Would you like to make friends with people from other countries?
a. yes b. no
18. Do people from other countries annoy you?
a. yes b. no
19. In your experience learning English at school you were most motivated by
a. exams b. teachers c. textbooks d. the possibility of communicating with native speakers or other natives e. to do the same as everyone else
g. other ()
20. You think Japanese people are likely to use English to communicate with
a. native speakers of English b. people whose first language is not English (e.g. people from Middle Eastern or Asian countries)
21. Your feeling about people who can speak English well
a. respect b. envy c. indifference d. scorn e. other ()
22. You will make your children study English hard
a. definitely b. maybe c. cannot say either d. probably not e. definitely no
23. You think English will be important for your children
a. definitely b. maybe c. cannot say either d. probably not e. definitely no
24. On a scale of 1-5, classify the usefulness to you of English for:
5 essential 4 very useful 3 useful 2 not very useful 1 useless
- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| a. Travel | 5-----4-----3-----2-----1 |
| b. TV/movies | 5-----4-----3-----2-----1 |
| c. internet/computer use | 5-----4-----3-----2-----1 |
| d. communication with people from other countries | 5---4-----3-----2-----1 |
25. On a scale of 1-5, rate the following idea:
'Honestly speaking, I don't believe English will ever be useful in my life'
a. strongly agree b. agree c. disagree d. strongly disagree
e. don't know

Free answers

1. If you answered 'yes' to 1-a, please explain why you want to study other languages.
2. Please explain why you are for or against the idea of English becoming an official language of Japan
3. Do you like English? Please comment on why you do or do not like English.
4. What has been your most positive experience of learning English?
5. What has been your most negative experience of learning English?

6. What kind of classes would you be interested in taking to study English?
7. Without thinking too deeply about it, say what 3 key words come to your mind when you hear the word 'English'?

Thank you for your cooperation.