

## Commerce High School Students' Interests in and Attitudes Towards English

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Commerce high school students' English learning attitudes and interests are understudied in comparison to their peers in academic university-bound schools. This study compares commerce and academic high school students' interests in and attitudes towards English learning by means of a 4-item questionnaire administered to 553 students from 3 similarly ranked public high schools in western Japan. Chi-square tests and effect size were utilized to test for significant differences between school types and grade levels. The results indicated that English learning was significantly less important to 1st- and 2nd-year commerce students compared to their academic peers. University entrance exams had a significantly weaker effect on commerce students as a reason to study English. The commerce students were more interested in studying commerce-related topics in English classes than were academic students. The findings suggest the need for differentiated instruction that addresses commerce students' interests.

大学進学コースの普通科高校生に関するものに比べると商業科高校生の英語学習態度や興味に関する研究は少ない。本研究では、西日本で同等の偏差値の公立高校3校の553人の生徒に4項目の質問票を用いて商業科と普通科高校生の英語学習態度や興味を比較する。学校の種類や学年間の有意差を試験するために、カイ二乗検定と効果量が利用された。結果、商業科の高校1、2年生にとって、普通科の高校生よりも英語学習の重要度が大幅に低いことが示された。商業科の高校生の英語を勉強する理由として「大学・専門学校等入試のため」だけが有意に弱い効果量を示した。商業科高校生は、普通科高校生よりも英語の授業における商業関連のテーマを学習することにより興味を持っていた。調査結果は、商業科高校生の興味に対応する差別化教授法の必要性を示唆している。

Understanding learners' interests is essential to providing relevant and effective language instruction (Brown, 2007). Furthermore, relevant content fosters positive attitudes towards second L2 learning, which develop and maintain motivation and contrib-

ute to success (Dörnyei, 2001). However, research on Japanese high school (HS) learners' interests and attitudes towards English learning has focused primarily on academic (i.e., general education) students, rather than on students in commerce and other vocational HSs. This is in spite of the fact that commerce students comprise the third largest group of HS students in Japan (6% of all students), according to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2014a), and have different post-graduation goals from academic HS students (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999). Despite these differences, HS English instruction remains aimed towards the needs of university-bound academic students (Gorsuch, 1998; Nishino, 2013) and MEXT-approved English textbooks do not specifically address the interests and future careers of commerce students. Clearly, commerce HS students have been a low priority for both policy makers and researchers to date. To fill this gap, an investigation was conducted into the English-learning interests and attitudes of Japanese commerce HS students as compared to academic students. This paper begins with brief background information on commerce HSs and an overview of related research followed by the presentation of the study.

### Commerce High Schools

Okano & Tsuchiya (1999) explained that commerce HSs (商業高校 [*shougyou koukou*]) are generally ranked lower than most academic, or general, HSs (普通科 [*futsuuka*] or 文理科 [*bunrika*]). This difference in ranking can impact student morale and motivation. As a result of not being able to enter higher ranking schools, some commerce students have a poor self-image (personal communication, U. Ohara, April 19, 2011).

Ostensibly, the aim of Japanese commerce schools is to prepare students for service-industry careers. Approximately 40% of commerce students enter the workforce directly after graduation in contrast with only 9% of academic students; only 22% of commerce students attend universities or junior colleges compared to 63% of academic students (MEXT, 2014b). The remainder enter trade schools, primarily focused on service-industry

### *Kinkade: Commerce High School Students' Interests in and Attitudes Towards English*

jobs. Thus, commerce students have markedly different overall needs and aims than do their peers in academic schools. In terms of English education specifically, most commerce students do not need the type of English knowledge necessary to pass the English portion of university entrance exams but would presumably benefit from learning English that is used in the Japanese service industry.

Despite these differences, the same grammar-translation instructional approach used to prepare academic students for university entrance exams is applied in commerce and other vocational schools (Gorsuch, 1998; Nishino, 2013). This might be the result of a lack of specialized resources, human resources policies, and teachers' educational backgrounds. Schools are restricted to using MEXT-approved textbooks, which are designed for the academic students that make up the vast majority (73%) of HS students. In addition, English teachers are generally transferred between schools after 3 to 8 years, regardless of school type (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999), which can impede the development of specialized instructional approaches for specific learners. Furthermore, as university graduates, most English teachers attended academic HSs themselves and are therefore most familiar with the instructional approach applied in such schools.

