

Workplace English Usage in Japan: Pregraduation Expectations to Postgraduate Experiences

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The study compared purposes for which 4th-year Japanese university students foresee their use of English after graduation with their actual use of English later as employees working in Japan. Two questionnaires were employed: The first measured the students' expectations of future English use after graduation ($N = 37$); the second included 29 of the original participants and an additional 33 students ($N = 62$), who had all graduated, and asked them to report on the kinds of English tasks they use in their Japanese workplaces. Findings revealed more than 60% of the participants answering the second survey use English in their occupations. Of the 29 participants who answered both questionnaires, the expectations 6 students had for future English use after graduation are compared with their current use of English at work. In future research, an attempt will be made to narrow the focus from generalized task types to precise English target tasks in the workplace.

本研究では、日本の大学四年生が予想した将来の英語使用目的と、就職後の実際の英語使用状況を比較する。研究のために、二つのアンケートを実施した。一つ目は、37人の学生に対し卒業後の英語使用に関する予想を質問し、二つ目では、初めの研究対象者29人を含む62人の卒業生に職場での英語を使用するタスクの種類について回答してもらった。アンケート結果から、二つ目のアンケートに回答した人の60%以上が英語を使用する様々な職種に就いていることがわかった。両方のアンケートに回答した研究対象者のうち、6人に特に焦点を当て、彼らが学生だったときに立てた将来の英語使用の予想と現在の職場での英語使用状況を比較した。今後の研究では、職場での一般的なタスク・タイプから、より具体的な英語使用のタスク・タイプへ焦点を絞っていく。

Students' areas of learning interest and future goals are important points of view that university educators of English in Japan should consider when deciding what English to teach. A study of Japanese students' notions of English usage was conducted by Grafstrom (2013) from Akita University, who surveyed 22 first-year undergraduate students who were enrolled in his English for academic purposes (EAP) course. Grafstrom argued that the traditional approach of selecting English language course content based on national standards set by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and what individual professors deem as being the “essentials” should accommodate student input. Grafstrom suggested that educators gauge what Japanese students expect they will need English for in the future, in other words, what they feel are their real English needs, not only from an academic needs point of view, but also from an everyday usage sense.

Grafstrom (2013) advocated a move to this more student-centered approach, suggesting university instructors consider their students' English language needs by asking what they expect to use English for after graduation and preparing curricula linking student expectations of English usage to classroom teaching and learning practices. This approach may generate more student interest in learning English, as classroom activities would emanate from students' own imaginations and students would have a voice in the educational process. Equipping students with English skills that are in step with what they expect they will need English for in Japanese workplaces may be a tremendous boost to their employment prospects. Moreover, students who visualize a benefit of learning English at university for their future employability are likely to have a greater appreciation of the meaning and purpose of learning English while in school. From a pedagogical perspective, if student English language goals and the uses of English in Japanese places of employment can be ascertained, then students can be grouped according to common language goals and target language needs rather than streamed according to language proficiency scores on English entrance exams. Grafstrom argued, “If this were the case, one could speculate that first year students with

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low English language proficiency would benefit more from being in a class with like-minded students rather than being surrounded by students with similar low-proficiency” (p. 22).

The challenge facing educators is to determine how realistic it is that Japanese university students will know what they will need English for. The level of certainty Japanese university students possess in this regard is likely related to university grade level. Investigations into student expectations for future employment and English usage would bear greater fruit if such research focuses on older students who have a longer exposure to notions of career potentials and more concrete expectations that they can better articulate than younger 1st-year students.

Knowing English may be required in the workplace and identifying workers’ specific English needs are two different avenues of research. Lambert (2010) gauged the future English language needs of Japanese university students by contacting graduates already in the workplace. Regarding the importance of English workplace skills, he identified the English tasks that received high priority from the business and education respondents in his study: (a) locating information, (b) translating documents, (c) summarizing information, (d) editing documents, and (e) interpreting between speakers.

Nakamura (2015) found that employers hiring graduates from her university identified five key English tasks most needed: (a) introducing the company and its products, (b) making telephone calls, (c) answering telephone calls, (d) answering complaints, and (e) rejecting a proposal or a suggestion. All were productive tasks. In contrast, university subject lecturers in Nakamura’s study identified the key English language tasks employees needed as (a) obtaining information from the Internet, (b) answering telephone calls (listening), (c) listening and understanding native English, (d) understanding business documents, (e) understanding emails/business letters, and (f) understanding manuals. All were receptive tasks. The instructor list of English language tasks was in stark contrast to what Japanese employers deemed as needed in work environments, and it suggests educators and employers may be out of touch with each other.

