

University in English? Changes in Japanese Student Confidence and Interest

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Japan is rapidly expanding English-medium instruction (EMI) and English-taught degree programs (ETPs), assuming high schools will produce students ready to learn academic content in English. Yet readiness for EMI depends on confidence in using English, not only proficiency. This study compared survey data from 3rd-year students at the same Japanese public high school (international studies curriculum) in 2013 (N = 147) and 2024 (N = 132). Confidence in speaking, listening, reading, and writing for an English-taught degree increased significantly over 11 years, with the largest gains in speaking. In contrast, interest in enrolling in an ETP was stable across cohorts. New 2024 items showed why this matters: students reported that confidence in every skill strongly shaped whether they would apply. The findings suggested that expanding ETP participation will hinge not just on test scores but on confidence-building communicative experiences in the secondary–tertiary transition.

日本では、英語による授業 (EMI) や英語による授業のみで学位取得できる課程 (ETP) の拡大が進められているが、その前提となる高校生の「準備性」は十分には検証されていない。本研究は、同一公立高校 (国際系学科) に在籍する高校3年生を対象に、2013年 (N=147) と2024年 (N=132) の調査データを比較し、英語力への自信とETPへの関心の変化を分析した。その結果、「話す・聞く・書く・読む」の4技能すべてで自信は有意に向上していた一方、ETPへの関心はほぼ変化しなかった。ただし、2024年の調査では、4技能への自信がETP出願への判断に強く影響することが示された。これらの結果は、英語能力のみならず、高校段階での自信形成がETP拡大の鍵であることを示唆している。

English-medium instruction (EMI) and English-taught degree programs (ETPs) have become central components of Japan's higher education internationalization strategy. Since the late 2000s, national initiatives such as the Global 30 Project and the Top Global University Project have incentivized select universities to expand EMI offerings in order to enhance global competitiveness, attract international students and faculty, and respond to broader concerns related to globalization, demographic change, and labor market demands (Bradford, 2016; Brown & Lyobe, 2014; MEXT, 2014). Although these initiatives were initially oriented toward international student recruitment, policy attention has since shifted toward domestic students and the cultivation of global human resources, resulting in a steady expansion of English-medium offerings across Japanese universities (Bradford, 2018, 2019, 2020; Rose & McKinley, 2018).

Japan's formal education system follows a 6-3-3-4 structure, with students completing 6 years of elementary school, 3 years of junior high school (JHS), and 3 years of senior high school (SHS) before entering a four-year undergraduate program. As senior high school represents the final stage before university, the transition from secondary to tertiary education has become an important focus of recent EMI-related policy initiatives. Recent recommendations by the Council for the Creation of Future Education (Cabinet Secretariat, 2023) call for substantial expansion of both university level ETPs and secondary-level EMI, reflecting an assumption that students graduating from Japanese SHSs will be better prepared to engage with academic content in English at university. This assumption is further embedded in recent reforms to the national Course of Study, which emphasize communicative competence, increased use of EMI, and alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (MEXT, 2018; National Institute for Educational Policy Research, 2021).

However, readiness for EMI involves more than meeting externally defined language proficiency benchmarks; affective factors such as confidence in using English for academic purposes may also shape EMI engagement and outcomes (Aizawa & Rose,

2019). Despite growing recognition of this issue at the tertiary level, little empirical attention has been paid to SHS students' perceptions of readiness prior to university entry, or how such perceptions relate to their interest in ETPs.

This lack of attention to the secondary level is particularly striking given the recent expansion of the English section of the Course of Study and promotion of EMI opportunities in Japanese secondary education. While policy reforms aim to enhance students' linguistic and communicative capacities, it remains unclear how SHS students themselves perceive their preparedness for tertiary-level EMI and whether such perceptions influence their interest in pursuing ETPs at university.

Against this background, the present study investigates Japanese SHS students' confidence in their English language skills and their interest in ETPs for university study, drawing on survey data collected in 2013 and 2024. By focusing on students at the stage of transition from secondary to tertiary education, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of EMI readiness and provides empirical insight into an unexplored aspect of Japan's EMI education pipeline.

