

# English: Do students need it? Do they want it?

-Student Beliefs on Compulsory English-

FUKUDA Steve  
Center for General Education

SAKATA Hiroshi  
International Center

「英語が使える日本人」の発表から6年が経過しており、その成果の一つとして、例えば現在の日本人大学生が「英語学習の必要性に対する理解」、「国際化についての理解」、「英語学習に対する意欲向上」などの点でかなりの向上を見せているものと推測される。

そこで、本稿では297名の国立大学一年生にこれら3点に関するアンケート調査を実施し、現状における同政策の効果を見ることとした。結果、①学生は英語の必要性を感じているが、②個人的に学習する目的は明確ではない、③国際化の圧力は感じているが、その定義に関しては十分理解しているわけではない、ということが明らかになった。

キーワード: Students' beliefs, Compulsory English, Action Plan

## 1. Introduction

6 years have passed since the implementation of the Ministry of Education's 'Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Ability'. Therefore, a) Do the students now understand the need to study English? b) Are they informed in the concepts of Globalization? If so, c) Shouldn't students want to study English and be motivated to? This paper examines the beliefs of first-year university students on these inquiries. We will try not to rely on top-down '*impressionistic claims*' (Ikeno 2005). We concluded that students felt the need for English, but did not feel a clear individual reason of the need to study English. Furthermore, students feel the pressures of globalization somewhat, but feel the connotations are vague, and are not sure of the reasons of its pressure.

## 2. Plans of the Ministry of Education

The English language classes have been compulsory in the Japanese secondary and tertiary education system for a number of years. The plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities' (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology: MEXT 2003) has been widely known, arguably accepted, and discussed widely. Therefore the question arises: Has there been any positive change? Unofficially questioned by the authors, many teachers

and experts view the results negatively. MEXT is constantly trying to fix these so-called 'problems' in a top-down aspect. However, the changes we are looking for are in the students. Meanwhile, little seems to have been done to change their attitudes. A better question would be: How do the recipients at the bottom end, mainly the students, feel of all the commotion? There is a great need to understand how the recipients of these implementations perceive these issues.

The Ministry of Education (MEXT) has emphasized the necessity for the implementation of a stronger English education program. MEXT's justification to cultivate every citizen with a 'Good Command of English'<sup>1</sup> is as follows:

1. Due to the progress of the IT revolution
2. The advancement of globalization in various fields of the economy and society.
3. English abilities are important in terms of linking the nation with the rest of the world, obtaining the global understanding and trust, enhancing our international presence, and for further development.

MEXT asserts that the goals may be reached '*through instruction, basic and practical communication abilities will be acquired so that the entire public can conduct daily conversations and exchange information in English.*', and '*In order to foster such abilities in school education, it*

*is necessary to give a system of unified instruction through each school level.'*

They also seem to make an interpretation on how this goal is to be met:

*'In order to be able to "make use of English", it is necessary not only to have a knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but also the ability to use English for the purpose of actual communication. Thus, in English classes, instruction mainly based on grammar and translation or teacher-centered classes are not recommended. Through the repetition of activities making use of English as a means of communication, the learning of vocabulary and grammar should be enhanced, and communication abilities in "listening," "speaking," "reading," and "writing" should be fostered. Such techniques for instruction are necessary. To carry out such instruction effectively, it is important for teachers to establish many situations where students can communicate with each other in English and routinely to conduct classes principally in English. Through such opportunities, learners can experience the fulfillment of expressing themselves and understanding others, and feel the joy of learning English.'*

MEXT does not define who every citizen needs communicate with and what type of information needs to be exchanged. Daily conversations and exchange of information in professional field have a big gap between them in the aspect of English level. Their juxtaposition of these goals seems to be conflicting with one another. Furthermore, since language learning levels are diverse, it is irrational behind unifying classes unless there is a clear way of doing so.

All parents, teacher, and employers focus on the advancement of the students, or their young. In a society that focuses on educational background, it will be impossible to apply the above in classroom. In other words, the curriculum content has been decreased, but that clearly just gives teachers more allotted time to actually finish the content, or focus more on the advanced content of the examination to get into college.

## **2.2. Faults on the Front Line**

Aspinall (2003) sheds some light on these arguments. He lists 5 reasons for the poor level of English.