Besides Lambert (2010) and Nakamura (2015), studies attempting to determine the kind of workplace English usage by Japanese graduates are rare. A 2008 investigation of Japanese computer science and engineering graduates found most participants used English to read technical manuals and instructions for installations, and/or sending emails, faxes, and letters (Kaneko, Rozycki, & Orr, 2009). In another study of written business communication in English at Aoyama Gakuin University, Someya (2005) showed that business English is undergoing changes stemming from accelerated advances in technologies. Someya found that 82% of respondents felt that English was

a necessity in their workplace, and English writing was the most essential English skill. However, given the response rate of 24.3% and the age of the study, the conclusions drawn may not be relevant to current workplace settings in Japan.

The current study borrowed from Grafstrom (2010) and Lambert (2015), utilizing modified versions of their research questionnaires to gauge the expectations 37 fourth-year Japanese university English language majors have for English use after graduation and focuses on six participants of the 37 who had completed the questionnaire as students and later reported using English at work.

Methods

The university attended by students in this study is highly regarded in central Japan for its foreign language departments. Amongst these language departments, there are approximately 100 students enrolled in the Department of British and American Studies in any given year. The average age of the 37 students at the time of the first questionnaire was just under 22. There were 17 males and 20 females and their average student-TOEIC score was 730.

The two questionnaires measured (a) what Japanese students expected they would use English for in their personal and professional lives upon graduation, and (b) what these same graduates actually use English for in their Japanese workplaces. On the pregraduation questionnaire, called the Student English Usage Expectation Questionnaire (see Appendix A) and conducted in 2015, 37 students from two of the researcher’s 4th-year university classes (18 participants from my Communicate English III course [CEIII] and 19 participants from my Academic Writing III course) were asked what they expected to use English for after graduation. The questionnaire contained six Likert-scale items related to the participants’ expected English usage in their personal lives and six items for their expected English usage in their professional lives after graduation. Additionally, there were open-ended questions related to how English would impact their personal or professional lives.

The postgraduate questionnaire, called the Survey of English Usage in the Workplace (see Appendix B), asked the participants about their actual use of English at work. This questionnaire was distributed to the same 37 participants who had completed the pregraduation questionnaire and an additional 110 graduates from several other classes of students (whom I had also taught over the previous 3 years). Questions in this survey asked respondents to indicate their occupations and provide work descriptions and the work tasks they were involved in that required English. Information was obtained using a five-item questionnaire designed on Survey Monkey and administered via a social

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networking service called Line, a freeware app popular among young Japanese. During their coursework, when the participants were students in my classes, a Line folder had been established. For the protection of the participants' identities, however, pseudonyms are used in the reporting of the responses to both questionnaires in this study.

Results

Questionnaire 1 (Pregraduation) Student English Usage Expectation Questionnaire

The responses provided by my students suggest greater certainty in using English in the personal realm than professional realm (see Table 1). The highest scoring responses to the 6 items related to personal expectations: Statement 20 (English will be necessary when I travel abroad) had a mean score of 4.30 out of a possible 5—higher scores mean more certainty; Statement 19 (After university I will travel to foreign countries) had a mean score of 4.08. The two most agreed upon professional statements were Statement 16 (After university some of my customers will be foreigners, $M = 3.68$) and Statement 18 (I will have to speak English to my foreign customers, $M = 3.65$).

Table 1. Pregraduation Mean Responses About English Usage Expectations in 12 Professional and Personal Areas ($N = 37$)

#	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Professional area			
16	After university some of customers will be foreigners	3.68	1.226
18	I will have to speak English to my foreign customers	3.65	1.033
15	I will have to speak English to my foreign co-workers	3.35	1.136
13	After university I am likely to have foreign co-workers	3.05	1.246
14	My foreign co-workers will be fluent in Japanese	2.97	0.799
17	My foreign customers will be fluent in Japanese	2.38	0.893
Personal area			
20	English will be necessary when I travel abroad	4.30	1.309
19	After university I will travel to foreign countries	4.08	1.460
12	After university I will continue to study or practice English	4.03	1.166

#	Statement	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
21	After university I will have English-speaking foreign friends	3.68	1.203
23	I will have a boyfriend/girlfriend who is a foreigner and speaks English	2.30	0.909
22	I will have family members who are foreign and speak English	2.19	1.330

Note. Likert-scale responses: 5 = *Yes, most likely*; 4 = *Yes, probably*; 3 = *I'm not sure*; 2 = *Probably not*; 1 = *No, definitely not*.

