

Students' Needs and Motivations in Learning English in Japanese Higher Education

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I Introduction

Social surroundings have been rapidly changing since Japanese 'bubble' economy burst at the beginning of the Heisei period(1989—). In the face of an unprecedented and prolonged crisis of economic recession since World War II, the Japanese government announced in 1996 its reform plan for the financial market. The new financial market system was based on a free market and free trade with three clear principles of, fair, free, and global trade. This led to the opening up of the Japanese financial market to foreign competitors. American and European financial giants can now operate more freely in Japan. This has caused a 'big bang' in the Japanese financial system. Foreign companies have vigorously sought mergers with or acquisitions of Japanese companies. Under these circumstances, Japanese industries have been forced to cope with much more international business dealings and operations. Concurrently, the rapid and wide-spread computerization in recent years has changed the society at an unprecedented scale. Many revolutionary changes in contemporary communication technology have made business dealings easier and more immediate.

Such dramatic changes in the business world have created a pressing demand for a working knowledge of the international language: English. It is now crucially important that English teaching method should be improved in Japanese schools and institutions of higher education to cope with the demands of society in its search for higher qualified skills and more efficiency for both today and the future.

The modification of English teaching methods can be carried out efficiently through the careful observation and the analysis of the present situations of English teaching. This research was conducted to find out students' needs and motivation at higher education levels: universities and vocational institutions. This is also aimed at analyzing the effect of such urgent social demands on students. This research is expected to give some parameters in seeking better ways of English teaching.

II Theoretical Background

An investigation into a series of theories of motivation in English learning as a foreign language and second language will be of great help in understanding the results of this research.

Motivation itself means 'a need-satisfying behavior' and 'goal-seeking behavior' in psychology. In this essay, however, the motivations directly related to foreign and second language learning are focused upon.

The most extensive experiments carried out by Gardner and Lambert(1972) about motivation in learning foreign and second languages have offered an ideal introduction to our contemporary linguists. Motivation is

divided into two categories, according to their report; one is instrumental motivation, "a desire to gain social recognition or economic advantages through knowledge of a foreign language", and the other is integrative motivation, "a desire to be representative members of the other language community." (Gardner and Lambert, 1972: 14). Later Baker. C (1988: 153) states more clearly that "instrumental motivation reflects utilitarian motives, being keen to succeed and get promotion in employment, for example." Rivers (1983: 145) explains more concretely that integrative motivation occurs when "the person is interested in the other language community to the point of being willing to adopt distinctive characteristics of their behavior, linguistic and nonlinguistic." As a result of their research, Gardner and Lambert claim that integrative motivation can last longer and create more positive results than instrumental motivation, because it is based on the personality of the learner. Actually, long term motivation is required for the very demanding task of foreign and second language learning.

Different social environments, however, produce different results. Even Gardner and Lambert's research conducted in different settings produced different results. Their research conducted in Montreal, a clearly bilingual setting, illuminated the confirming result, while their research in the Philippines highlighted the strength of instrumental motivation for learning a foreign language, i.e. English. In the Philippines, English is used as an official language. English is the language used in the educational settings and the command of English enables a students to get a good job. Under such circumstances, it is crucially important to learn English. The division between instrumental and integrative motivations does not seem to be so obvious.

In Japan, people do not have many opportunities to use English in their daily life. Therefore, English has been treated as an academic subject. For societies like Japan, academic motivation should also be taken into account. Johnstone defines academic motivation as below. (1989: 121)

This is directed towards learning a foreign language as exemplar of language in general. It entails a detached, analytical focus on language as a symbolic system of rules covering many different interesting areas, e.g. speech and writing, semantic fields, dialect and register, philology, language learning.

Japanese students are forced to study English as one of the main subjects for the entrance examinations to higher institutions.

Other sorts of motivation should not be overlooked, either. They are intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Dickinson (1987:32) defines intrinsic motivation as "the learner's continued willingness to put learning the target language at a high level of priority among all the demands on her time" and extrinsic motivation as "the incentives, encouragement and threats provided by both the teacher and educational context."

III Research

1 Purpose of the research

The purpose of this research is to find out the students' needs and motivational factors which drive them to learn English. Needs and motivations seem to interact tightly with each other, as Brown(1987: 115) mentions, "the foreign language learner who is either intrinsically or extrinsically meeting needs in learning the language will be positively motivated to learn."

2 Research method – Questionnaire

2.1 Samples

The samples of the writer's research consisted of 73 university students and 45 Senmon Gakko (vocational institute) students. The questionnaire was conducted in the classrooms where she teaches English.

2.2 Contents

The questionnaire consisted of four parts (See Appendix).