Literature Review

Policy-Driven Expansion of EMI and Implementation Challenges in Japan

The rapid expansion of EMI in Japanese higher education has been widely documented, with scholars noting that institutional engagement with EMI is often driven by policy incentives rather than pedagogical considerations. Studies show that EMI has functioned as an add on strategy used to secure government funding or enhance institutional prestige, rather than as a comprehensive reform of teaching and learning practices (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020; Aizawa & Rose, 2019; Brown, 2016; Brown & Iyobe, 2014; Ota, 2018; Shimauchi, 2018). As a result, universities may expand EMI offerings without providing sufficient guidance, training, or structural support for instructors and students.

Research has highlighted the challenges arising from this top-down approach (Aizawa & Rose, 2019; Rose & McKinley, 2018; Shimauchi, 2018). Faculty members frequently report limited training in EMI pedagogy and difficulties managing classes in which students' English proficiency levels vary widely at the classroom level (Aizawa & Rose, 2019). These constraints can result in extensive code switching between English and Japanese, potentially undermining both content learning and the goals of EMI. Such findings underscore concerns that rapid policy-driven expansion may come at a cost to educational quality (Macaro et al., 2018; Yashima & Kojima, 2024).

Language Proficiency Thresholds and EMI Outcomes

Within discussions of EMI effectiveness, language proficiency has often been treated as a central determinant of student success. CEFR level B2 is commonly cited as a threshold for effective participation in university level EMI, and this benchmark has been adopted in policy discourse in Japan as well (Aizawa & Rose, 2019; Rose et al., 2020). Empirical studies have shown that students with lower levels of English proficiency tend to report greater difficulty in EMI courses, particularly in relation to academic reading and oral participation (Aizawa & Rose, 2019; Brown et al., 2022; Rose et al., 2020).

At the same time, proficiency alone does not fully account for variation in EMI outcomes. Several studies have demonstrated that students with similar proficiency levels may experience EMI quite differently, suggesting that additional factors shape engagement and performance (Aizawa et al., 2023, 2025; Brown et al., 2022; Soruç et al., 2022). This recognition has prompted increased attention to motivational and affective dimensions of EMI learning.

Confidence, Self-Efficacy, and Engagement in EMI

Among the affective factors examined in EMI research, self-efficacy and confidence have received growing attention. Self-efficacy, defined as individuals' beliefs in their capability to perform tasks required to achieve specific outcomes (Bandura, 1977, 1997), has been shown to predict academic engagement and success across educational contexts, including EMI settings (Brown et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2022; Tsui, 2024). In EMI settings, lower proficiency students with high self-efficacy are more likely to engage in class discussions, ask questions, and persist when faced with linguistic challenges.

Although self-efficacy is conceptually distinct from confidence, self-efficacy can be treated as a component of broader confidence in language use (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013). As lack of confidence has been identified as a key demotivating factor in language learning (Dörnyei, 1994; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009), students' perceived ability to function in English medium academic environments may influence their willingness to engage with EMI regardless of their objectively measured proficiency. This aligns with the findings, stated above, that confidence-related factors can mitigate difficulties associated with lower proficiency, enabling students to manage EMI demands more effectively.

Because confidence is the central construct examined here, it is necessary to specify how the term will be used going forward. In this study, confidence refers to students'

subjective belief in their own ability to use English productively and receptively in an EMI academic environment; self-efficacy, in Bandura's (1977, 1997) task-specific sense, is treated as one component of this broader construct. Confidence is therefore the primary construct measured and reported throughout this paper. Readiness and preparedness, by contrast, are used only to refer to the broader, unmeasured capacity invoked in EMI policy and research literature (e.g. Cabinet Secretariat, 2023; MEXT, 2018)—encompassing proficiency, confidence, and potentially other factors such as prior EMI experience—of which confidence, as measured here, is one specific component.

Secondary Education, Confidence Development, and Preparation for EMI

Despite extensive research on university-level EMI, comparatively little attention has been paid to how readiness for EMI develops during secondary education. Studies focusing on Japanese SHS students have reported low confidence in language skills, particularly speaking, even among students with relatively strong receptive abilities (Angeles et al., 2025; Igawa & Forrester, 2016; Izumitani, 2020). This mismatch between proficiency and confidence raises questions about how students approach English used in academic contexts beyond SHS.

