

English programs and assessments in Japanese universities

Jared Winans*, Bogdan Pavliy

Abstract

This paper will attempt to reveal the English abilities most beneficial to Japanese university graduates, and how universities can best help students gain these abilities. This paper will cover primary, secondary, and tertiary education goals for English acquisition as well as employer expectations and student motivations. It will also touch on the current trends within Japan related to foreign labor and inbound tourism, and how the trends may impact Japanese employees in the near future. This paper will culminate in recommendations for universities seeking to implement or revise a student-focused English education program.

Keywords: English, course design, education, career

1. English targets for Japanese university graduates under MEXT

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is the national government organization responsible for making educational curriculum policies in primary and secondary schools in Japan (Leong & Ng, 2016). In recent years, MEXT has worked to strengthen its English program and to emphasize the role of speaking within the four core English skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) (Hasegawa, 2017).

In 2014, MEXT began to implement its “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization”, which aims to be in full effect by the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (MEXT, 2014). The

***Jared Winans is a part-time lecturer at Toyama University of International Studies**

reform has students studying from an earlier age and is meant to help students more fluently communicate with English speakers.

The program puts additional pressure on high school students hoping to enter university. As Mitchell's study states, high school L2 learners now not only need to study grammar and test-taking strategies, but also develop active communication skills (Mitchell, 2017).

In order to enforce its goal, MEXT plans to introduce changes to the government-run National Center Test for University Admissions in 2020. It will employ the use of external exams as well as assess spoken English (Mainichi Japan, 2016).

MEXT has also issued official guidelines for university entrance exams to push them to assess the "four core skills". It encourages universities to use external English examinations such as the TOEFL® (ETS, 2018).

Indeed, many universities have been using English assessment tests provided by private companies in their entrance exams. Around 43% of national universities, 26% of public universities, and 46% percent of private universities (43% overall), "used or planned to use privately run exams, such as the Eiken English proficiency test, TOEFL and GTEC, in the 2015 academic year" (Mainichi Japan, 2016).

While MEXT has issued guidelines for university entrance exams, it does not issue official guidelines for tertiary [university] education. There are some government programs that a limited number of universities choose to adhere to, such as the "Top Global University Project", but there is no official, independent organization that checks English education content or goals across all Japanese universities (Hasegawa 2017). As such, it is important for universities to develop their program in a way that builds on the skills of students graduating from MEXT's reformed system, and that prepares them for their career search and employment.

2. Personal expectations and motivations of university students regarding English acquisition by graduation

In order to consider what changes should be made to English courses in Japanese universities, it is essential to determine the content that is most beneficial to students. Regarding university students' motivation of learning English, we should pay attention to what Dörnyei (2001) calls “instrumental values” - skills and values related to practical benefits – in this case, the benefits learners can get from the mastery of English. Such benefits include: earning extra money; getting a promotion or better opportunities to move up the social ladder; pursuing further studies which require English; improving social position; pursuing hobbies and other activities which require English (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 56). If the acquisition of such values is of primary importance to university students and graduates, an emphasis on ESP (English for Special Purposes) courses over general English courses can be suggested.

While most universities in Japan offer general English as a required subject for first year students, ESP courses (if they exist) are usually integrated in the second or third year academic curriculum, and are usually not required subjects. As ESP courses are highly content-based, it may be necessary to use specialists in the specific field as instructors or course consultants.

The benefits of using content-based instruction in English classes are supported by many scholars. For example, Kasper's research (1997) on the effects of content-based courses linked to mainstream courses in academic settings showed that for the students of intermediate English proficiency, content-based instruction in their English class enhances their performance in the class, helps to facilitate the subsequent performance in other mainstream university courses, and increases the likelihood of earning a degree (Kasper 1997, p. 309).

Research by Song (2006) also shows that the students enrolled in content-linked English programs achieved better grades in that course and performed better in subsequent English courses. Song's content-linked courses' ESL students had higher English proficiency test pass rates as well as higher graduation and retention rates than non-content-linked ESL students (Song, 2006, p.420).

On the other hand, if students do not have English ability sufficient for ESP courses, instructors may need to reduce specific content and increase general English content.

3. Increased immigration and tourism likely to increase need for English speaking staff

Many work-oriented English education materials and programs in Japan focus on cross-border communication and overseas work. While these skills are essential, an emerging trend in Japan of increased immigration and tourism may force universities to include additional related skills in their programs such as how to work alongside foreigners or with foreign customers.

In December 2018, Japan's parliament passed an immigration law which should permit around 345,000 new "semiskilled" immigrant workers to enter the country over just the following 5 years (Denyer & Kashiwagi, 2018). This change allows foreign workers to obtain visas for a wider variety of professions (Mainichi Japan, 2019). It was reported that as of Oct. 31 2018, there were 1.46 million foreign workers in Japan, up 14% from the previous year. With the recent policy changes, the amount of foreign labor is sure to increase.