Part 1 (Q1~Q3) relates to students' educational experience from the start right up to the present in order to obtain fundamental information about their English language education.

Part 2 (Q4~Q8) looks into students' purposes of learning English and their personal feeling towards learning English.

Part 3 (Q9~Q13) concentrates on students' experiences and interaction with foreign cultures.

Part 4 (Q14) relates to students' attitudes towards the English language.

3 Hypothesis

This research was conducted on four hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: In this monolingual society, Japanese students have been described as being more oriented to integrative motivation than instrumental motivation. However, with rapid internationalization, students may be more oriented to instrumental motivation.

Hypothesis 2: The increase in the number of the opportunities when the students use their English for communication outside classrooms may have enhanced their motivation.

Hypothesis 3: The students' needs for English learning may have become clearer, because they consider English as a vehicular language, as it has become an international language rather than an academic language subject.

Hypothesis 4: Universities offer a four year course, while vocational institutions offer a two year course. There are some considerable differences between the two types of higher institutions in their entry requirements. Therefore, these two higher institutions should not be compared on an equal footing. When compared, however, they may produce some interesting results in their responses; students from a vocational institution may show a much keener response to social demands.

IV Finding and Analysis of Findings

1 Findings in Part 1 (Q1~Q3)

The results of Part 1 show that the percentages of the students at university and Senmon Gakko who have an experience of studying English outside school, when they were still at high school, was 53% and 80% respectively. The percentages of the students who have learned English privately along with their formal education were 2% for the university students, and 20% for the Senmon Gakko students. Once they get into an institution of higher education, they seem to drop their urge to learn English outside school. A big difference in the figures before and after entering a university and a Senmon Gakko apparently shows that the entrance examination has strongly influenced their motives to study English. Most high school students seem to be motivated to study English as the way to achieve successes in the entrance examinations. Their hard work aimed solely at passing their examinations produces a big backwash, which is a disturbing phenomenon to teachers in higher education. "Most university language teachers in Japan lament the apparent lack of motivation and positive attitudes toward learning their students show shortly after matriculation to university." (Berwick and Ross 1989)

2 Findings in Part 2 (Q4~Q8)

Ninety-seven percent of the students are aware of the importance of learning English. Asked about their specific purposes of learning English, the students both at university and Senmon Gakko listed first 'for communication with foreigners' (72%, 75% respectively), second 'for job hunting and work' (71%, 68%), third 'for enjoying foreign culture, such as movies and sports' (42%, 52%), and fourth 'for travel' (40%, 47%). This result endorses the hypothesis 1. (Note: the total of the percentages exceed 100%, because students were allowed to tick more than one answer.)

Out of the four required skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing, the students thought 'speaking' and 'listening' were overwhelmingly needed as seen in the data below.

	speaking	listening	Reading	Writing
Communication with foreigners	U: 94% S: 100%	U: 45% S: 81%	U: 3% S: 3%	U: 7% S: 6%
Job hunting and work	U: 86% S: 90%	U: 70% S: 66%	U: 20% S: 40%	U: 14% S: 26%
Enjoying foreign cultures	U: 100% S: 86%	U: 45% S: 81%	U: 30% S: 39%	U: 0% S: 0%
Travel	U: 96% S: 90%	U: 89% S: 61%	U: 7% S: 14%	U: 0% S: 0%

Note: (1) U: university students and S: Senmon Gakko students

(2) The total percentages exceed 100%, because students can choose more than one answer.

The percentages of the students who try to improve their levels of English proficiency are 39%(U) and 48%(S) respectively. To achieve some improvement, they choose an English language Newspaper (U:43%, S: 67%), and Satellite broadcasting and FEN broadcasting (U: 47%, S: 54%) as their means.

Moreover, 47%(U) and 66%(S) of students hope that they will acquire a reasonable proficiency in their daily English communications.

3 Findings in Part3 (Q9~Q13)

The percentages of students who have been abroad are 57%(U), and 48%(S). Their prime destination has been the U.S. A. Those who have lived in foreign countries are 15%(U), and 20%(S). Again the U.S.A. is the top in the list. After their experience abroad (short time visits), 66%(U) and 85%(S) of the students say that their interest in English has increased greatly. After their lengthy stay abroad, also 91%(U), and 70%(S) students give the same answer. It proves that direct contact with foreign cultures has a strong impact on the students' motivation. This finding supports hypothesis 2.

Seventy-six percent of the students (U and S together) have communicated with foreigners outside classrooms in Japan. This high percentage shows that the opportunities to use English in the society has increased dramatically. With regard to the frequency of their use of English for communication, however, it is remarkably low. Only 68% of the students have used English more than once in their life time. Though English has penetrated into Japanese society, they do not have an opportunity to use English in their everyday life. Even so, their communication with foreigners has boosted the students interest in English (U:61%, S:79%). In their communication with foreigners, especially in using the language in a practical way, students appear to have become more motivated and interested in English than they would be without these stimuli.

