Students' Beliefs About the Function of EFL in Higher Education

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This study examined the language learning beliefs of 76 university students. The primary aims were (a) to provide evidence on the views students have of the role of English in higher education as informed by their perceived future language needs, (b) to achieve a more thorough understanding of the specific content students feel they need in their studies, and (c) to develop and validate a questionnaire that would serve these purposes. The results show that the respondents valued conversational-based course content benefitting the English needs of their future occupations, as well as oral skills practice over writing practice. A principal finding of the study was the existence of fundamental mismatches between certain student beliefs, institutional policies, and what teachers suggest is beneficial EFL study, which could have negative implications for the language classroom. However, awareness of student beliefs can inform course planning and instruction.

この研究では主に以下の三つの目的で76名の学生の言語学習における信条を検討している。(1)学生が必要とする外国語スキルを知り、『高等教育における英語学習の役割』の学生の見解を明らかにする。(2)学生が英語学習の中で何を必要と考えているのか、より具体的な理解をする。(3)以上の内容を確認・証明できるアンケートの作成。アンケートの結果は、学生がライティングより、会話やスピーキングの授業が将来仕事で役に立つと信じていることを判明した。また、この研究を通して、学生が考える学ぶべきこと、大学が教育に必要としている中身、教師が有益なEFL学習と推奨する内容、この3つの間の根本的なずれを発見した。この結果は外国語を学ぶ教室の中で矛盾が存在しかねないことを意味している。しかしながら、学生が外国語学習で何に重点をおいているかを理解することは、コース立案および授業の形成に役立てることができると言えるだろう。

L EARNER BELIEFS have long been recognised as an important construct in language-learning research. Identifying these beliefs and their effect help to determine the approaches to course design, class activities, and teacher instruction that can engage students positively. Although the amount of research conducted into learner beliefs is growing, it remains an underexplored variable affecting language acquisition, with a number of factors having received only brief attention.

The aim of this study was to investigate how students view the function of EFL at university. To determine how students perceive English study, it is essential to redirect the strategic focus from previous belief research. Some studies have looked at the *wants* of students yet have only highlighted student longing for games, songs, and fun, with a de-emphasis on content. More in-depth responses could be garnered by having the students focus on their *needs*. This is all the more necessary given that the purposes of English study are often unclear for those in non-

English majors. In order to understand student beliefs about the function of university English, we should attempt to elicit what class content or activities they believe to be important and why.

Literature Review

The Nature of Learner Beliefs

All foreign language learners hold various beliefs. These beliefs can be about the nature of language, the tasks they encounter both inside and outside the classroom, and the learners' own perceived abilities in learning a language (Sakui & Gaies, 1999). In any given second or foreign language classroom, students can hold a vast range of beliefs, from how long it takes to achieve language fluency, to the best techniques for learning a language, to whether they will ever achieve a native-like accent.

Beliefs are viewed as understandings that can be formed by a learner's educational experiences (Dole & Sinatra, 1994), or as a part of the learner's understanding of their learning goals and needs (Flavell, 1987). These beliefs will culminate in the learner's conception of what their language studies should encompass and will in turn influence their attitude and motivation towards their classes, with their expectations, satisfaction, and commitment all dependent on the fulfillment of such beliefs (Horwitz, 1988).

Research Into Learner Beliefs

A few influential studies laid the groundwork for understanding learner beliefs in a range of settings (Horwitz, 1988; Kern, 1995; Wenden, 1986), and subsequent studies have utilised their methodology in numerous cultural and educational contexts. Horwitz (1988) developed the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) to study the beliefs of typical groups of foreign-language learners in the USA and to create teacher and researcher awareness of the variety of beliefs that learners hold. She believed that certain beliefs could possibly affect students' ability to learn a second or foreign language, and also have consequences for instruction (p. 284). The BALLI contained 34 belief statements with which students were asked to select their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. The findings showed consistency in the beliefs of learners of different target languages and that, as a determiner of the diversity of students' opinions, the BALLI can be helpful to teachers in a variety of settings. The instrument became popular and was used in a large number of belief studies.

