

University in English? Questions of Confidence

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This paper reports on an investigation into the low application rates of students at a Japanese public high school with an international studies curriculum to English-medium university programs in Japan. The study examines one potential reason for low application rates among students who have expressed interest in such university programs. An examination of confidence in the four basic skill areas, and specifically in respect to participation in such programs, shows that these students had lower confidence in their speaking skills relative to their listening, reading, and writing skills. The questions that arise from this research, including whether or not confidence levels influence application rates, are meaningful not only for universities offering English-medium curricula, but also for primary and secondary school educators.

本論文では、ある公立高校国際学科の生徒の、全授業を英語で行う日本の大学の学部に対する出願率が低いことに関する調査を報告する。本調査では、英語で授業を行う学部への生徒の関心が高いにもかかわらず、出願率が低い潜在的な理由について分析を行った。上述の学部での授業に必要な英語の4技能に関して、生徒の自信レベルを調査したところ、リスニング、リーディング、ライティングのスキルに比べて、スピーキングスキルに対する自信が低いという結果が示された。本調査結果から示唆される課題は、生徒の自信レベルが出願率に影響を与えるかという問題にとどまらず、英語によるカリキュラムを実施する大学及び、小、中、高校の教育関係者にとっても非常に重要である。

The number of Japanese universities offering liberal arts curricula with English-medium programs (hereafter, EM programs) in the first and second years of instruction has been steadily increasing since the early 2000s. Hosei, Meiji Gakuin, and Waseda have joined the ranks of Sophia and International Christian University (ICU) in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Added to these institutions are regional bastions that include Akita International in Tohoku, Ritsumeikan in Kansai, and Asia Pacific in Kyushu. The increase might be explained by a call from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEXT) to nurture “global human resources” (*gurōbaru jinzai*) (MEXT, 2011a). The introduction of

such innovative multi-disciplinary programs might also serve as an incentive to attract the shrinking body of university-age students caused by national demographic trends. Nevertheless, studying at the tertiary level in a second language imposes considerable linguistic and cognitive demands on the students, including a different learning style, which requires a student to become “an active speaking agent” (Sawir, 2005, p. 570). This intellectual challenge does not appear to be suppressing the popularity of these programs, however. For example, for general applications (*ippan nyūshi*) for April 2014 admission, there were 4.5 times as many applications for available places in both Waseda’s SILS and Hosei’s GIS and a remarkable 13.4 times as many for Akita International (SILS Waseda University, 2014; Hosei University, 2014; Akita International University, 2014). Given that these EM programs are clearly popular, it might be expected that students from high schools with specialized foreign language curricula and content-based classes with a focus on international studies would be well suited to enroll in such programs.

In academic years 2011 through 2013, when the research was carried out, third year students at High School A scored considerably higher on the TOEIC than the Japanese national average. For example, in 2012, the average TOEIC-IP score for 3rd year students at High School A was 607, which compares very favorably not only with the national average of 413 for 3rd year high school students, but also with the national average of 493 for 4th year university students (The Institute for International Business Communication, n.d.). One reason for these comparably high TOEIC-IP scores is that the curriculum at High School A is considerably more focused on English language study than might be expected at a Japanese public high school. The number of compulsory English credits at a standard public high school is five, five and three in the first, second and third years respectively, for a total of 13 credits. At High School A, the compulsory English credits amount to eight, eight and seven for a total of 23 credits, considerably more than the minimum required by MEXT (H. Yokoya, personal

communication, March 4, 2016). Specialized English language courses available at High School A include Speech and Debate, English Literature (using original, authentic texts and not graded readers), Human Rights (research and presentations), Cross Cultural Understanding studied in English, and, for 3rd year students, a four-skills language course involving readings, discussion, critical analysis and essay writing on a variety of social and political topics. Furthermore, all 3rd year students submit a minimum 5-page research paper in English as a graduation requirement. On account of this curriculum, the school attracts a number of students who have lived abroad for a considerable part of their school education. On average there are 15-20 so-called “returnees” per cohort, and they have a special curriculum in the first and second years. In recognition of the school’s specialized curriculum and the students’ advanced language skills, High School A has twice been designated a Super English Language High School by MEXT (2003-2008), and in 2014 was designated a Super Global High School (MEXT, 2011b; MEXT, 2014). Both the curriculum and students’ test results at High School A suggest that it has a rigorous academic program in which students gain the experience and skills that are very useful, if not essential, for university EM programs. Nevertheless, these acquired skills have not translated into high application or enrollment rates to university EM programs.