1. The difference in language in terms of word order and pronunciation, and the fact that Japan cannot be compared to foreign countries whose mother tongue is in the same language family.
2. There is not much contact with English in the daily life of Japanese.
3. The Grammar Translation (GT) teaching methods for examination are the mainstream of instruction. Hence, the teaching of GT compared to the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).
4. The cultural characteristics of a non-communicative language classroom, 'better' meaning 'showing-off', and learning strategies of only one correct answer.
5. English is seemed to be perceived as a 'cool' language, and something to have fun learning, resulting in the flippant attitudes perhaps.

The first two show the difficulty acquiring the language. The third reason conflicts with the MEXT goals of necessity and the last two assess students' feelings or beliefs of instruction. Moteki (2004) implies that communication or a good command of speaking ability is impossible without the basics of grammar and vocabulary,<sup>3,4</sup> bringing forth the question: Is there really a need to change instruction? The kids may have fun in classes, but will they actually learn or acquire English with more communicative classes with rudimentary content. Goodman (2003) states that '*many people think the system has failed to equip enough Japanese people with the political success in an increasing globalized international environment*' and that on the other side of low English levels stand the internationally great achievements in math and science.<sup>5</sup> This is mind-boggling when considering that more students take the Foreign Language (91.4% of all students) section of the Center Examination than Math 1(67.3%) and Science 1 (38.8%).<sup>6</sup> The exam has also been the cause of many of the problems of poor English Level, which Moteki

(2004) seems to disagree. In fact, he thinks the best thing for students is studying for the exam, because it gives them a more solid foundation to accept the 'speaking' and 'listening' abilities with ease.

### 3. Defining Globalization

MEXT seems to use the term 'globalization' variously. It is an abstract term in need of a definition. The widely used source from professionals to laymen, Wikipedia, suggests that globalization '*is an umbrella term for a complex series of economic, social, technological, and political changes seen as increasing interdependence and interaction between people and companies in disparate locations.*' 'Globalization', or '*kokusaika*' in Japanese, should be distinguished between the terms 'Internationalism.' In Japanese, the former and the latter do not seem to be differentiated. Wikipedia suggests that 'internationalism' is a '*means of adapting products such as publications, hardware or software for non-native environments, especially other nations and cultures.*' However, the discussion between the terms are beyond this paper, we will be using the term as is widely used as a starting point of many students research, Wikipedia's 'Globalization' definition. 'Globalization' has economically and socially (or culturally) positive and negative effects. A positive effect is one which brings an increased standard of living which inevitably brings social prosperity. On the other hand, negative effects include cultural assimilation via cultural imperialism, in other words, the destruction of local society and cultures, especially in developing countries. The cultural aspect of 'globalization', which many Japanese seem to define the term, is thought of to bring about greater international exchange or spreading of multiculturalism, international travel, immigration (legal and illegal), world-wide fads and Pop Culture (the famous being Pokemon from Japan), development of global infrastructure, increased number of global standards (i.e. copyright laws), terrorism.

### 4. The Front-line

The '1.53 shock of 1991'<sup>7</sup> has jump started many problems, such as the '2006 problem'<sup>8</sup>. The students of the '2006 problem' are said to be the first batch of youngsters instructed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Great Educational Reform which includes a 30% curriculum reduction, 5 day school week, and relaxed education. These students have apparently also been encouraged in creative thinking (Goodman 2003).

Ikeno (2005) points out that '*While active discussions have been conducted among applied linguistics, the question of how learners think about these issues has remained unexplored.*' The same can be said about other issues involving the education system. An understanding of student beliefs has many important aspects. First of all, they are in fact the recipients of all considerations and actions. Also, as Ikeno (2005) points out, that '*many researchers and practitioners make impressionistic claims about the mentality of Japanese people.*' Therefore, there is a need to see the discussion from a different perspective, that of the students. We need to be informed from the students' perspectives on compulsory English language education and globalization.

First of all, how do the learners feel of English as a compulsory course? Do they actually know why they have to study English? Are they motivated intrinsically? Second of all, do they actually feel they have a future connection with 'globalization'? Do they feel it will affect their future? What does the word mean to them? The students that will be asked are said to be part of the '2006 problem' for they are said to be brought up in the more relaxed curriculum. This curriculum focuses on cultivating students for the 'global age' with a good command of English.

### 5. Survey

#### 5.1. Participants

A total of 207 first-year college students of a Japanese national university participated in this survey. They were majoring in agriculture, education, engineering, law,

medicine, and science. All participants were taking English as a compulsory course meeting once a week for 15 weeks. The survey was given in the last class of a 15-week course. All instruction in the classes was held in English with some Japanese for facilitating comprehension when necessary. The instruction technique used was more focused on CLT than GT, and the instructor's aim was on increasing or sustaining motivation of the students and gaining the competence to feel at ease with English and become autonomous.