In Japan, variations on the BALLI have featured regularly in research on English learning beliefs, their utilisation ranging from the incorporation of a few of its items (O'Donnell, 2003; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), to the use of many context-sensitive modifications of its items (Riley, 2009; Sakui & Gaies, 1999), to instruments made entirely of its items (Burden, 2002; Jones & Gardner, 2009). However, the tendency for belief research in Japan to generally follow the template set out by the BALLI has caused any areas outside of its scope to remain only partially explored after two decades, indicating little in the way of alternative methodology. Beliefs about the function of EFL in higher education are one area that has yet to receive significant attention, although aspects of it have been partly covered by the range of beliefs covered in the BALLI-influenced studies.

Sakui and Gaies (1999) developed an instrument that consisted of items compiled from a number of existing instruments used in belief research, as well as a few original items. Their findings lend support to the view that Japanese university learners of English were perhaps shifting towards a greater approval of communicative-oriented pedagogy and away from traditional approaches. The majority of participants agreed that they would have many opportunities to use English in their lives and that English would help them to get a good job. To this

end, they felt that speaking and listening activities were more beneficial to their studies than reading and writing.

Additional studies revealed that students understand the importance of English communication and are eager to improve their speaking ability. The students also indicated that some of their more preferred topics for communication are culture (Riley, 2009), social issues, and everyday-life situations (Matsuura, Chiba, & Hilderbrandt, 2001). Nevertheless, research has yet to probe deeply into students' understanding of what communicative content specifically comprises. Most students conveyed the usefulness of speaking practice, but to assume this to mean general conversation could be incorrect. Given the recent development of many forms of specific-purpose study, student beliefs may alter greatly when confronted with different speaking tasks in the classroom. The same applies to listening, reading, and writing. For empirical results on the skills that students prefer to practice to have greater relevance in an actual classroom setting, the skills need to be divided into their various academic-, occupational-, and survival-oriented constituents, or study forms.

Methodology

Research Questions

In order to achieve the aims of the study, two specific research questions were posed:

1. What do Japanese university students believe they will need English for in their future careers and lives?
2. What types of English study do they believe they require in order to meet their needs?

Participants

A total of 76 students from a private university in Hyogo Prefecture, Japan, participated in the study. The majority were in their 2nd year of study (93%) with the remainder in their 3rd year. The participants were 57% female and 43% male, with all but one student in the 18 to 21-year-old age bracket. None of the students was an English major, as I wished to collect data from learners who perhaps did not see an obvious need for English in their studies. The participants' majors were Law (40%), Sociology (24%), Business (18%), Political Science (11%), Law/Political Science (3%), Finance (3%), and Media (1%). Four classes were selected by the university to participate, all which met my requirements.

Instrumentation

It was decided that an original, well-constructed questionnaire would be the most useful instrument for collecting data. In order to fulfill the study aims, the questions and response options needed to represent the broad range of content in English courses in an exploratory manner, as well as address the student view on *importance* and *needs*. By applying some of the methodology of needs analysis (NA) research conducted in university English programs, a questionnaire could be created that would better address the research questions than common belief research methodology. Data collected on student beliefs about their English needs would in turn reflect their feelings on the importance of different types of class content.

Steps were taken to ensure the relevance of the questionnaire content following several approaches taken by Sakui and Gaies (1999). The most important step was to compile a thorough yet concise collection of English study types common to universities in Japan and common uses for English in the students' lives following graduation. Initially, existing instruments used in belief studies were examined for relevant or adaptable items. The list was then expanded by a comprehensive review of local language journals from the past decade. A number of instruments used in NA research were then reviewed, which aided

the creation of additional items and revision of existing items. Two studies in particular, Chia, Johnson, Chia, and Olive (1999) and Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2008), used questionnaires that broke down the four language skills into separate components, many of which I modified for use in a non-field-specific instrument.

Lambert (2010) built a consensus of task types common across workplace domains, as faced by Japanese graduates in their careers. A number of the tasks were deemed relevant to this study, including locating information, translating, and interpreting. Takakubo (2002) also provided an inventory of future English needs and tasks in a Japanese context and targeted both academic and general uses for the language.