### Attitude Towards English Learning

Students' attitude towards English learning (AE) affects their motivation and success (Dörnyei, 2001; Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009). Ryan (2008) found HS students' self-reported AE correlated with the students' intended learning effort more than did 15 other motivational measures. Furthermore, the link between AE and motivated behavior has been verified empirically. Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) found that Korean junior high school students' self-reported attitudes towards their English courses correlated with independently observed motivated behaviors in class.

Most research on Japanese HS students' AE has centered on nonvocational schools (e.g., Ryan, 2008) and, to my knowledge, no published research has specifically focused on commerce students. However, some comparisons can be made with other vocational schools, such as technical HSs. Similar to commerce HS students, the majority of technical HS graduates do not continue on to higher education (MEXT, 2014b). Soda and Esaki (2005) reported that over 80% of the 2nd-year technical HS students they surveyed did not like English. The authors did not test for correlations, but over 80% did not like studying grammar, and nearly half did not think English was necessary for the future. This perceived irrelevance might be related to technical students' career paths. If so, similar patterns might be expected for commerce students' AE.

Tachibana, Matsukawa, and Zhong (1996) used a questionnaire to compare Japanese and Chinese HS students' attitudes towards and reasons for studying English. The Japanese students' interest in English increased with grade level but the Chinese students' interest decreased. Whereas the Chinese students valued English fluency for the future, the Japanese students were more interested in the utility of English for passing university entrance exams. This corresponds with Ryan's (2008) more recent account of Japanese HS English education as noncommunicative and only useful for tests.

This focus on entrance exam preparation might ultimately have a detrimental effect on AE and motivation because of its influence on instructional choices. Most Japanese HS English teachers believe a grammar-translation instructional approach is ideal for preparing for Japanese university exams (Falout et al., 2009; Gorsuch, 2000; Nishino, 2013). At the same time, grammar-translation instruction has been identified as one of the primary demotivating factors for Japanese students (Falout et al., 2009). Thus, although entrance exam preparation provides a temporary external motivation for academic students, its benefits are limited because of its effect on instructional choices.

With the exception of Soda and Esaki (2005), the studies above have focused on nonvocational students; however, based on commerce students' career paths, one might hypothesize that entrance exam preparation would be less of a motivating factor for English study. Furthermore, in the absence of such a goal, one might expect fewer commerce students to have a positive AE, similar to Soda and Esaki's technical students. In order to test these hypotheses and better understand commerce students' AE and learning interests, the following research questions were investigated:

- RQ1. How does commerce HS students' AE differ from that of similarly ranked academic students overall and by grade level?
- RQ2. If differences in AE exist, what are the primary reasons?
- RQ3. Are commerce students' more interested in studying commerce or entrance-exam-related topics in English classes compared to academic students?

### Methods

The participants were HS students ( $N = 553$ ) from three suburban schools in western Japan with similar *hensachi* (偏差値) rankings (i.e., standardized entrance exam score required for admission; see Poole, 2003). The schools were in the process of being merged into a single school with separate academic and commerce curriculum tracks. The 3rd-year academic students ( $n = 53$ ) attended an older academic school (*hensachi* = 45%) housed in the same building as the new school. The 3rd-year commercial students

*Kinkade: Commerce High School Students' Interests in and Attitudes Towards English*

( $n = 147$ ) attended a separate commerce HS (*hensachi* = 47%). In the new dual curriculum school, the academic track (*hensachi* = 48%) participants were comprised of 2nd-year ( $n = 105$ ) and 1st-year ( $n = 109$ ) students, and the commerce track (*hensachi* = 45%) participants were 2nd-year ( $n = 71$ ) and 1st-year ( $n = 68$ ) students. Each of the schools used the same prefectural HS entrance exam, which included English reading, listening, and writing tests. An ALT visited the participants' classes one to four times a month, and the students had limited opportunities to interact with foreign residents from English-speaking countries, who accounted for less than .08% of the prefectural population (Statistics Bureau, Japan, 2010a; 2010b).

An English-learning attitudes and interests questionnaire (see Appendix) comprised of four multiple-response items was created collaboratively with the English teachers at the three schools and was administered at the start of the school year by the researcher during English class. The participants were informed that the purpose of the questionnaire was to improve English education through academic research and that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and would not affect their course grades. The mean scores for each grade level and school type were later presented to the students in the corresponding grade level and school type (e.g., 3rd-year commerce students were shown the mean scores for all 3rd-year commerce students).