Answers related to personal impacts of English for open-ended Question 24 (How do you think learning English will affect your future after graduating from university?) included "It would give me a better chance to make friends with various people" and "I think learning English affects me because learning and using English will make my sight wider and I can find out about other cultures." In terms of the professional impact of knowing English, responses included "If I can use English I can get a job using my English and my vision will be widened" and "If I can speak English my company has a chance to connect with foreign countries." Although these second two answers lack specificity, the participants realized the impact could be positive and allow for career opportunities they would otherwise not experience if they could not speak English.

Responses to open-ended Question 25 (In the future what do you believe will be the advantages and disadvantages of you being able to communicate in English in your everyday life and at work?) included "I can see English movies or dramas and understand them" and "Communicate with people and have happy life." The advantages for knowing English for their professional lives related to having opportunities to meet foreigners through work and advance careers: "Work will be smooth, and I can communicate with foreign business customers" and "A chance to get a good salary and good job."

Questionnaire 2: Linking Pregraduation Expectations of English Usage With English Usage After Graduation

From the results of the second, postgraduate questionnaire, seven participants who had completed the pregraduation questionnaire were identified as currently using English in their Japanese workplaces. Of the 30 other participants in the pregraduation questionnaire (who did not confirm using English in the workplace), 22 responded with "No" to Question 5 (Do you use English in your work?); the remaining eight did not

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reply to the second questionnaire. Of the seven participants who currently use English at work, one failed to provide sufficient information regarding job description or English use at work to include in the results. A summary of comments related to expectations of English usage by the six respondents to the pregraduation questionnaire is provided in Figure 1 under the column “Expectations of English use after graduation.” Information related to Question 5 (If you answered yes to Question 4, please describe what you use English for in your work in as much detail as possible) is also included in Figure 1 under the column “English use at work.”

Expectations of English use after graduation	English use at work
<p>Jun</p> <p>Permanent job secured at time of survey. Certain English will be used with foreigners in Japan. Will travel to overseas company branches using English for business.</p>	<p><i>Construction sales:</i> Communicates with foreign customers in English-speaking countries.</p>
<p>Miki</p> <p>High level of certainty English would be needed in professional life. Ensured she would develop her English speaking and vocabulary by studying overseas.</p>	<p><i>Flight attendant:</i> Inform customers of safety matters and provide service. Communicate with international crews. Read manuals written in English.</p>
<p>Megumi</p> <p>Using English after graduation was probable. Unsure of employment duties requiring English. Expecting to use English with foreign tourists.</p>	<p><i>Teacher:</i> English is used continually for instructing elementary and high school students.</p>
<p>Kaori</p> <p>Predicted English use would be frequent at work. Little need for English in personal life. Did not indicate job expectations after graduation.</p>	<p><i>Airport check-in:</i> To communicate with foreign passengers.</p>

Expectations of English use after graduation	English use at work
<p>Yuri</p> <p>Hopeful English is integral to her life. Certain to have family members who are foreign and speak English.</p>	<p><i>Banking:</i> English essential to communicate with local staff in cooperation with overseas corporate subsidiaries.</p>
<p>Satoshi</p> <p>Studied English overseas and expected to use English when travelling. Did not indicate any kind of employment situation involving English.</p>	<p><i>Travel Agency:</i> Communicate with hotels, agencies, and overseas clients.</p>

Figure 1. Pregraduation expectations of English use after graduation and actual English use at work. Pseudonyms are used in the reporting of responses.

Jun’s comments exhibit a strong link between expectations of English use after graduation and his current use of English at work. He was aware of his future place of employment at the time he completed the pregraduation questionnaire. Jun secured his permanent job early in his 4th year of university studies. During his time as a student in my CEIII class he became acquainted with what his job duties and English use would be. On the pregraduation questionnaire, he stated in his answer to Question 26 (How much English and what kind of English do you expect to use after you graduate in your personal life and at work?) that he would keep his “English alive as much as possible. I don’t want to lose my strong tool.” Before graduating, Jun completed a 2-month internship in Canada at a branch office of the Japanese company that eventually hired him. He chose *Yes, most likely* (5) in response to Statements 19, 20, and 21 on the pregraduation questionnaire, indicating his strong certainty about using English to interact with foreigners in international settings. Also, Jun chose *Yes, probably* (4) for Statements 13, 15, 16, and 18, indicating it quite likely he would be interacting in English with foreign customers and coworkers.

Miki suggested that English would be a part of her professional life, but she lacked awareness of the job tasks requiring English. Now Miki is employed as a flight attendant and speaks English with foreign passengers and crew members on international flights. She communicates with passengers concerning meals and drinks and speaks English to provide safety instructions to foreign passengers sitting near emergency exits. In the pregraduation questionnaire, she anticipated speaking English at least 50% of the time for professional purposes but only 10% of the time in her personal life. Miki answered

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it was either *probably* (4) or *most likely* (5) that she would engage in overseas travel and interact with foreigners who speak English (Statements 15, 16, 18, 19, and 20).