Subsequent measures in augmenting the questionnaire's content were then undertaken. Ten English instructors currently working in Japanese universities were invited to judge the relevance of the study items in university programs, based on the raters' own knowledge and experience. They needed to decide whether the items were suited to university study as opposed to high school or language school syllabi. The instructors were also asked to consider which types of study content most benefitted each of the future needs. Following a few raters' comments on possibly overlooked items in the survey, *extensive reading* was added to the list. There were also concerns raised about some items being too broad in scope, therefore some wording was modified to make the items more focused.

From the steps listed above, a final group of 12 future English needs and 19 types of study content was created. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the level of need and importance, respectively. The 19 content types were also used in a section which asked students whether they felt they needed more or less of each form of study in their current classes.

The instrument was then translated into the students' L1 and was piloted with 38 second-year students enrolled in non-English majors at a different university, to test both the understanding of the instructions and items and the time required to complete all of the sections. The pilot study went smoothly with no discernible problems for the students. (For the final questionnaire see the Appendix.)

Data Collection

The questionnaire was administered in a 5-day period near the beginning of the semester. The students' regular English instructors administered the questionnaire. None of the attending students knew of the survey beforehand, and all of them agreed to participate, finishing in approximately 15 minutes.

Data Analysis

The mode was calculated for each item in sections using the Likert scale, at each point on the scale. For the remaining section on study needs, percentages were calculated according to how often students selected a particular response option.

Findings

Figure 1 shows how the participants responded when asked about the English abilities or future uses for English they felt they would need in their lives. From left to right, the chart shows the responses from strongest to least perceived need.

Communicative needs for travel, work, and social interaction were consistently selected high on the scale, and many of the higher-rated needs related to work in Japan. In conjunction with the section on future needs, the responses to the second section on content of English study they believed to be most important for students at their university (shown in Figure 2) display the student belief that speaking is the most necessary skill to acquire.
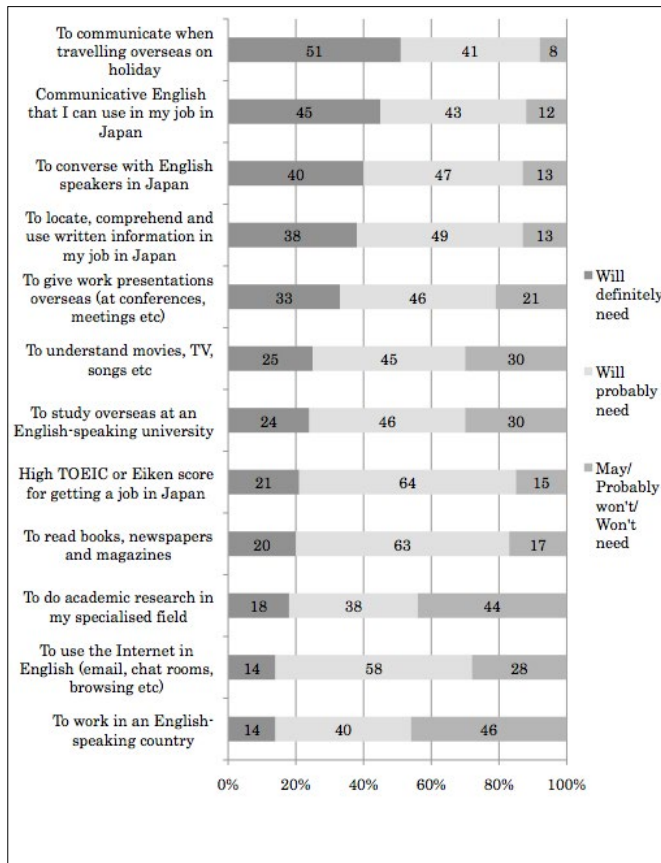
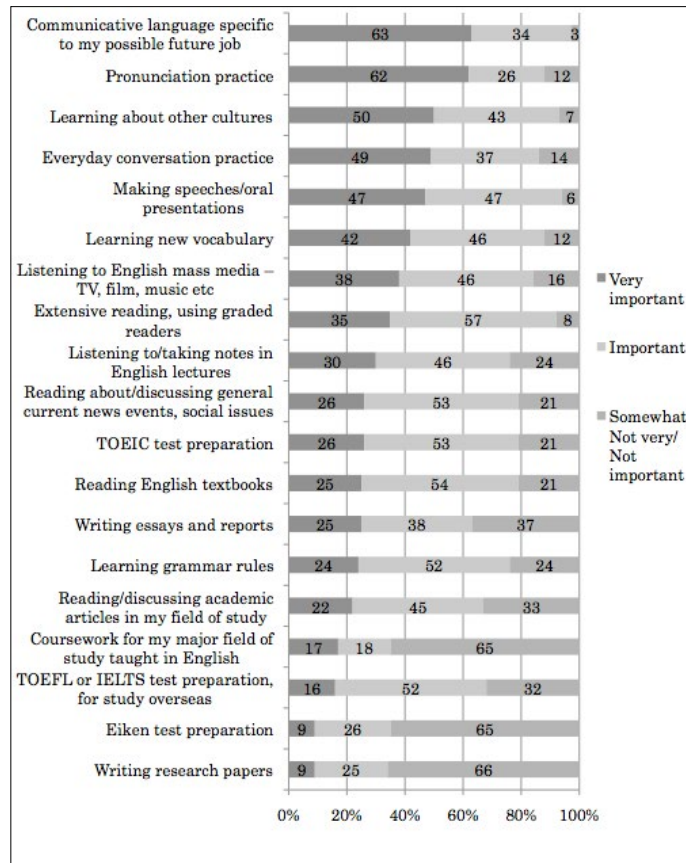Figure 1. Future English Needs (*N* = 76)