While many foreign employees are expected to study or undertake Japanese language education, so far there are few details regarding how or to what degree this will be accomplished (The Washington Post). The Ministry of Justice explained in a public assembly that the government is working to establish a support system for foreign workers in their native

languages or in English (NHK, 2019). Companies themselves will need Japanese staff who can communicate with foreign staff, whether in Japanese, English, or another language. Given that English is Japan's most established second language, and that it is widely taught in Asia and throughout the world, it follows that English usage should increase in Japanese workplaces that employ foreigners.

Additionally, the tourism industry has been booming, with average year-on-year growth of foreign visitors exceeding 20% since 2012 (JNTO, 2019). Tourism industries such as hotels, airlines and more should see an increased need for staff to speak English due to this trend.

Visitor Arrivals to Japan by Year

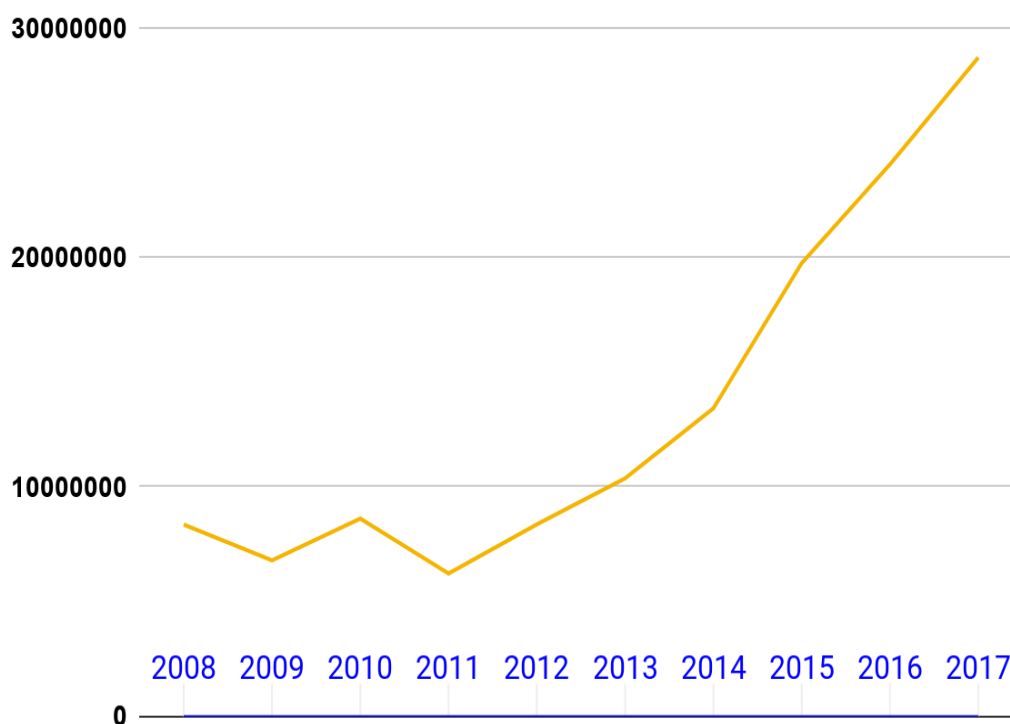


Figure 1. Visitor Arrivals to Japan

Data source: Japan National Tourism Organization

4. **Expectations of English ability for new recruits in Japan**

It appears that “practical” rather than “technical” English ability is most needed in today’s workplaces. Through the following summary of literature on the subject, we will attempt to find the specific practical skills that are needed from graduates.

In the past, one-way communication such as giving instructions was common, and the many available textbooks on the matter reflect this. However, the need for such one-way communication has declined over time (Mouer, 2015). Similarly, technical English has often been emphasized in educational programs, but research indicates that with exception to science industries, employers in Japan place less importance on technical English ability than on general English ability. In a survey by Glen Hill covering 63 companies in a variety of industries, the companies were asked to rate their needs for new recruits’ English skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Within each of these categories, the companies emphasized general English over technical English (Hill, 2013).

Richard Mark Nixon conducted a survey of recent graduates of a Japanese university. Of the 41 participants who mentioned they used English at work, 13 reported having direct verbal or written communications with people overseas. Only 4 reported that they had to perform translation or interpretation (Nixon, 2015).

Nakamura’s findings agree with Nixon’s in that productive English skills are more often used in the workplace than passive ones. In Nakamura’s study following Business School graduates, workers were expected to introduce their company and products, make and answer telephone calls, respond to complaints, and respond to proposals and give suggestions (Nixon, 2015; Nakamura, 2015).