Megumi was uncertain about using English after graduation but desired to do something in English in some capacity. She responded to Question 24 (How do you think learning English will affect your future after graduating from university?) by commenting, “If I can speak English while working, my company may have a chance to contact more with foreign countries.” Megumi envisioned how using English would benefit her employer but the link between expectation and eventual English use was vague. She stated, “I’m not sure whether I use English at work or not after I graduate, but I may talk with foreign tourists very often.” In fact, after graduating Megumi began working for a type of private school commonly referred to as a cram school by Japanese students, teaching several subjects, including English. Although it appears Megumi is not meeting foreign tourists, she is now using English on a regular basis as predicted by her answers to Statements 15, 16, and 18, for which she believed using English was *probably* (4).

Kaori’s expectation of English use in her professional life linked well to what transpired after graduation. She indicated English would be necessary for her future career and she would need to use English “frequently” but was not aware at the time of the pregraduation questionnaire of how she would use English or in what workplace capacity. Now working at a Japanese airport, Kaori uses English when assisting English-speaking travelers who are obtaining their boarding passes, serving customers in an airport lounge, and engaging in activities related to ground duty. Kaori accurately predicted she would eventually use English frequently in her workplace and believed it *most likely* (5) that she would have foreign family members who speak English (Statement 22). She also believed it *most likely* she would travel overseas and use English while doing so (Statements 19 and 20).

There was little information connecting Yuri’s expected professional English usage and what eventually transpired, although she did believe English would be a part of her personal life by suggesting it *most likely* (5) she would have family members who are foreign and speak English (Statement 22) and that she would *probably* (4) have a boyfriend or girlfriend who is a foreigner and speaks English (Statement 23). Alternatively, she indicated no expectation of using English in her professional life other than her answer to Question 26 (How much English and what kind of English do you expect to use after you graduate in your personal life and at work), to which she simply replied, “A lot, hopefully.” In contrast to her vague expectation of professional English use, Yuri reported on the postgraduate questionnaire that she has been working at a

Japanese bank and described English as an “essential” component at work, as she uses her L2 to “communicate with local staff in cooperation with overseas bases because there are many companies with overseas subsidiaries.”

Participant 6, Satoshi, provided no indication he would use English in any sense, as he answered *No, definitely not* (1) to Statements 15, 16, 18, 19, and 20, all statements indicating using English to interact with foreigners; yet in his present job he uses English at a travel agency (albeit not on a face-to-face basis). Satoshi is employed as a travel planner. His duties include consulting customers about travel plans, preparing plans, and selling them. He uses English on the telephone to communicate with hotels, agencies, and overseas customers. He also reads and sends emails in English. After his 2nd year as an undergraduate, Satoshi visited the United States to study English at a language school. He indicated on the pregraduation questionnaire that he needed to improve his vocabulary and writing ability, skills that he now uses on the job.

Discussion

The two statements garnering the highest means on the pregraduation questionnaire (After university I will travel to foreign countries) and (English will be necessary when I travel abroad) correspond with Grafstrom’s (2013) findings. Grafstrom concluded that speaking English is something that will happen “if [students] go somewhere else to do it, namely overseas and not necessarily in Japan” (p. 26), prompting Grafstrom to claim, “It seems as though English language training in elementary school, middle school, and finally at [Akita University] AU, is just a very elaborate, institutionalized training for going on vacation” (p. 26). However, one wonders whether the sentiments expressed by students in Grafstrom’s study is indicative of how they feel English is to be used in the future, or whether their answers reflect a lack of awareness of how English could potentially be used in a professional sense.

Sixty-six percent (41 of 62) of participants who answered the postgraduate questionnaire indicated that they use English in job duties. However, this percentage may be misleading because 85 graduates of the 147 contacted failed to respond. If none of the nonresponders use English in the workplaces, and this is the reason they did not respond, then the percentage of graduates using English would be 28%, based on only 41 participants using English out of the 147 persons contacted. This is not a large proportion and is comparable to other studies conducted of English usage by university graduates in Japan (Lambert, 2010).

Variations in terms of the current English usage at work of the six who answered both questionnaires relate to the frequency of English use and the purposes for which English

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is used to perform job duties. Jun uses English daily to communicate with foreigners in his business interactions. Miki uses English on domestic or international flights to communicate verbally with foreign travelers and/or crew members. Although Megumi teaches a course in English at a cram school, she uses English less frequently than Jun and Miki. Kaori works at an airport and uses spoken English frequently to communicate with foreign travelers. Yuri and Satoshi may use English the least, but their L2 appears to be an integral part of their work life.

