

Japanese University Student Expectations of English Language Use after Graduation

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1 Introduction

Few academic studies in Japan are concerned with measuring Japanese university students' expectations of living in an international environment (outside of Japan) or being involved in an intercultural scene (within Japan) after graduating from university. Two such studies were conducted by Morita (2013, 2014), who found that whether students expect to leave Japan and live internationally or even be involved within an intercultural context within Japan after graduation is primarily dependent on the main area of their studies, that is, their undergraduate majors, and the subsequent employment possibilities related to their majors.

2 Japanese students in an international environment

Morita's (2014) eighteen month longitudinal project involved three separate surveys of 217 first and second year non-English majors who were enrolled in English language courses at Nagoya University. The students' majors covered a full spectrum: 70 engineering students; 39 literature students; 38 health science students; 32 natural science students; 20 from law; and 18 from the agricultural sciences. Morita found that 53.9% of the total 217 students anticipated they would be working in an international environment in the future, while fewer students in the study, 45.2%, believed they would not. The most common theme guiding their future expectations of international involvement was their 'field of study and career aspirations', which garnered 34% of all student responses as the number one determining factor. Other themes identified by Morita as important to

the students' decision to live abroad or not were the need for 'globalization' (20%), an intrinsic 'desire or requirement to work abroad' (12.3%), and the 'international aspects of future job' (10.8%).

Of the different student majors it was those who were studying engineering who possessed the highest proportion of students (70%) who anticipated an international environment would follow graduation. In terms of the other majors, 62.5% of the natural science students, 55.6% of the agricultural students, 51.3% of the literature majors, 45% of the law students, and only 23.7% of the health sciences students believed that their future environment would be international. One Japanese engineering student who was quite sure of working overseas stated:

I am involved in engineering and information science, so I will definitely work overseas. It is necessary to work in an overseas branch and cooperate with foreign companies' (Morita, 2014, p. 60).

Another student in the study majoring in the natural sciences expressed a similar sentiment:

I am a physics student and want to work in a job related to the field. One cannot achieve that in Japan, research in a foreign language and interaction with foreign researchers are unavoidable' (Morita, 2014, p. 60).

Morita surmised that engineering and science students may anticipate their future environment as more international than that of the other majors because they "see themselves working at the forefront or cutting edge of technology, which they perceive as something involving international collaboration [whereas] literature and law students do not" (2014, p. 62).

3 A sense of globalization

In a separate study of the attitudes of students towards globalization, intercultural contexts and English at Nagoya University, Morita (2013) found that although a sizeable proportion of the 109 student sample felt that functioning in an international context was a future likelihood they also did not feel that their decision was related to the notion of being compelled by

globalization. Even though 89% of the students in Morita's study believed that Japan was being affected by globalization and 81.7% felt it was "untrue that staying in Japan meant they would not be reached by the forces of globalization" (Morita, 2013, p. 35), a sizeable proportion of these same students, 52.3%, still felt that "globalization was a matter of choice and they could choose to be affected or not" (Morita, 2013, p. 35). This sentiment seems to fly in the face of conventional thought, that globalization represents a formidable and unstoppable force that Japanese students, and students from all over the world for that matter, will eventually need to succumb to. Getting into the minds of the students, Morita suggested that "[g]lobalization and intercultural contexts seem to be abstract concepts and lack reality to the respondents ... [t]hey know of the processes of globalization and existence of intercultural contexts but they find it hard to picture themselves in them" (Morita, 2013, p. 36).

4 The relevance of English

The relevance of English to Japanese university students, in terms of their perceptions of the need for it, and the kinds of usages they foresee for it, is intricately intertwined with their perceptions of globalization and their expectations of whether they will function in an international environment. The participants in Morita's (2013) study felt strongly (84.4%) that there was a real need for English communication skills. However, the respondents' strong support for the need for English communication may have been a simple echoing of government rhetoric (rather than a strongly felt sentiment) as many of the same respondents also expressed narrowed attitudes toward the practical usefulness of English, such as "a test score which helps them secure jobs or places in graduate programmes" (Morita, 2013, p. 31).