In a study by Sampson (2017), 380 companies primarily in engineering, IT and chemicals were surveyed regarding necessary English skills. 69 companies reported English was important for all employees, and 236 reported that it was important for certain sections. The most used English abilities were: English for working overseas (244 companies or 64%), email & faxes (58%), document/information gathering (56%), technical discussions (49%), telephone calls (43%), negotiations (34%), meetings (33%). Note that “technical discussions” was listed by 49% of companies (Sampson, 2017, p.30).

Sampson’s study noted that larger companies tended to place more emphasis than smaller companies on the need for English ability (Sampson, 2017, p. 28).

5. English ability evaluations for job applicants

The distributor of the TOEIC, the Institute for International Business Communication, claimed in 2013 that 70% of recruiters took the TOEIC into account (IIBC, 2013). In Hill’s study, only 32% of recruiters reported that an English test of any sort was required for hiring, promotions, or overseas transfers (Hill, 2013). It is possible that while a company may not require an exam, it may take scores into account if they are received.

The TOEIC Institutional Program reported that as of 2015, 776 organizations in Japan were administering the TOEIC test to new recruits, with 34,085 examinees (IIBC p. 1). In addition to this, many Japanese people take the test individually. According to an IBC spokesperson, around 2 million Japanese people take the TOEIC each year (Hongo, 2014). Further, the number of TOEIC examinees graduating from liberal arts and science university programs has been increasing (IIBC p. 1). With such figures, it appears a significant number of applicants may indeed have TOEIC scores that they could submit to recruiters.

Unfortunately, TOEIC scores in Japan are generally low. According to the ETS' 2013 Report on Test Takers Worldwide, Japan was ranked 40th in TOEIC scores out of the 48 countries surveyed (Report on test takers, 2013). Additionally, average TOEIC scores for new graduates were largely unchanged between 2011-2015, with an average in 2015 of 494 (IIBC p. 1). Contrast this with Japan's average score of 513 in the same year, and the average in Asia of 571 (ETS, 2015, p5). This data suggests many new graduates may not have desirable scores to submit.

There is some debate over the TOEIC's role in evaluating English ability for work. Michihiro Hirai, a language-education consultant and former long-time employee of Hitachi corp., expressed his belief that overdependence on the TOEIC test as the sole indicator of English ability in industry and academia led to education focusing on passive skills (reading and listening) when active skills (speaking and writing) are more important to work (THE JAPAN TIMES, 2009).

Despite concerns over the TOEIC's usefulness for employers, there is no denying its ubiquity. Some universities could potentially benefit from assessing incoming students' ability using the TOEIC, and adjusting their program around the average scores as a starting point. Further, the university could once again require the TOEIC before graduation to estimate students' improvement over the course of the university program. This of course would consume some time and monetary resources.

6. Summary and recommendations

University English programs should prepare students to use English functionally at a minimum for work and ideally for other areas of interest as well. If universities are able to

ascertain students' instrumental values as well as identify the English skills required for a given career path, they may be able to provide corresponding English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses. Not only should this benefit students after graduation, it should raise students' motivation in English classes as students will easily understand how they will benefit from the program.

Universities planning to offer ESP or targeted English courses should remember that most employers value general, productive English skills over technical or passive skills. For most students, skills such as presenting a company or product, responding to complaints, giving suggestions, or simply conversing in English are of more importance than translation, reading or writing skills.

In addition, given increases in tourism and foreign labor, universities may choose to provide instruction on how to communicate with foreign employees or tourists within Japan.

Universities should be encouraged to evaluate students' career aspirations and other interests related to English. Upon such consideration, if ESP courses are needed, testing incoming students' English ability may be necessary to determine if such focused education is feasible at the students' current level. Finally, understanding trends in how English is being used in the workplace and throughout Japan will help universities to tailor and continually update their programs to meet students' needs.

References

1. Denyer, S., Kashiwagi, A. (2018, December 07). *Japan passes controversial new immigration bill to attract foreign workers.*

https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/japan-passes-controversial-new-immigration-bill-to-attract-foreign-workers/2018/12/07/a76d8420-f9f3-11e8-863a-8972120646e0_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d9b7a22c4b83

2. Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Educational Testing Service (ETS) (2013). *2013 Report on Test Takers Worldwide - ETS Global*.
https://www.etsglobal.org/Global/Eng/content/download/14400/237929/version/1/file/2013_Report_on_Test_Takers_Worldwide-TOEIC_Listening_and_Reading_Test.pdf
4. Educational Testing Service (ETS) (2015). *2015 Report on Test Takers Worldwide: The TOEIC® Listening and Reading Test*.
[https://www.etsglobal.org/content/download/16378/276472/file/2015 Report on Test Takers Worldwide -The TOEIC Listening and Reading Test.pdf](https://www.etsglobal.org/content/download/16378/276472/file/2015_Report_on_Test_Takers_Worldwide_-The_TOEIC_Listening_and_Reading_Test.pdf)
5. Educational Testing Service (ETS) (2018). *TOEFL iBT® Test Participates in Japan's University Entrance Examinations - ETS Open Notes*.
<https://news.ets.org/press-releases/toefl-ibt-test-participates-japans-university-entrance-examinations/>
6. Hasegawa, H. (2017). The Critical Role of Universities in Impacting upon English Education in Japan. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(1), 567-585.