Conclusion

University educators in Japan often fail to consider the point of view held by those most affected by course and curriculum decisions—that is, the students. The current study highlighted, from a student’s perspective, the relationship between the views they have for their future English use and the use of English they experience in permanent employment settings after graduation.

The results of this study revealed that once the students had reached their senior year of study they had at least a general idea of the job they would like to have but their expectations of English usage were often vaguely expressed. Three of the six students anticipated with certainty that English would be used after graduation for career purposes. Students who had already, or were on the verge of, securing permanent employment displayed a comparatively better grasp of what kinds of English they would use, the frequency of usage, and for which job tasks English would be required.

The findings presented in this paper are of an exploratory nature and feature students who have a major stake in learning and using English. Future research with the same participants who volunteer to continue will focus on moving from job tasks involving English to precise target language within individual occupational areas. Once identified, this target language can provide a rich base of instructional material into which teachers and students alike may delve.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Preraduation: Student English Usage Expectation Questionnaire English Usage Background

- Did you write any English language tests?
TOEIC Test? No ___ Yes ___
If you answered yes, what was your highest score? _____
TOFEL Test? No ___ Yes ___
If you answered yes, what was your highest score? _____
IELTS Test? No ___ Yes ___
If you answered yes, what was your highest score? _____
- Have you ever studied English overseas? No ___ Yes ___
If you answered yes to this question could you please list the countries you have visited, for how long did you, and the kinds of English instruction you received?
- How many hours of English coursework do you have at this university each week?
- What is your university major? _____ Year of study? _____

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5. Are you taking any extra English classes outside of your university?
No _____ Yes _____
If you answered yes could you please explain the kinds of instruction you are receiving, why you are taking this English instruction, and how many hours you are studying in outside classes each week.
6. What are the types of English you are using in your university classrooms?
7. Indicate which English you use outside of your classrooms during free time and for how many hours a week:
 - a. Email _____ hours
 - b. Chatting on social media like Skype or FB or other apps _____ hours
 - c. Writing essays or letters _____ hours
 - d. Singing songs _____ hours
 - e. Listening to music _____ hours
 - f. Listening and watching English movies or English television shows _____ hours
 - g. Other hours _____ and for what purposes? _____
8. How would you describe your strengths and weaknesses in using English?

Expectations About Using English After Graduating From University

For the following questions 9 to 23 please indicate your level of agreement with a rating of 1 to 5:

- | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|------------------|---|--------------------|---|--------------|--|--|--|--|--|
| 5 | Yes, most likely | 4 | Yes, probably | 3 | I'm not sure | | | | | |
| 2 | Probably not | 1 | No, definitely not | | | | | | | |
9. TOEIC will be necessary for my work after university 1 2 3 4 5
 10. TOFEL will be necessary for my work after university 1 2 3 4 5
 11. IELTS will be necessary for my work after university 1 2 3 4 5
 12. After university I will continue to study English 1 2 3 4 5
 13. After university I am likely to have foreign co-workers 1 2 3 4 5

14. My foreign co-workers will be fluent in Japanese 1 2 3 4 5
15. I will have to speak English to my foreign co-workers 1 2 3 4 5
16. After university some customers will be foreigners 1 2 3 4 5
17. My foreign customers will be fluent in Japanese 1 2 3 4 5
18. I will have to speak English to my foreign customers 1 2 3 4 5
19. After university I will travel to foreign countries 1 2 3 4 5
20. English will be necessary when I travel abroad 1 2 3 4 5
21. After university I will have English-speaking foreign friends
1 2 3 4 5
22. I will have family members who are foreign and speak English (for example, a brother/sister-in-law, an aunt/uncle, etc.) 1 2 3 4 5
23. I will have a boyfriend/girlfriend who is a foreigner and speaks English
1 2 3 4 5
24. How do think learning English will affect your future after graduating from university?
25. In the future what do you believe will be the advantages and disadvantages of you being able to communicate in English in your everyday life and at work?
26. How much English and what kind of English do you expect to use after you graduate in your personal life and at work?

Appendix B

Postgraduate: Survey of English Usage in the Workplace

Part 1: Current position and experience

1. In which area are you currently working?
2. How long have you been working in this area?
3. Please describe what you do in your job in as much detail as possible.

Part 2: Use of English in conjunction with position

4. Do you use English in your work? (a) Yes (b) No
5. If you replied "Yes" to Question 4, please describe what you use English for in your work in as much detail as possible.