Exposure to EMI or EMI-like practices at the secondary level appears to play a role in shaping students' confidence and expectations. Research suggests that students with prior experience using English for academic tasks such as discussion, presentation, and extended writing develop a clearer understanding of EMI demands and greater confidence in their ability to meet them (Aizawa & Rose, 2020; Thompson et al., 2022). Conversely, students without such experience may perceive EMI as inaccessible, regardless of their language proficiency.

Recent reforms to Japan's Course of Study for high schools aim to address the issue of language proficiency by emphasizing communicative use of English, academic expression, and alignment with CEFR competencies. While these reforms are intended to enhance proficiency, and perhaps confidence, implementation remains uneven across school types (MEXT, 2025), highlighting the importance of examining students' self-perceptions alongside policy intentions.

Secondary English Education Reform and Preparation for EMI

As Japan has expanded EMI at the tertiary level as a means of cultivating globally competitive human resources, increased attention has been directed toward the role of secondary education in preparing students for English-medium academic study. From

this perspective, readiness for tertiary EMI is not solely a university-level concern but a necessary component of secondary education policy. Reflecting this view, the Council for the Creation of Future Education has called for a substantial expansion of EMI at the secondary level, recommending an increase from approximately 50 to 150 SHSs nationwide where students can study multiple subjects taught in English (Cabinet Secretariat, 2023).

Key changes to the SHS English curriculum include a renewed focus on speaking, the introduction of a course on logical expression, increased use of EMI, the integration of active learning approaches, and alignment with CEFR competencies (MEXT, n.d.). These reforms explicitly target students' ability to use English for logical expression, discussion, and extended academic discourse, skills widely recognized as central to successful participation in EMI. Moreover, the new Course of Study aims to "cultivate a willingness to communicate proactively and autonomously in English" (MEXT, n.d.). The stated objectives of the Course of Study, if achieved, should adequately prepare students for EMI in university.

Analyses of the revised Course of Study suggest that these changes bring English education closer to students' needs and motivations. Yoshida (2022), for example, argues that increased emphasis on interactive and student-centered language use enables instructors to design activities that better reflect students' interests, thereby enhancing motivation and engagement. Yoshida further suggests that such motivational gains may contribute not only to higher proficiency but also to increased confidence in using English.

However, national implementation reports indicate that the intended proficiency outcomes of these reforms have yet to be realized uniformly. Although MEXT has a target of CEFR B1 proficiency by high school graduation, recent data show substantial disparities by curriculum type. In 2024, approximately 70.7% of third-year students in high schools with a specialized English or international studies curriculum were assessed as meeting or considered to be at the B1 level, compared to only 26.9% of third-year students in high schools with a regular curriculum (MEXT, 2025). These disparities suggest that while reforms may be yielding gains in certain educational contexts, access to EMI-relevant proficiency—and by extension, confidence—remains uneven across the secondary education system.

Taken together, these policy developments and implementation outcomes suggest that secondary education reforms are explicitly intended to enhance students' preparedness for tertiary EMI, particularly through increased communicative engagement and academic language use. Yet, whether such reforms have translated into greater student

confidence in relation to EMI university study, and whether such confidence has changed over time, remain underexplored. Addressing this gap is particularly important given ongoing expansion of EMI and ETPs at the tertiary level.

Research Gap

Existing studies point to the importance of confidence-related factors in EMI engagement and success, while also revealing a lack of empirical research focusing on students prior to university entry. In the Japanese context, little is known about how high school students perceive their readiness for EMI or how such perceptions influence their interest in ETPs. Addressing this gap is essential for evaluating the assumptions underlying current policy initiatives and for understanding how secondary education reforms may shape future participation in EMI at the tertiary level. Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1. How does senior high school students' confidence in their English language skills differ between the 2013 and 2024 cohorts.
- RQ2. How does interest in English-taught degree programs differ between the 2013 and 2024 cohorts?
- RQ3. Among the 2024 cohort, to what extent do students perceive their confidence in each English language skill as influencing their decision to apply to an ETP for tertiary study?

Because the 2013 survey did not include comparable items, RQ1 and RQ2 compare the 2013 and 2024 cohorts, whereas RQ3 is examined using 2024 data only.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were 3rd-year students in a public prefectural SHS (Kanagawa Prefecture) with a specialized international studies curriculum that includes elective content courses taught in English. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct research was obtained from the school administration. All participating students provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymized.