### 5.2. Materials

The participants were asked to complete a 6-item survey on their beliefs of compulsory English education and globalization. A 5-point Likert scale of: [1]Strongly agree, [2]agree, [3] Neither agree nor disagree, [4] Disagree, and [5] Strongly disagree, was used in asking the participants the rate of agreement to each question. The statements in the questionnaire consisted of the following:

1. English will be valuable to my future.
2. My feelings toward English have changed after entering college.
3. All Japanese should learn English.
4. When I hear a person using fluent English, I think they are showing-off.
5. My teachers have taught me the reason I have to learn English.
6. Globalization and internationalization will have an effect on my future.

The present study is intended to be exploratory. The data will be discussed in the view of the participants. Due to time constraints, we will only be discussing means of the results. The discussion will be 1) How much the participants feel the need for English, 2) If participants feel they have the understanding of and necessity to study English, and 3) The participant's feelings on globalization in relation to their future. Results with the highest mean score on [neither agree nor disagree] will be thrown out, and we will be looking at the second highest number.

Table-1. Beliefs' Questionnaire Results

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Q1	.51	.39	.08	.00	.00
Q2	.07	.43	.32	.14	.02
Q3	.10	.23	.40	.20	.04
Q4	0	.04	.12	.45	.37
Q5	.01	.23	.42	.26	.06
Q6	.17	.46	.27	.07	.01

### 6. Results and Discussion

The results of statement 1 (English will be valuable to my future) show that many students do feel the need to study English for their future or an advantage to studying English. When asked, 'How they think English will affect their future?' most students felt the need for English in their work in any occupation. Further studies, on how they think English will affect their future will bring insight on the type of motivation the students hold. As Van Lier (1996) pointed out that motivation 'is very a important, if not the most important factor in language learning.' Furthermore, language instruction should be intrinsically motivated (Fukuda 2008). Should learning a language be forced on students who have no interest or motivation after six or so years?

Statement 2 (My feelings toward English has changed after entering college.) shows us that many students are having more fun learning English at the college level. In other words, they seem to enjoy communicative classes more than the GT methods most students have experienced in secondary education. This is obvious considering that all people like to avoid tedious and tiresome tasks, as in the case, arguably, with the GT method. Therefore, we asked students, 'In what ways did your feelings change?' Many pointed out that they simply had more fun and some even mentioned feeling communication practice is simply more useful. It might also point out students feel the need for more communicative lessons. However, Moteki (2003) pointed out the importance for studying grammar,

and the questions remain if the students are able to evaluate their own improvement or just want to have fun. Further inquiry with students who need English in different situations in the future and simply among students who like and dislike English is necessary. However, we can say this might help cultivate intrinsic motivation and create more autonomous learning.

Surprisingly, statement 3 (All Japanese should learn English) resulted in an almost even distribution. However, students mostly agreed with the statement. This might show the fact that they feel or know the necessity to learn English as in statement 1, but the even distribution shows us that some do not feel the necessity. Some students even exclaimed they will not need English in the future or only people who need it should learn it. Furthermore, some mentioned that it is more important to learn different types of languages, for example languages of the neighboring countries North and South Korea, Russia, and China. Some understand the fact that 'globally' does not equal 'English.'

Aspinall (2003) reported that many students feel that a person is perceived as 'showing off' when showing a high skill of English. However, the results of statement 4 (When I hear a person using fluent English, I think they are showing-off.) shows otherwise. Further research is warranted in this area in questioning the other way around. We do not want to make '*impressionistic opinions*' as Ikeno (2005) strongly asserts. This might just be a fact of the modesty in Japan, or they might know the importance of simply practicing.

Many participants disagreed with statement 5 (My teachers have taught me the reasons and necessity to learn English). This raises several questions. Is the only reason they learn English because teacher, parents, or society tells them to? Do they learn it only because it is perceived as 'cool'? Before teaching any aspect of English, especially at the college level, there might be a need to concretely explain to students the need to learn English. Asking questions about why they think they

must study English, many have felt there is no clear reason, because it is required, or they might need it in the future. One student even clearly stated it was just for the Center Exam to get into college. Here, we see the 'niceness' or docility, perhaps, of some students. However, to intrinsically motivate students we need to concretely explain or have concrete reasons why each student should learn English to the students, teachers, and employers.