Contemplating the reasons for the low application rates to EM programs, the researchers posited at least three possible contributing factors. Some students may want to pursue a field of study not contained in EM program curricula, for example, engineering, medicine, or law. Another factor may be financial considerations, as the greater majority of EM undergraduate programs are at private universities. Yet a third determinant may be that some students prefer an undergraduate program in an English speaking country if they want to study in English.

These factors may partly explain the lack of motivation to apply to EM programs among students at High School A. However, there may be another influence contributing to low application rates, specifically, lack of learner confidence, which has been identified as a key demotivating factor in language learning (Dörnyei, 1994; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). Dörnyei’s framework of L2 motivation at the learner level lists four subsuming components of self-confidence (Figure 1).

Factors contributing to *language use anxiety* include the learning environment. Conditions in which the learner can “maintain a positive social

image” provide for self-confidence (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013, pp. 110-111, 121). Another factor influencing self-confidence that Dörnyei (1994) identifies is *self-efficacy*, defined by Bandura (1977) as “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce certain outcomes” (p. 193). *Causal attributions* and *perceived language competence* also influence confidence. As Weiner (1992) explains, “prior behavior-outcome experiences...in similar circumstances” impact expectancy (p. 205); failure tends to lead to low expectancy, whereas success tends to lead to high expectancy. In other words, feelings of inadequate competence in English classes that exert more demands than typical high school English classes might lead a student to perceive himself as lacking the linguistic tools necessary, and therefore the confidence, to cope with a four-year undergraduate curriculum taught primarily in English. It is this confidence, or lack thereof, among students at High School A that we investigate in the study.

Figure 1. Dörnyei’s Framework of L2 Motivation at the Learner Level

Self-Confidence
Language use anxiety
Self-efficacy
Causal attributions
Perceived L2 competence

Source: Dörnyei & Ushioda (2013, p. 52)

Methodology and Results

A questionnaire (see Appendix) was given to all third year students in late May 2011, 2012, and 2013, one to two weeks before their spring mid-term exams. This timing was chosen to reduce the influence of those exam results on the students’ responses. The questionnaires were anonymous in order to promote truthful and unguarded responses. Homeroom teachers were asked to distribute, conduct, and collect the questionnaires. The researchers were not present. In 2011, 2012, and 2013, 109, 142, and 148 questionnaires were collected, respectively. Two questionnaires were eliminated from the analysis in 2011 and again in 2012 because they were incomplete.

Respondents were asked to indicate their interest level in English-only undergraduate programs at Japanese universities on a four-point Likert scale (“Not at all”, “Not very”, “Somewhat”, and “Very”). In each of the three years, more than 60% of responses were positive (“Somewhat” or “Very”).

Table 1. Percentage of Responses to the Question “Do English-only Undergraduate Programs at Japanese Universities Appeal to You?”

Year	Not at all	Not very	Somewhat	Very
2011	11.3%	25.5%	40.6%	22.6%
2012	16.3%	22.7%	36.2%	24.8%
2013	10.9%	20.4%	40.1%	28.6%

With this positive interest established, what then is contributing to low application and enrollment rates in EM programs by students at High School A? We tested our hypothesis that students lacked self-confidence in their English ability by asking them to rate how confident they were that their English skills are good enough to participate in a Japanese university undergraduate program taught exclusively in English. Students rated each of the four skill areas – speaking, listening, reading, and writing – separately on a four-item Likert scale: “very” confident, “somewhat” confident, “not very” confident, and “not at all” confident.

Looking only at the respondents who indicated a positive interest (“very” interested or “somewhat” interested) in EM programs, confidence in passive skills was higher than confidence in active skills. Table 2 shows that a large majority of respondents at High School A were “very” confident or “somewhat” confident in their reading and listening skills.

Table 2. Passive Skills: Percentage of Students Responding Positively to the Question “How Confident Are You That Your English Skills are Good Enough to Participate in [an EM Program]?”

Year	Reading	Listening
2011	60.3%	69.1%
2012	68.6%	70.9%
2013	61.4%	74.3%

This level of confidence could be explained by the fact that high school English classes tend to focus on improving those skills necessary to pass university entrance exams (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009), which have a considerable amount of reading and listening comprehension questions. In addition to the required English courses, as outlined above, many students at High School A also take other courses taught exclusively in English during their second and third years, which might contribute to relatively high confidence in listening.