The 2024 sample consisted of 132 students enrolled in this curriculum. Most students held Eiken qualifications at approximately CEFR A2–C1, meeting MEXT benchmarks for SHS graduates (Eiken Foundation of Japan, n.d.). For comparison, a 2013 cohort of third-

year students from the same school and curriculum track (N = 147) was drawn from an earlier study (Igawa & Forrester, 2016). Because the two cohorts consist of different students surveyed 11 years apart rather than the same individuals followed over time, the design is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal (see Data Analysis, below, for how the 2013 data were reanalyzed for the present study).

Instrument

Data were collected using a questionnaire designed to assess students' (a) interest in ETPs for university study, (b) self-reported confidence in the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) in relation to participation in an English-medium undergraduate program, and (c) influence of confidence in English skills on applying to ETPs. To ensure comparability across cohorts, the core survey items were identical to those used in Igawa and Forrester (2016). An additional item was included in the 2024 survey to examine the perceived influence of language-skill confidence on students' willingness to apply to ETPs.

All survey items were presented in both English and Japanese, the latter having been checked and cross-checked by Japanese English teachers at the high school. Responses were recorded on a four-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 4 = *very much*), which was adopted to encourage directional responses and to eliminate the effect of sitting on the fence. The questionnaire items for this study are provided in the Appendix.

Procedure

The 2024 data were collected during the first term of students' final year of high school. The timing of the survey (May) was selected to minimize potential effects of midterm examinations on students' responses, consistent with the procedure used in the 2013 data collection. Surveys were administered online using Outlook Forms and completed during regular school hours.

Data Analysis

The 2013 dataset was originally collected for an earlier study (Igawa & Forrester, 2016), in which some variables were reported only in aggregated form. The present study conducted a secondary analysis of the original individual-level data for all variables included in the current investigation, enabling direct inferential comparison with the 2024 cohort.

Due to the ordinal nature of the 2024 survey data, non-parametric statistical procedures were employed. Mann–Whitney U tests were used to compare responses between the 2013 and 2024 cohorts for variables common to both datasets. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all items, and analyses were conducted using numiqo statistical software (numiqo Team, 2025).

Results

This section reports the results corresponding to the three research questions. Descriptive statistics are followed by inferential comparisons between the 2013 and 2024 cohorts where applicable.

Confidence in English Language Skills (RQ1)

Students were asked to rate their confidence in their ability to participate in an undergraduate ETP with respect to four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

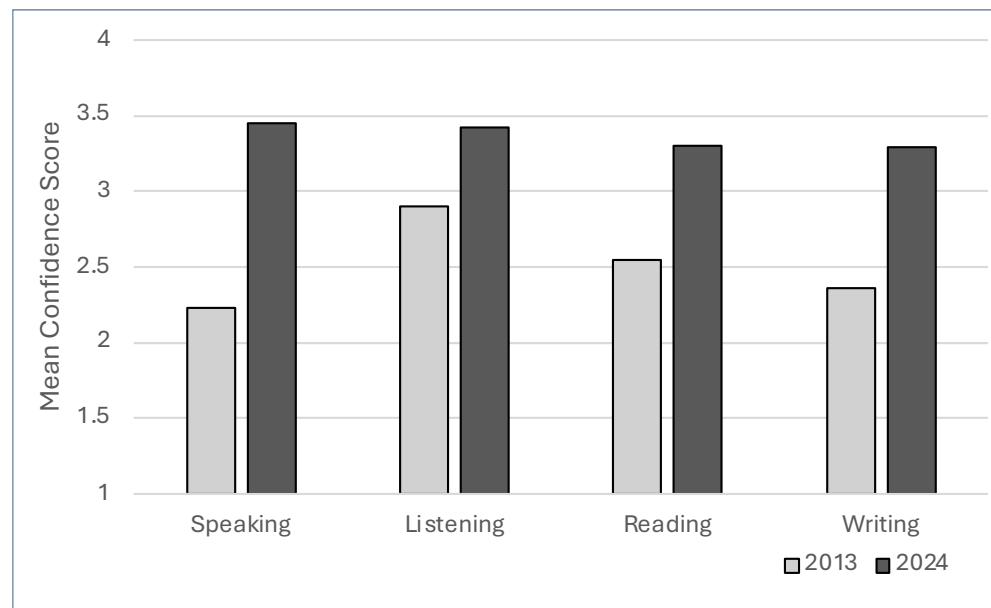
Across all four skills, students in the 2024 cohort reported substantially higher confidence than those in the 2013 cohort. The largest increase was observed in speaking confidence. In 2013, approximately one third of students indicated a positive level of confidence (*somewhat* or *very much*) in their speaking ability, whereas in 2024 over two thirds of students reported positive confidence. A Mann–Whitney U test indicated that this difference was statistically significant (2013: $M = 2.23$; 2024: $M = 3.45$; $U = 2789.00$, $p < .001$).