Pearson chi-square tests of independence were performed to test for significant differences between school types and between grade levels. Chi-square tests are appropriate for determining if nonrandom differences exist in independent categorical data when subgroup sizes for expected random distribution are greater than five (Field, 2013). Each choice in the multiple-response items was treated as endorsed or unendorsed. To control for false positive error resulting from multiple comparisons, a Bonferroni correction was performed ( $\alpha = .05/26$  tests = .0019). Phi ( $\phi$ ) coefficient effect sizes were calculated to evaluate the magnitude of significant differences independent of sample size. Following Cohen (1992), effect size thresholds were set at .1, .3, and .5 for small, medium, and large effect sizes respectively.

### Results

Chi-square tests by school type and across grade levels were used to compare the participants' responses to questionnaire item 1 (Is learning English important to you?) in order to answer RQ1 (How does commerce HS students' AE differ from that of similarly ranked academic students overall and by grade level?). The distribution and chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) test statistics between school types and between grade levels are presented in Table 1. The results indicate that there is a small but significant effect of school type on AE

overall with academic students valuing English study more than commerce students. The effect of school type is greatest in Year 1 (a medium effect), decreases in Year 2, and becomes insignificant in Year 3. In addition, comparisons by grade level for each school type revealed significant differences for commerce students' endorsement of this item, whereas none were found for the academic students. Post-hoc chi-square tests between grade levels revealed a significant difference between 1st- and 3rd-year commerce students with a medium effect size,  $\chi^2(1, N = 215) = 18.11, p < .001, \phi = .29$ , but not between 1st- and 2nd-year commerce students,  $\chi^2(1, N = 139) = 3.11, p = .078$ , nor between 2nd- and 3rd-year students,  $\chi^2(1, N = 218) = 4.87, p = .027$ .

**Table 1. Questionnaire Results: Learning English Is Personally Important**

Class year	Commerce		Academic		N	Chi-square statistics			
	Yes	No	Yes	No		df	$\chi^2$	p	$\phi$
Year 1	33	35	93	16	177	1	27.64	< .001	.40
Year 2	45	26	90	15	176	1	11.82	< .001	.26
Year 3	114	33	43	10	200	1	.30	.59	.04
All years	192	94	226	41	553	1	22.95	< .001	.20
Commerce (across grade levels)					286	2	18.35	< .001	.25
Academic (across grade levels)					267	2	.63	.73	.05

To answer RQ2 (If differences exist, what are the primary reasons?), chi-square tests by school type were performed to compare responses to Item 2 (Why?) and Item 3 (Why not?) for students who endorsed and who did not endorse item 1, respectively. Table 2 presents the distribution and chi-square test results for Item 2. The reported percentages represent the number of endorsements out of the total number of members who endorsed learning English as important for each respective group (e.g., 32% of the 192 commerce students who endorsed English learning as important selected university or college entrance exams as a reason for why learning English is important). University entrance exams were the only reason that academic students endorsed significantly more than commerce students and had a medium effect size. For commerce students, communicating with foreigners was the most endorsed reason. Chi-square tests of the responses to Item 3 revealed no significant differences between students from the two types of

*Kinkade: Commerce High School Students' Interests in and Attitudes Towards English*

school (Table 3). For both school types, difficulty was the primary reason endorsed for why learning English was not important.

**Table 2. Reasons Why Learning English Is Personally Important**

Reason	Commerce		Academic		Chi-square statistics		
	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	% <sup>b</sup>	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	% <sup>b</sup>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	$\phi$
University entrance exams	61	32	141	62	38.97	< .001	.31
Overseas travel	68	35	58	26	4.69	.03	.11
Future jobs	63	33	61	27	1.69	.19	.06
Communicate with foreigners	82	43	87	38	.76	.38	.04

Note. For each test, *N* = 418; *df* = 1.

<sup>a</sup>Number of endorsements.

<sup>b</sup>Percentage of endorsements out of the total participants who endorsed learning English as important in each respective group.

**Table 3. Reasons Why Learning English Is Not Personally Important**

Reason	Commerce		Academic		Chi-square statistics		
	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	% <sup>b</sup>	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	% <sup>b</sup>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	$\phi$
Not necessary for jobs or school	24	26	13	32	.55	.46	.06
Boring	13	14	7	17	.24	.63	.04
Too difficult	78	83	33	80	.12	.73	.03

Note. For each test, *N* = 135; *df* = 1.

<sup>a</sup>Number of endorsements.

<sup>b</sup>Percentage of endorsements out of the total participants that responded learning English was not important in each respective group.