4 Findings in Part 4 (Q14)

This question is quite straightforward. The result that sixty-two percent(U) and seventy-seven percent(S) of the students like English shows that quite a lot of students have very positive attitude to English.

V Conclusion

Four hypotheses set at the beginning of this research have been proved to be correct: the instrumental motivation has increased its strength; students are more strongly motivated by encounter with foreign cultures; students are aware that English has been functioning as an international language; students at a vocational institute have keener interest in learning English. All those have already been made clear in the earlier section on-Finding.

This research also presents that there has been a very strong demand for English as a means of

communication among students of these two types of higher education. Obviously students' demands are the exact reflection of the social demands. Japan has become aware of the need of English so that it can cope with the international affairs in all spheres. Industry, commerce, diplomacy, media and culture in general are in great need of fluent speakers of English, since English has become a truly international language.

Therefore, it is crucially important to respond to such students' and social demands and to search for effective ways of English language teaching in Japan. Further research will be conducted to specify the demands of students and society, and the analysis of such surveys should give some definite parameters to a drastic and far reaching revision of English language teaching in Japan.

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Appendix

Questionnaire (please tick the boxes)

- 1 When did you start learning English at school?
①kindergarten ②primary 1 ③primary 4 ④junior high school ⑤other(please state) _____
- 2 Have you ever learned English privately before entering the university or Senmon gakko?
① Yes ② No
- 3 If yes to Q2, answer the following questions
(1)At what age did you start leaning privately?
①kindergarten ②primary 1,2,3 ③primary 4,5,6 ④junior high school ⑤senior high school
(2)How long did you learn?
①one year ②two years ③three years ④four years ⑤five years
⑥six years ⑦over 7 years
- 4 Do you think that it is important to study English?
① Yes ② No
- 5 If yes to Q4, answer the following questions.
(1)What do you think English is needed for?
①for job hunting and work ②for travel ③for enjoying foreign culture, such as movies and sports
④for communication with foreigners ⑤other(please state) _____
(1)If your answer was ①, what skill/s do you think is/are needed for that? (choose either 1 or 2)
①writing ②reading ③listening ④speaking
(3)If your answer was ②, what skill/s do you think is/are needed for that? (choose either 1 or 2)
①writing ②reading ③listening ④speaking
(4)If your answer was ③, what skill/s do you think is/are needed for that? (choose either 1 or 2)
①writing ②reading ③listening ④speaking
(5)If your answer was ④, what skill/s do you think is/are needed? (choose either 1 or 2)
①writing ②reading ③listening ④speaking
(6)If your answer was ⑤, what skill/s do you think is/are needed? (choose either 1 or 2)
①writing ②reading ③listening ④speaking
- 6 Is learning English outside school to improve your ability?
① Yes ② No
- 7 If yes to Q6, what are you doing?
① learning English at a language school
② reading English paper regularly
③ reading English paper occasionally
④ watching foreign programs on a satellite channel.
⑤ listening to FEN broadcasts
⑥ other (please state) _____
- 8 What level of English do you think you need?
①fluent ②enough to get by in daily life ③enough to be understood

9 Have you been abroad?

- ① Yes ② No

10 If yes to Q9, please answer the following questions.

(1) Write down the names of the countries _____

(2) How often did you use English when you were abroad?

- ①all the time ②often ③sometimes ④hardly ever

(3) After your trip, did your interest in English increase?

- ①very much ②a little ③not at all

11 Have you ever lived abroad?

- ① Yes ② No

12 If yes to Q11, please answer the following questions.

(1) Write down the names of the countries.-----

(2) Why? Choose an answer from the following list.

- ① parent's job
② to study at a foreign university
③ for a home stay
④ to attend a summer school etc
⑤ for other reasons (please state)

(3) How long did you stay then?

_____years, _____months and _____weeks

(4) How often did you use English when you lived abroad?

- ①all the time ②often ③sometimes ④hardly ever

(5) After your trip, did your interest in English increase?

- ①very much ②a little ③not at all

13 If no to Q9, please answer the following questions.

(1) Have you ever talked with a foreigner outside school?

- ① Yes ② No

(2) If your answer was 'yes', where did you talk with foreigners?

- ①school ②place of part time work ③street
④other places (please state) _____

(3) How often did you talk with foreigners?

- ①regularly ②often ③sometimes ④ once or twice

(4) Do you think your experience of talking with the foreigner increased your interest increased?

- ①very much ②a little ③ not at all

14 Do you like English?

- ①yes ②no ③ no firm opinion