Figure 2. Most Important Content of English Study (*N* = 76)

Noticeably, speaking study content that would serve occupational needs was deemed slightly more important than that linked to improving general conversation ability. If we are to rank the importance of the four language skills for students, the following order is discernible: speaking, reading and listening, writing.

The same types of study content were also used in the next section, asking students about their current study needs, the findings of which are presented in Figure 3. The types are listed according to what percentage of students believed the types needed to feature more in their classes. The ordering of types closely mirrors Figure 2, displaying a consistency of opinion.

Discussion

Student Preconceptions About Future English Needs

The first research question addressed the students' perceived future English needs. The 12 items in the questionnaire covered common uses of English for EFL students in the areas of travel, work, study, research, entertainment, and general use. Although it was anticipated that the findings would display a student tendency to recognise the need for general-use English conversation over other uses of the language, the results indicate that they consider English for occupational purposes within Japan to be equally or even more important for them, with three of the five most highly-rated needs directly related to work (*using job-related communicative English, using written information at work,* and *giving work presentations*).

This could be a reflection of industry's push in recent years for graduates with a good English ability. Students would likely understand that a good grasp of English for international communication would raise their chances of gaining employment. A development, often perceived as a drawback, of this industry push is the growing use of TOEIC scores by Japanese compa-
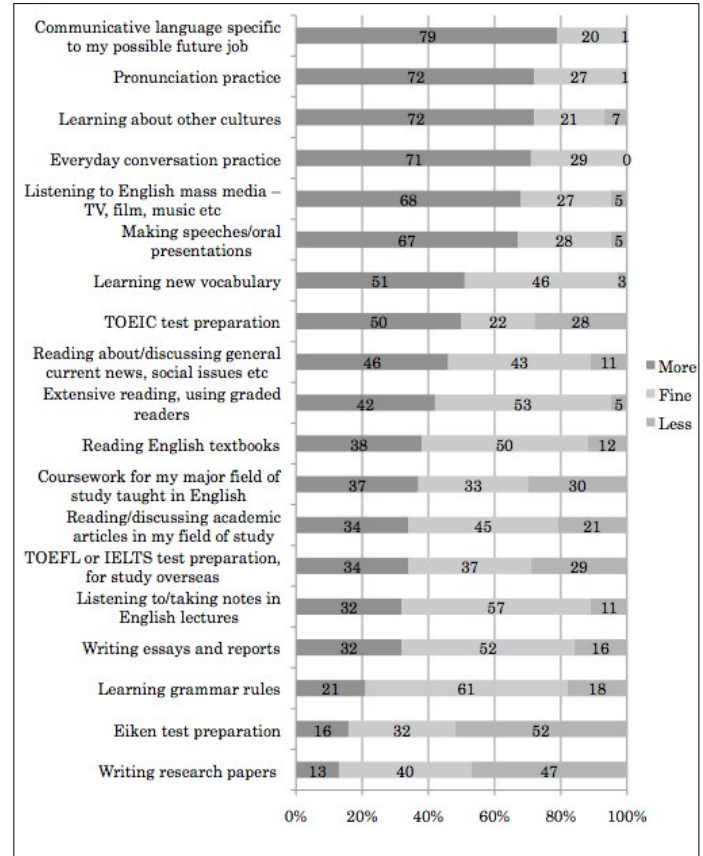