A similar pattern was observed for listening skills. Mean confidence scores increased from 2.90 in 2013 to 3.42 in 2024, and the difference between cohorts was statistically significant ($U = 6197.50$, $p < .001$). Significant increases were also found for reading confidence (2013: $M = 2.55$; 2024: $M = 3.30$; $U = 4732.50$, $p < .001$) and writing confidence (2013: $M = 2.36$; 2024: $M = 3.29$; $U = 3956.50$, $p < .001$).

Taken together, these results indicated a significant increase in students' confidence across all four language skills over the 11-year period. Figure 1 summarizes the distribution of confidence levels by skill and cohort.

Figure 1

Mean Confidence Scores (1-4) for English Language Skills by Cohort (2013 and 2024)



Interest in ETPs (RQ2)

To address the second research question, students were asked to indicate how appealing an ETP would be for their tertiary education, using the same four-point Likert scale. Contrary to the substantial changes observed in confidence levels, overall interest in ETPs remained stable across cohorts.

A Mann–Whitney U test comparing interest scores between the 2013 ($M = 2.86$) and 2024 ($M = 2.84$) cohorts revealed no statistically significant difference ($U = 9558.00$, $p = .831$). In both cohorts, a majority of students expressed positive interest, with 68.7% of students in 2013 and 69.7% of students in 2024 indicating that ETPs appealed to them either *somewhat* or *very much*.

Perceived Influence of Confidence on Applying to ETPs (RQ3)

The third research question examined the extent to which students in the 2024 cohort *perceived* their confidence in each language skill as influencing their decision to apply to an ETP. This item was included only in the 2024 survey and therefore no cohort comparison was conducted.

Students reported that confidence in all four skills exerted a strong influence on their likelihood of applying to an ETP. Mean influence ratings were highest for speaking ($M = 3.45$) and listening ($M = 3.42$), followed by reading ($M = 3.30$) and writing ($M = 3.29$). These results suggest that, while overall interest in ETPs did not increase over time, students' self-perceived language confidence plays an important role in shaping their application decisions.

Discussion

This study set out to examine changes in Japanese high school students' confidence in their English language skills, their interest in ETPs, and the perceived influence of language confidence on decisions to apply to such programs. By comparing two cohorts surveyed a decade apart, the findings provide insight into how recent educational reforms and increased exposure to English may be shaping high school students' self-perceptions at the stage of transition to tertiary education.

Increases in Confidence Across Language Skills

The results seemed to indicate a substantial increase in students' confidence across all four language skills between 2013 and 2024, with the most pronounced gains observed in speaking. This pattern aligns with recent reforms to the Japanese Course of Study for high schools, which place greater emphasis on communicative competence, active use of English in the classroom, and discussion and oral presentation skills. Although the present data do not allow for causal claims, the magnitude and consistency of the observed increases suggest that changes in secondary English education may be contributing to students' greater confidence in their ability to function in English-medium academic contexts.

These findings are broadly consistent with prior research indicating that confidence—closely related to the broader construct of self-efficacy—is shaped not only by linguistic proficiency but also by opportunities for meaningful language use (Kobayashi, 2019; Yoshida, 2022). As noted earlier, students with greater confidence are more willing to

engage in discussion, ask questions, and persist when faced with linguistic challenges. The present results extend this line of research by demonstrating that such confidence-related differences are already evident at the high school level and appear to have strengthened over time.