To further investigate the differences in the importance of university entrance exams as a reason for study, post-hoc chi-square tests were performed to compare responses both across school type and across grade level (Table 4). A significant difference with a medium effect was found between commerce and academic students in the first 2 years of HS, but not in the 3rd year, in which academic students' endorsement of this reason

dropped significantly. In contrast, commerce students' endorsement of this reason did not differ across grade level. In other words, the similarity between academic and commerce students in the 3rd year is not a result of an increase in endorsement of entrance exams as a reason for studying English for commerce students, but rather, as a result of the decrease in endorsement of this reason by academic students in their 3rd year. As the higher importance of English study for 3rd-year commerce students could not be accounted for by their statistically constant endorsement of entrance exams as a reason for study, the commerce students' endorsements of the other reasons surveyed were compared across grade levels with post-hoc chi-square tests. No significant differences were found for future jobs,  $\chi^2(2, N = 192) = 8.55, p = .014$ , communication with foreigners,  $\chi^2(2, N = 192) = 6.53, p = .038$ , or overseas travel,  $\chi^2(2, N = 192) = 2.71, p = .26$ .

**Table 4. Learning English Is Important for Entrance Exams: Grade-Level Comparison**

Class year	Commerce		Academic		<i>N</i>	Chi-square statistics			
	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	% <sup>b</sup>	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	% <sup>b</sup>		<i>df</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	$\phi$
Year 1	8	24	62	67	126	1	17.75	< .001	.38
Year 2	13	29	62	69	135	1	19.44	< .001	.38
Year 3	40	35	17	40	157	1	.27	.61	.04
Commerce (across grade levels)					192	2	1.61	.45	.09
Academic (across grade levels)					226	2	11.92	< .001	.23

<sup>a</sup>Number of endorsements.

<sup>b</sup>Percentage of endorsements out of the total participants who endorsed learning English as important in each respective group.

Responses to Item 4 (What do you want to study in English class?) were compared to address RQ 3 (Are commerce students' more interested in studying commerce- or entrance-exam-related topics in English classes compared to academic students?). Chi-square test results are given in Table 5. School type had a medium effect on English learning interests. Significantly more commerce students were interested in studying commerce in English class than academic students, with a medium effect size. In contrast, significantly more academic students were interested in entrance exam preparation than commerce students, with a medium effect size.

## Kinkade: Commerce High School Students' Interests in and Attitudes Towards English

Table 5. Study Preferences for English Class

Reason	Commerce		Academic		Chi-square statistics		
	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	% <sup>b</sup>	<i>n</i> <sup>a</sup>	% <sup>b</sup>	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>	$\phi$
Entrance exam preparation	70	24	146	55	52.93	< .001	.31
Commerce	84	29	5	2	77.32	< .001	.37

Note. For each test,  $N = 553$ ;  $df = 1$ .

<sup>a</sup>Number of endorsements.

<sup>b</sup>Percentage of endorsements out of the total participants in each respective group.

## Discussion

The results of this study suggest that commerce students' AE differs significantly from that of academic students in a number of ways. Fewer 1st- and 2nd-year commerce students had a positive AE, but unexpectedly, significantly more 3rd-year than 1st-year commerce students had a positive AE, which was statistically equal to academic students in a school of similar rank. This contrasts with the academic students' interest in learning English, which remained constant throughout all 3 years. As previous research has not compared these two groups, direct comparisons with other studies are not possible; however, there appears to be some correspondence of the commerce students' less positive AE with the technical students in Soda and Esaki (2005). Interestingly, the increase in the commerce students' positive AE with grade level is similar to the trend observed for the Japanese students in Tachibana et al. (1996), whereas the low-ranking academic students' AE in the present study remained constant; however, Tachibana et al. did not specify school type or ranking, so further comparison is difficult.

One reason for this overall difference between commerce and academic students' AE appears to involve university entrance exams. Entrance exams seemed to be a stronger reason for English study for the academic students than for the commerce students overall. This is logical given the different career paths of the two groups: Fewer commerce students will ultimately need to pass university entrance exams. Although the relatively low importance of entrance exams remained steady for commerce students, it dropped in importance for the 3rd-year academic students. The postsecondary schools available to students who attend low-ranking schools generally have less rigorous entrance requirements. Thus, it is possible that, even though the 1st- and 2nd-year academic students had high expectations, the 3rd-year students' expectations dropped in accordance with the actual entrance requirements they faced. In contrast, the commerce students' expectations for university study were rela-

tively low from the beginning. Thus, different results might be obtained for higher ranking academic students. It is also important to point out that communication with foreigners was commerce students' most endorsed reason for valuing English learning. Therefore, the prevalence of noncommunicative *English for tests* instruction that Ryan (2008) described in place of communicative English instruction might contribute toward commerce students' less positive AE. It is not possible to compare the commerce HS results with previous research; however, the overall importance of entrance exams for the academic students in this study corresponds with the results in Tachibana et al. (1996).