Figure 3. Study Needs for Present English Classes (*N* = 76)

nies as a measure of English ability and as a hiring requirement and the washback effect this has had throughout the education system. Despite this, there was not a strong belief amongst the

students that a high TOEIC score was a necessity for increasing their chances of employment within Japan.

Student Preconceptions About English Study

The second research question was concerned with the correlation between the students' perceived future English needs and the English they believe they require in their university studies in order to meet those needs. The findings here need to be considered carefully. An overwhelming majority of the students indicated that their future uses for English would involve communication: for work, when travelling abroad, and when interacting with native English speakers in Japan. They then demonstrated the belief that their studies should be communication based, with importance placed on conversation practice, workplace communication, giving speeches, pronunciation, and learning about other cultures. Although this gives the impression that the students had a reasonable understanding of what types of study can improve communicative ability, it is possible that this might be a reflection of the nature of language learning that they have experienced. As their previous language studies would have included a lot of rote learning and translation into Japanese, it may be the case that the things they think they need are the things they have never been taught.

Therefore, it is equally worth considering which components of English study the students *did not* believe should be a part of their university courses. Figure 2 revealed that they found writing and academic content to be of far less significance than speaking or even grammar. This is interesting in the case of writing when one considers the supposed occupational benefits of having good English writing skills in a Japanese company. Lambert (2010) found that some of the most common task types undertaken by Japanese graduates working in the business sector require writing: translating emails and manuals from Japanese to English and summarising information from press releases, for example. International communication is usually carried out via email and faxes, not verbal interaction (Hadley, 1999). Good writing skills are important for learning a foreign language, yet if instructors focus on this in their lessons, students may feel they are being subjected to noncommunicative practices if they only equate communication with speaking.

The instrument could be revised for future use to further clarify the ways in which writing can be taught, given that only two types of study content were explicitly concerned with writing (*writing research papers*, and *writing essays and reports*). It is difficult to know if students considered both the speaking and writing aspects of items like *communicative English specific to my possible future job* or *making speeches/oral presentations* when rating them highly.

Mismatches Between Students' Expectations and Institutional Policies

An integral point that has arisen from the findings is that fundamental mismatches can exist between (a) students' views, (b) institutional policies, and (c) what teachers believe are legitimate practices. Whilst the differences are not necessarily divided across all three strands, with overlaps occurring in a number of areas, any dissimilarity can have implications for the classroom.

Figure 3 indicates that half of the students would like more TOEIC test preparation in class. This has become an issue in higher education in Japan: whether or not EFL programs should make room in curricula for test preparation. Many professionals consider teaching for tests to be a misuse of class time, as it can reduce the students' exposure to meaningful communicative input. However, students who understand that achieving a high TOEIC score is necessary for entrance into a company may become discontented with a program that does not address this as one of their most important needs. If an institution includes

test preparation courses for all students, it may then create a division between those who feel they need such preparation and those who feel it detracts from study methods that could be of more benefit to their overall progress.