If we accept that passive skills develop earlier than active skills, we would expect that student confidence in active skills would be generally lower than confidence in passive skills, and this is borne out in the data (Table 3).

Table 3. Active Skills: Percentage of Students Responding Positively to the Question “How Confident Are You That Your English Skills are Good Enough to Participate in [an EM Program]?”

Year	Writing	Speaking
2011	33.8%	33.8%
2012	52.3%	31.4%
2013	43.6%	36.6%

In first language acquisition, oral skills develop before written skills; however, in second language acquisition, especially when the learners have already acquired a level of literacy in their first language, students generally learn all four skills in tandem. It could be argued, though, that the goal of English language instruction in Japanese high schools is not acquisition but rather the ability to pass university entrance exams. University entrance exams in Japan test listening and reading skills in addition to structure and written expression. Some universities add a writing section to their exams. Speaking skills, however, are generally not tested in university entrance exams and consequently are unlikely to receive the emphasis that the other three skills do. Therefore, we should not be surprised that students at High School A had the least amount of confidence in their speaking skills.

The higher confidence in writing skills can be explained by the fact that students at High School A have extensive experience writing in English. In addition to elective writing courses and the compulsory graduation thesis in English, from 2012, all third year students at High School A are required to take a multi-skills English course in which they write seven full essays. This course was an elective in 2011, when only 60% of students took the class. This might explain the lower confidence in writing that year.

Although this low confidence in speaking might not pose a problem in regard to university entrance exams, it might become problematic when considering whether or not to apply to university EM programs, which tend to mimic a North American seminar-style learning environment in which students are expected to actively engage in oral discourse.

Discussion

The study results show that of the four skill areas, students have the least amount of confidence in their speaking ability. Considering the nature of Japanese high school English language curricula, in which there is a responsibility on teachers to prepare students to pass university entrance exams, this is not particularly surprising. However, the size of the gap between confidence in speaking and confidence in the other three skills among students at High School A is noteworthy. By itself, low confidence in speaking may not explain the low application and enrollment rates in undergraduate EM programs by students at High School A. However, it does appear possible that such a low level of self-confidence in oral language ability could be a factor that influences students when they select which university programs they apply for. As confidence is determined by past or current experience, the researchers considered the following contributory factors which might explain this low confidence in speaking among the students from High School A.

1. At High School A there are bi-weekly speaking and listening courses, compulsory for first year students and elective for second year students. There is not, however, a speaking-centered course for third year students. The absence of this type of course inevitably results in a drop in, if not elimination of, opportunities to practice speaking in English. This likely has a negative influence on students' confidence in their speaking skills.
2. The multi-skills English course that third year students at High School A are required to take (involving reading, discussion and essay writing on social topics such as euthanasia, the Japanese SDF, and jury trials) may be too complex for students to be able to participate fully in group discussions. Students might be reluctant to speak up if they do not feel knowledgeable enough on a topic or do not have the language skills to discuss the topic. Furthermore, they might not see a need to participate because the grade for this course is based primarily on essay and exam scores. Moreover, such classroom-based discussion tasks are inherently under strict time constraints and therefore require a certain level of spontaneity if students are to participate in the allotted time. In contrast, reading and writing tasks are generally given as homework, allowing students to spend as much time as necessary to complete the tasks.
3. Students with higher level language skills, for example, students with extensive experience

living abroad or students who have a parent who is a native English speaker, are streamed into separate English-medium classes in the first and second years. The third year multi-skills classes, however, are comprised of students irrespective of English language ability. One possible consequence of these blended classes is that students with weaker English skills lose confidence in their speaking ability. These students have been observed to remain quiet when working in groups with higher level students. Compared to the other skills, confidence in speaking may be more strongly impacted since speaking is a communal activity in which students are immediately aware of each other's levels (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). Listening, reading, and writing, in contrast, are discrete activities where the results—and the corresponding gap between levels—are not obvious to the whole class.