Stability of Interest in ETPs

In contrast to the marked increase in confidence, students' overall interest in ETPs did not appear to change significantly between the two cohorts. In both 2013 and 2024, approximately two thirds of students reported that ETPs were appealing options for tertiary study. This stability suggests that interest in ETPs among students in specialized international studies tracks has remained consistently high, even as confidence in language skills has increased.

The absence of growth in interest despite rising confidence is noteworthy, particularly in light of national policy initiatives aimed at expanding ETPs and increasing domestic student participation. One possible interpretation is that factors other than language-related confidence—such as perceptions of academic difficulty, concerns about content mastery, career aspirations, or the perceived value of English-taught degrees within Japan—play a central role in shaping students' program choices. This interpretation is consistent with previous research suggesting that language proficiency alone does not determine interest or enrollment in ETPs (Igawa & Forrester, 2016).

Perceived Influence of Confidence on Application Decisions

Although overall interest levels remained stable, the results for the third research question seem to indicate that students perceive their confidence in English language skills as an important factor in deciding whether to apply to an ETP. For the 2024 cohort, confidence in all four skills was rated as having a strong influence on application decisions, with speaking and listening exerting the greatest influence. This finding highlights an important distinction between general interest in ETPs and the more concrete decision to apply.

From this perspective, confidence may function as a threshold factor: students may find ETPs appealing in principle, but only those who feel sufficiently confident in their language abilities—particularly in interactive, oral skills—are likely to consider applying. This interpretation may help explain why increases in confidence did not translate into increased overall interest at the cohort level.

Implications for Secondary–Tertiary Transition

Taken together, the findings would appear to underscore the importance of considering affective aspects of language learning in discussions of EMI readiness—of which, as defined earlier, confidence is one component. While policy reforms have focused heavily on raising measurable language proficiency, the present study suggests that confidence in using English for academic purposes plays a distinct and meaningful role in shaping students' perceptions and decisions. Efforts to prepare students for EMI at the tertiary level may therefore benefit from greater attention to creating opportunities for successful communicative experiences in secondary education, particularly those that mirror the interactional demands of university-level EMI.

At the same time, the stable level of interest in ETPs suggests that expanding the number of programs alone may not be sufficient to increase domestic enrollment. Universities and policymakers may need to address broader concerns about the relevance, accessibility, and outcomes of English-taught degrees, as well as provide clearer information to prospective students about the academic and career pathways associated with such programs.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study draws on data from a single public high school with a specialized international studies curriculum, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Students in regular or vocational high school curricula may exhibit different patterns of confidence and interest. Second, the data are based on self-reported perceptions rather than direct measures of proficiency or actual enrollment behavior. Third, while the study compares two cohorts over time, it does not track individual students longitudinally or examine post-graduation outcomes.

Future research could address these limitations by including a broader range of school types, incorporating longitudinal designs that follow students into tertiary education, and examining actual application and enrollment data for ETPs. Further qualitative research could also explore how students interpret EMI and ETPs, and how factors such as career goals, parental expectations, and institutional messaging interact with language-related confidence in shaping educational choices.

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Bio Data

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Appendix

Questionnaire Items for the Study

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?

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、全ての授業が英語で行われる学部(学科)に興味がありますか？

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

How confident are you that your English skills are good enough to participate in an undergraduate degree program taught exclusively in English? 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.

すべての授業が英語で行われる学部(学科)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 話す	Not at all ない	Not much あまりない	Somewhat ややある	Very much ある
Listening 聞く	Not at all ない	Not much あまりない	Somewhat ややある	Very much ある
Reading 読む	Not at all ない	Not much あまりない	Somewhat ややある	Very much ある
Writing 書く	Not at all ない	Not much あまりない	Somewhat ややある	Very much ある

How much do the following items influence your interest or lack of interest in applying to a faculty or department taught exclusively in English at a Japanese university?

以下の項目は、全ての授業が英語で行われる学部・学科を希望する、あるいは希望しないことに、どの程度影響しますか？

English speaking ability 英語話す力	Not at all ない	Not much あまりない	Somewhat ややある	Very much ある
English listening ability 英語聞く力	Not at all ない	Not much あまりない	Somewhat ややある	Very much ある
English reading ability 英語読む力	Not at all ない	Not much あまりない	Somewhat ややある	Very much ある
English writing ability 英語書く力	Not at all ない	Not much あまりない	Somewhat ややある	Very much ある