Certain commentators on Japan's higher education system (see Guest, 2009; Paterson, 2008) have bemoaned institutions for relegating EFL to a standard that fails to adequately represent the purpose of tertiary education, instead placing it on a par with the quality of language education received from secondary schooling. It is important to understand whether the students themselves are appeased by this standard or feel that there should be more to their English courses than improving conversational ability and passing tests. Their indication in the results in Figure 3, that they will require an English ability not just for their more immediate goals but also for their long-term career-based needs, is a positive sign, yet one that the institution would need to be aware of.

Mismatches Between Students' Beliefs and Teachers' Beliefs

The feedback gathered from the raters who reviewed the survey during its construction phase suggested that for job-related English communication, having coursework for the students' majors taught in English, reading and discussing academic articles in their field of study, and writing essays and reports would be beneficial, in addition to the more obvious communicative content. The fact that the students ranked these types low in terms of their importance and the need for more of them in their studies perhaps highlights their belief that they do not consider themselves competent enough to undertake such study or else are uninformed about its benefits and how it can increase communicative ability. It may also reflect on the teachers' own preconceptions about language, in that they are possibly con-strained by ideas that may not be directly transferable to a Japanese context. This difference between what the teachers think students need and what the students feel they need should be considered during course planning, with the understanding that neither party is necessarily correct in its beliefs.

Teachers would benefit from knowing not only which student beliefs differ from their own, but also the conditions that may have led to their formation and if there is some legitimacy to them. It has been reported that Japanese students would like to do pronunciation practice in their EFL classes (Jones & Gardner, 2009; Matsuura et al., 2001; O'Donnell, 2003), yet this is often dismissed as ill informed by teachers and researchers who feel that explicit practice of it is unnecessary. However, the over-whelming student desire to speak with accurate pronunciation, reinforced by the findings of this study, calls for greater consideration of it as a useful instructional goal in classrooms. Despite the students' desire to speak more in classes, they could be restricted in doing so by certain cultural mannerisms. Speaking with inaccurate pronunciation seems to be a fear of many students that could affect their confidence in using the language. If explicit pronunciation practice in class placates students and generates more speech from them, it bears consideration.

Understandably, the concept of "hidden needs" is not obvious to most students. They enter university with an educational background that has not emphasised cognitive development or the practical application of knowledge, and they often do not receive suitable preparation for autonomous learning once their courses commence. They have formed beliefs on how English is studied and are not always responsive to change. A number of researchers support the idea of instructors confronting existing student beliefs with new information that can prepare them for their EFL courses (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Dörnyei, 2001; Horwitz, 1999; Wenden, 1986). Horwitz (1988) explains that students often view their language teachers as experts and

are therefore receptive to their teachers' beliefs. If so, teachers should exert their influence positively on student beliefs by explicitly stating the academic and language learning aims of courses from the outset and by displaying these aims through activities and content. Discussions about the aims of classes should be a regular part of instruction.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have looked at the beliefs of EFL learners at a Japanese university to try and determine any trends in how they view the importance of course content in relation to their needs. One important finding is how their beliefs can differ from those of teachers and researchers. Opinion amongst academics has suggested that EFL courses designed to incorporate the content of students' other classes (Guest, 2009) or general academic content (Cruz, 2004) can improve their advanced English proficiency and motivate students by giving them a purpose for their English studies. Despite this, attention should be paid to the students' competing views. The findings of belief studies can go some way to inform both institutions and research, particularly in the area of program evaluation and planning. Student beliefs are based on their experiences and needs in specific contexts, and it can therefore be difficult to apply the interpretations made in other contexts. Institutions that accommodate certain beliefs may find that it enhances student attitude and motivation and positively impacts on student performance. It is a recommendation that course planners regularly survey students in order to better understand the views they hold on course content that may be contrary to the beliefs of professionals.

Conversely, student beliefs that fundamentally oppose the recommendations of research may need to be confronted. One approach is to provide students with new information in classes that can help them adapt to more effective strategies. Another is for institutions to reflect contemporary research by implement-

ing programs that can provide communicative English relevant to particular occupations and disciplines. This could potentially appease the language needs of students more than the continued use of general English courses.

With a greater understanding of their students' beliefs, English instructors will be better positioned to be able to educate, inform, and guide their students towards meeting their academic and future needs.