7. Hill, G. (2013). Comparing Student and Corporate Perceptions of the Need for English in the Workplace. *OnCUE Journal*, 7(2), pp. 110-116.
8. Hongo, J. (2014). *Japan Ranks 40th of 48 Countries in TOEIC Scores*.
<https://blogs.wsj.com/japanrealtime/2014/07/18/japan-ranks-40th-of-48-countries-in-toeic-scores/>
9. IIBC. (2013, October). TOEIC scores for new recruits in FY2013. *TOEIC Newsletter*, no. 118. Tokyo, Japan: Educational Testing Service.
10. IIBC. (2015, September). TOEIC Scores for New Recruits in FY2015. *TOEIC Newsletter*, no. 126. Tokyo, Japan: Educational Testing Service.
11. Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO) (2019). *Japan Tourism Statistics*.
<https://statistics.jnto.go.jp/en/graph/#graph--inbound--travelers--transition>
12. Kasper, L. (1997). The impact of content-based instructional programs on the academic progress of ESL students. *English for Specific Purposes*, 16(4), pp. 309-320.
13. Leong, C., Ng, P. (2016). Primary school English reform in Japan: Policies, progress and challenges. *Current Issues in Languages Planning*, 17(2), pp. 215 – 225.
14. MacWhinnie, S., Mitchell, C. (2017). English classroom reforms in Japan: a study of Japanese university EFL student anxiety and motivation. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 2 (7)

DOI 10.1186/s40862-017-0030-2

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318511924_English_classroom_reforms_in_Japan_a_study_of_Japanese_university_EFL_student_anxiety_and_motivation

15. Mainichi Japan (2016, September 01). *Japan's new standardized university entrance exam to use private English testing.*

<https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20160901/p2a/00m/0na/014000c>

16. Mainichi Japan (2019, January 25) *Foreign workers in Japan at record high of 1.46 million.*

<https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20190125/p2g/00m/0dm/107000c>

17. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2014). *English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization.*

http://www.mext.go.jp/en/news/topics/detail/___icsFiles/afieldfile/2014/01/23/1343591_1.pdf

18. Mitchell, C. (2017). Language education pressures in Japanese high schools. *JALT Shiken*, 21(1), pp.1-11.

19. Morita, L. (2017), Why Japan needs English. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 3, pp.1-11.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2017.1399783>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23311886.2017.1399783?needAccess=true>

20. Mouer, R. (2015). A third opening without a third restoration? In R. Mouer (Ed.), *Globalizing Japan: Striving to Engage the World (Japanese Society Series)*. Balwyn North VIC Australia: Trans Pacific Press. pp. 247- 284.

21. Murata, A. (2015). Stuck in between: English language environment for international students and skilled foreign workers in Japan. In S. Horiguchi, Y. Imoto, & G. S. Poole (Eds.), *Foreign language education in Japan: Exploring qualitative approaches* (pp. 51–64). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
22. Nakamura, J. (2015). Workplace English Needs of Japanese Business Undergraduates. *On CUE Journal*, 7 (3), pp. 151-167.
23. NHK News (2019, March 19). *Gaikoku jinzai ukeire kakudai ni muke tonai de setsumeikai kigyō ga takai kanshin* (外国人材受け入れ拡大に向け都内で説明会 企業が高い関心)
https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20190319/k10011853541000.html?utm_int=news-business_contents_list-items_013
24. Nixon, R. (2015). Workplace English Usage in Japan. *The Journal of the Faculty of Foreign Studies*, 47, pp. 21-34.
https://aichipu.repo.nii.ac.jp/?action=repository_action_common_download&item_id=2212&item_no=1&attribute_id=22&file_no=1
25. Nixon, R. (2018). English Usage in Japanese Workplace Settings. *The Asian EFL Journal*, 20(1) pp. 4-18.
26. Ockey, G. (2017). Approaches and Challenges to Assessing Oral Communication on Japanese Entrance Exams. *JLTA Journal*, 20, pp. 3-14.
27. Sampson, R. (2017). Expectations and dreams: Industry and student ideas about future English use. *OnCUE Journal*, 10(1), pp. 21-38.

28. The Japan Times. (2009, October 5). *Engineers must have English skills to succeed.*

http://www.laurenceanthony.net/research/japan_times/japan_times_disc_20091005.pdf