Commerce students' constant low endorsement of entrance exams does not provide a plausible explanation for the unexpected increase in positive AE for the 3rd-year commerce students. As no other significant differences between commerce students' grade levels were found among the other reasons surveyed, there appear to be other influences that were not accounted for in this study, such as differences in the school or classroom environments. Future research comparing students from all three grades within the same school or with a longitudinal design might reveal whether this increase is an anomaly.

Finally, in terms of commerce students' preferences for English study, the commerce students were significantly more interested in studying commerce-related topics in English classes and less interested in entrance exam preparation than academic students. These results logically correspond with the two groups' respective career paths as well as their reasons for valuing English learning. Furthermore, the academic students' interest in entrance exam study is in line with Tachibana et al. (1996).

## Limitations

Without broader investigation, a number of confounding factors cannot be disregarded in this study. First, the sample was restricted to only three schools in a single suburban municipality. Second, the 3rd-year students attended different schools than the 1st- and 2nd-year students; thus, the potential effect of differences other than school rank cannot be discounted. Related to this, the effect of merging schools might have an impact on student morale and attitudes especially in the two older schools that were in the process of being closed down. Lastly, the study relied on a very limited number of self-reported questionnaire items, which presents a challenge to test validity. To overcome these limitations, future research should incorporate a broader sample from a number of schools throughout Japan, collect and compare the students' postgraduation activities with national statistics, include more concrete measures of student proficiency than school rank, include interviews to better understand the underlying reasons for students' AE, and increase the number of questionnaire items for each hypothesized construct.

## Kinkade: Commerce High School Students' Interests in and Attitudes Towards English

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide insight into commerce HS students' English-learning interests and attitude in comparison with academic HS students. Significantly fewer 1st- and 2nd-year commerce HS students in this study had a positive AE compared with their peers in a similarly ranked academic program at the same school. Unexpectedly, the 3rd-year commerce and academic students equally valued English learning; however, this was not accompanied with an increase in the importance of English for exam preparation, future jobs, communication with foreigners, or overseas travel, which remained constant for commerce students in all grade levels. In addition, compared to academic students, significantly more commerce students were interested in studying commerce-related topics in English classes, rather than entrance exam preparation.

Future research should be aimed at confirming whether these findings can be extended to other Japanese commerce students and, if positive AE does increase with commerce students' grade level, what the underlying reasons are. If the overall lower importance of English and entrance exams for the commerce students in this study proves to be representative of Japanese commerce students in general, commerce HS English teachers and policy makers have an important responsibility in light of the links between AE, motivation, and ultimate achievement in previous research. As the commerce students in this study seemed to prefer studying commerce-related topics in English class over entrance exam preparation, incorporating activities focusing on customer service might foster a more positive AE. That, at least, has been the experience of this author and the 3rd-year commerce HS teacher involved in this study.

## Bio Data

**Tyler Kinkade** has been teaching for over 14 years. He is currently a lecturer at Komazawa University. His research interests include motivation, learner development, and interlanguage pragmatics. <kinkade@komazawa-u.ac.jp>

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*Kinkade: Commerce High School Students' Interests in and Attitudes Towards English*

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## Appendix

### *English Learning Attitudes and Interests Questionnaire*

(In the actual questionnaire, Items 2 and 3 were clearly aligned below the yes and no checkboxes for Item 1 respectively.)

1. Is learning English important to you? Yes  No   
英語を学ぶことは、あなたにとって重要ですか。
2. Yes → Why? (Check all that apply)  
それはなぜですか。(あてはまるものすべてに印を付けてください)
  - Future jobs 将来の仕事
  - University/college entrance exams 大学・専門学校等の入試
  - Future overseas travel 海外旅行
  - Communicate with foreigners in Japan 日本にいる外国人とのコミュニケーション
3. No → Why not? (Check all that apply)
  - Not necessary for future jobs/school 将来の進路(仕事・学校等)に必要ない
  - English is boring 英語は退屈だ
  - English is too difficult 英語は難しすぎる
4. What do you want to study in English class? (Check all that apply.)  
英語の授業でどんなテーマについて勉強したいですか。(あてはまるものすべてに印を付けてください)  
Career path 進路関係\*
  - Entrance exam preparation 入学試験の準備
  - Commerce/business 商業
  - Other その他

Hobbies/Entertainment 趣味・娯楽 (abridged list)

- Music 音楽
- Foreign travel 外国旅行
- Sports スポーツ
- Other その他

\*Only the first two choices were relevant to the analysis for RQ3.