Almost all participants felt that 'globalization' would effect there future. The results for statement 6 (Globalization and Internationalization will have an effect on my future) shows us that more than half believe this. Interestingly, students did not perceive a good definition of the term shown in answers such as: it is learning about and understanding other countries values from a nationalist point of view. Other answers were those, such as: To be able to get along with anyone, to be able to advance speaking English, to speak English with the increasing numbers of foreigners in Japan, or seeing more foreigners everywhere we go. A number of students might not have grasped a clear understanding of the term, and a feel they are just forced to learn English.

Finally, further data on the parents' feelings, especially in secondary education and now in primary education because of the implementation of English classes, needs to be gathered. It would also be interesting to see the views of employers as well. Certainly, they would want every employee to learn English, but would they rather have many inadequate users of English or have every employee in the field ready professionally, and a few who have a good command of English?

## 7. Conclusion

The discussion on: 1) How much the participants feel the need for English 2) If participants feel they have the understanding of and necessity to study English and 3) The student beliefs on globalization and their future showed a need for further evaluation and research to understand more deeply the reasons for the results. There is

also a further need for more statistical research to show validity and reliability. However, after looking at each result in depth, we can say that 1) Students feel the need for English 2) Students do not feel they are getting a clear definition of the need to study English and 3) Students feel the pressures of globalization, and the need for it in the future, but are vague on their meanings of the term.

In other words, students perceive English communication a necessity and realize the needs for it in the future, but only in a top-down sense.

Finally, urgency of the necessity in the aspect of instruction has been made clear. Before coercing English studies, explaining the how and why of studying English and not just spoon feeding it to students is essential. Simultaneously, an understanding of the goals mentioned by Moteki (2004) above, and instruction in fostering the student might be more meaningful. If not, instruction ultimately might just be a waste time unless sustaining or increasing intrinsic motivation (Fukuda 2008), or concentrating more on those in need or motivated could be more meaningful.

Even we cannot say that we fully understand the concepts of globalization and the need for every student to learn English at any level required. We feel that many instructors in the primary, secondary, and even the tertiary level have the same thoughts. Undoubtedly, there is no panacea to the problem in pedagogical aspects, but we can and can only hope instructors on the front lines come close in terms of the clearing definitions and reasons of necessities of the source of the top-down decisions to the individual student in the near future.

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a. Progress on Education reform

b. Redesigning Compulsory Education

c. 新しい時代における教養教育の在り方

d. 教育基本法案

e. 21世紀を展望した我が国の教育在り方

9) Globalization [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com) taken 2006/8/1

10) Internationalization and localization [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com) 2006/8/1

## Footnotes

1. 'Japanese with a Good Command of English' is the name MEXT uses for the committee for the English education reform.

2. Goodman (2003) points out that the education is second-handedly controlled by the parents and employers of society. The former sees schools and education as a means of social reproduction. Therefore, Parents feel the need of a good educational background, meaning a high score on examinations in the meritocracy/egalitarianism of Japan's society. The latter sees schools as a place for creating ideal citizens for the workforce. For example, The cultivation of hardworking, literate, numerate men who put work before the family, and women who would work a few years until producing the next batch of ideal workers. Hence, as what the employers are looking for, GT method is used as another form needing much effort and determination to pass.

3. Moteki (2004) implies that studying for test, like the Center Examination, actually does good for the students, and that it gives students the basics which make acquiring English easier in the long run.

4. Moteki (2003) points out, though Japanese students are at a disadvantage, they can learn English with no problem. Of course, he points out the need for effort and determination, as well as 2000 hours of study and the acquiring of 10,000 vocabulary words.

5. According to the 'International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement' and the 'Third International Mathematics and Science Study', Japanese classroom instruction in math and science is challenging and urges more critical thinking and progressive techniques.(Goodman 2003)

6. The number of examinees is as follows: 520,084 for English, 495,197 for Japanese, 383,698 for Math 1, 221,284 for Science 1. However, English did

have the highest average score with a percentage of 58.09 compared to Math 1's 48.03, and Science 1's 48.44

7. 1991 is the year Japan's fertility rate had dropped to a staggering 1.47. This number is lower than the 1.53 needed to keep the country stable demographically.

8. 2006 is the year of the first batch of university students are entering universities under the new curriculum of 30% reduction of hours.