Bio Data

Jeremy McMahon has been teaching English in Japan for over 10 years. His current research interests include learner beliefs and effective activities for young learners in low-frequency settings.

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Appendix

Student Questionnaire on English Needs

1. FUTURE ENGLISH NEEDS

What English abilities do you feel you will need in your life?

(Please put a "✓" in only <u>one</u> box for each row.)

	Will definitely need	Will probably need	May need	Probably won't need	Won't need at all
1. Ability to converse with English-speakers in Japan					
2. Ability to use the Internet in English (email, chat rooms, browsing etc.)					
3. High TOEIC or Eiken score for getting a job in Japan					

	Will definitely need	Will probably need	May need	Probably won't need	Won't need at all
4. Communicative English that I can use in my job in Japan					
5. Ability to locate, comprehend, and use written English information in my job in Japan					
6. Ability to work in an English-speaking country					
7. Ability to study overseas at an English-speaking university					
8. Ability to read books, newspapers and magazines					
9. Ability to give work presentations overseas (at conferences, meetings etc.)					
10. Ability to do academic research in English in my specialised field					
11. Ability to communicate when travelling overseas on holiday					
12. Ability to understand movies, TV, songs etc.					

	Very important	Important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not important at all
1. Learning grammar rules					
2. Learning new vocabulary					
3. Writing essays and reports					
4. Reading/discussing academic articles in my field of study					
5. Writing research papers					
6. Reading about/discussing general current news events, social issues etc.					
7. TOEIC test preparation					
8. Eiken test preparation					
9. TOEFL or IELTS test preparation, for study overseas					
10. Coursework for my major field of study taught in English					
11. Everyday conversation practice					
12. Listening to English mass media – television, film, music, podcasts etc.					
13. Extensive reading, using graded readers					
14. Listening to/taking notes in English lectures					
15. Communicative language specific to my possible future job					
16. Reading English textbook chapters					

II. ENGLISH AT UNIVERSITY

A. What types of English study do you feel are most <u>important</u> for students at your university?

(Please put a "✓" in only <u>one</u> box for each row.)

	Very important	Important	Somewhat important	Not very important	Not important at all
17. Pronunciation practice					
18. Making speeches/oral presentations					
19. Learning about other cultures					

B. What types of English study do you think that you need more or need less of in your future English classes?

(Please put a "✓" in only one box for each row:

"Need MORE" if you feel you aren't receiving enough of this in your classes,

"Need LESS" if you feel you don't need as much as you are now receiving in your classes,

"Fine as it is" if you feel you are receiving the right amount of this in your classes and don't need it to change.

(If you don't study a type at all in your classes, choose "Need MORE" if you feel you need it, or "Fine as it is" if you feel you are fine not studying it.)

	Need MORE	Need LESS	Fine as it is
1. Learning grammar rules			
2. Learning new vocabulary			
3. Writing essays and reports			
4. Reading/discussing academic articles in my field of study			
5. Writing research papers			
6. Reading about/discussing general current news events, social issues etc.			
7. TOEIC test preparation			
8. Eiken test preparation			
9. TOEFL or IELTS test preparation, for study overseas			
10. Coursework for my major field of study taught in English			
11. Everyday conversation practice			
12. Listening to English mass media – television, film, music, podcasts etc.			
13. Extensive reading, using graded readers			
14. Listening to/taking notes in English lectures			
15. Communicative language specific to my possible future job			
16. Reading English textbook chapters			
17. Pronunciation practice			
18. Making speeches/oral presentations			
19. Learning about other cultures			

III. GENERAL INFORMATION

(Please put a "✔" in the correct box, and write the information on the lines)

- Sex:　　☐ Male　　　　☐ Female
- Age:　　☐ 18-21　☐ 22-25　☐ 26-30　☐ Over 30
- What is your current year of study?
　　　　☐ 2nd year　　　☐ 3rd year
- What is your major field of study? _____
- Have you ever studied English in another country or been part of an exchange program?
　　　　☐ Yes　　　　　☐ No
- If yes, for how long: _____