Conclusion

The study's initial intention to investigate confidence levels of third year high school students was precipitated by the fact that the number of students in High School A applying to English-medium university curricula was fewer than anticipated. Survey results showed that students were significantly less confident in their speaking abilities than they were in the three other main language skills. This is clear. What is not clear is if this apparent lack of confidence in speaking skills significantly influenced students' decisions to apply to such programs or not. Further investigation into factors influencing students' behavior would be meaningful from both secondary and tertiary educational perspectives. If some teacher-controlled classroom occurrence in high school, including the curriculum itself, is negatively affecting student confidence and motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013), identifying such problems would be the first step to remedying them.

High School A's educational goals include that students "acquire the ability to understand others and express themselves in English by actually using English and developing the comprehensive skills necessary to communicate effectively in English." Raising students' confidence in these skills, in particular speaking skills, is crucial if we are to nurture individuals who are productive participants in a global society. The results of this study suggest that it is important that we as teachers strive to find the most effective ways to help students to develop both their skills and their self-confidence to become those productive participants in a global society.

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ELT Materials Review, a new international peer-reviewed journal from IATEFL's Materials Writers SIG, is calling for submissions to its inaugural issue planned for autumn 2017.

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SURVEY

Please answer the following questions in either English or Japanese.

Thank you for your cooperation.

英語、または日本語で次の質問を教えてください。ご協力ありがとうございます。

1. List the three universities and courses you are most interested in at this point in your university application process.

あなたが大学の志望校を考えはじめたときに最も興味をもった大学・学部・学科の上位3つを書いてください。

	大学	学部	学科
#1			
#2			
#3			

2. The number of Japanese universities that offer undergraduate degree programs taught exclusively in English is increasing. Do English-only undergraduate programs at Japanese universities appeal to you? (Circle one answer.)

明治学院大学の国際学部(GTS)や上智大学の国際教養学部(FLA)のようにすべての授業が英語で行われる学部に興味がありますか？

Very much
ある

Somewhat
ややある

Not much
あまりない

Not at all
ない

3. How confident are you that your English skills are good enough to participate in such a program as GTS or FLA? Please answer the question whether you are interested in such programs or not and rate your level of confidence for each of the four skills **as honestly as possible**.

GTS や FLA のような課程の授業に参加するとしたら、あなたは自分の英語力にどれくらい自信がありますか？英語の4技能(話す、聞く、読む、書く)のそれぞれにどれくらい自信があるか率直に教えてください。

Speaking: Very Somewhat Not very Not at all
話す ある ややある あまりない ない

Listening: Very Somewhat Not very Not at all
聞く ある ややある あまりない ない

Reading: Very Somewhat Not very Not at all
読む ある ややある あまりない ない

Writing: Very Somewhat Not very Not at all
書く ある ややある あまりない ない

Circle the words that indicate how much you agree with each of the following statements.
一番適していると思うものに○をつけてください。

4. I have enough opportunities to practice speaking English in my 3rd year YIS English classes.
私が受けている3年生の英語授業では話す機会が十分あります。

agree 思う	somewhat agree やや思う	somewhat disagree やや思わない	disagree 思わない
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5. I have a sufficient level of proficiency in spoken English to actively participate in my 3rd year YIS English classes.
私は、3年生の英語授業で積極的に参加できる英語を話せる能力が十分あります。

agree 思う	somewhat agree やや思う	somewhat disagree やや思わない	disagree 思わない
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6. I am interested in the topics discussed in my 3rd year YIS English classes.
私の受けている3年生の英語授業のトピックには興味があります。

agree 思う	somewhat agree やや思う	somewhat disagree やや思わない	disagree 思わない
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7. I am comfortable speaking in English in front of my peers in my 3rd year YIS English classes.
3年生の英語授業ではクラスメートの前で英語を喋るのは恥ずかしくない。

agree 思う	somewhat agree やや思う	somewhat disagree やや思わない	disagree 思わない
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8. If you have any additional comments regarding the above four questions, write them below.
上記の4つの質問に関して追加したいコメントがありましたら、自由に記入してください。

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9. Are you interested in attending a four-year university in an English-speaking country?
すべての授業が英語で行われる日本の大学の学部よりも英語圏の4年制大学へ進学することに興味がありますか。

Very much Somewhat Not much Not at all
ある ややある あまりない ない

10. Male 男性 Female 女性

11. Have you ever lived abroad? 海外に住んだことがありますか? Yes はい No いいえ

If Yes, list the countries where you lived and the ages when you lived in each one.
「はい」であれば、住んだ国とそれぞれに何才から何才まで住んだのか書いてください。

country 国	from age ~才から	to age ~才まで