If Japanese students do genuinely feel that having good English communication ability is an important skill that they will need after graduation then a deeper investigation into the complexity of attitudes toward English language usage is required. Researchers need to separate out the

governmental or nationalistic rhetoric towards English that Japanese students may be merely parroting, from the real life practical concerns that often relate to the many unanswered career questions that face young students as they near graduation.

In fact, one such study has focused on the practical notions of English use held by Japanese students. Conducted at Akita University by Ben Grafstrom (2013), the researcher set out to discover the reasons students have for studying English and what they anticipate they will use this second language for after graduating from university. Grafstrom surveyed twenty-two first year 18 and 19 year old undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education and Human Studies (six students) and the Faculty of Medicine (sixteen students) who were enrolled in the researcher's English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course at Akita University. The students from the Faculty of Education and Human Studies came from three different majors: Japanese Studies; Human Development and Education; and General Education; whereas students from the Faculty of Medicine were all Nursing majors. The primary motivation Grafstrom cited for this study was to inform English language curriculum design at Akita. The author argues 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 feel are the 'essentials', often based on their own insights and experiences, should accommodate student input: "This student-centered approach is a more futuristic approach (as opposed to the traditional approach) and signifies a major shift in educator's and education-policy makers' (e.g. politicians) education worldview" (p. 21). As a result of this shift in approach, it seems justifiable that educators quickly gauge what Japanese students expect they will need English for in the future, in other words what they feel are their real English needs, but not only from an academic needs point of view, but also from a pragmatic everyday usage sense, and in order to do so, second language (L2) linguistic researchers need to step up their investigations of learner attitudes in this regard as this provides teachers with the opportunity to "take student's experiences, interests, or desires into account" (p. 22).

A subsequent motivating factor which connects to curriculum is the notion that if student English language goals are ascertained then students can be grouped together according to their common language goals rather than forming classes according to the traditional streaming approach, which in Japan has focused on language proficiency scores on English entrance exams and from high school academic records. Grafstrom argues, “If this were the case, [grouping students according to language goals] one could speculate that first year students with 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 question items used in Grafstrom’s study were organized into two broad groups: questions concerned with English needs for social/private life and English needs for business/professional life. The answers provided by the students suggested that they were more concerned with English as it relates to their personal lives than their academic or future professional lives. Two statements that amassed the highest mean responses from the students: ‘After university I will travel to foreign countries’ and ‘English will be necessary when I travel abroad’ suggested to the researcher that “speaking English is something that will happen [only] if they go somewhere else to do it, namely overseas and *not* necessarily in Japan” (p. 26) prompting Grafstrom to exclaim, “... 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). Overall, item statements that related to the professional use of English after graduation did not garner responses with means that were as high as those as statements related to the personal use of English.

5 Conclusion

Morita (2013, 2104) queried Japanese undergraduate students about being in an international environment after graduation and also asked them to think about their views toward globalization, intercultural contexts and English use. Grafstrom (2013) measured student expectations concerning English

language use in their personal and professional lives after graduating from university. Both are commendable research studies and more investigations of this type are needed in Japan at the micro and perhaps macro levels. However, both research projects surveyed undergraduate students with majors other than English. Their participants were enrolled in general English courses in order to satisfy a school requirement that is designed to augment their main area of study (such as English for Academic Purposes). In other words, English was not their main course of study. One wonders if the attitudinal information obtained from Japanese students who are majoring in English would result in empirical findings that were different from both of the research projects reviewed in this article. Would there be a deviation in terms of views toward functioning in international and intercultural contexts, and what would the perception of globalization be for undergraduate students who intend to spend four years of their school life functioning primarily in English and studying topics relevant to L2 language acquisition? Hopefully their views towards future English use would go beyond the communication needs required when one travels on holiday to English-speaking countries.

References

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