

The Workplace English Needs of Japanese EFL University Students after Graduation

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1 Introduction

English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) is a subcategory of a larger field of linguistics research and instruction referred to as English for Specific Purposes (ESP). EOP grew in relevance once English started to become a needed tool in order to obtain employment, receive promotion, and interact effectively in a rapidly globalizing working world that is dominated by English as the medium of communication. The direction taken to address English in the workplace training through the use of EOP seems to fly in the face of conventional holistic objectives of second language (L2) learning and teaching until one realizes that EOP has rapidly developed as a recent reaction to workplace demands made by companies that are dealing with real-life language requirements. Employees who use English as a second language for communicative purposes are not usually expected to be as competent in the entire range of English productive and receptive skills as a native speaker of the language would be, rather L2 English employees are expected to be competent in certain specialized skills or aspects of English. In order to determine which of these aspects are needed by employers' linguistics researchers should direct their investigative efforts towards listening to what employers have to say in this regard, which surprisingly is not being done to a great extent in Japan.

2 Identifying the types of English being used in Japanese work environments

In terms of becoming aware of the use of workplace English in Japan, and

specifically what the EOP demands are of employers in Japan, it is necessary to take a two-prong approach. From one direction researchers need to gather information from Japanese companies about their workplace English needs and from the other direction a determination of the relative *lack* of the current Japanese educational system to train students who are capable of meeting the linguistic needs professed by employers should be assessed. The purpose of this article is to review two *linguistic audits* (Pilbeam, 1979) that have used this dual approach to assess the workplace English needs of Japanese businesses (what Japanese employers are asking their employees to use English for in the workplace, and the kinds of and extent to which provisions are being made by educational institutions in Japan to meet such employer needs).

A linguistic audit requires a *needs analysis* of the workplace where employees are using the L2. Dudley-Evans & St. Johns (1998) posited that a linguistic needs analysis consider: 1) the level of knowledge possessed by employees of the communicative function of EOP in their workplace; 2) an understanding by employers of what English is needed by their employees in order to carry out their jobs; and 3) an awareness by employees of EOP theory and practice, which includes a sensitivity to cross-cultural differences that can be developed in order to enhance communicative competence.

3 The kinds of English skills needed in the Japanese workplace

Janice Nakamura (2015) recently conducted a survey of Japanese business employers and EOP university lecturers to discover the workplace English skills that the two groups of respondents deemed as most important for Japanese employees to possess. The results of her study revealed some interesting differences between the two groups of respondents. Her questionnaire utilized 4-point Likert-type response instruments matched to an extensive list of Japanese translated response statements related to known English skills used in the workplace by second language users in international settings. The questionnaire also included two open-ended general questions that asked respondents to gauge the importance of Business English studies

for Business undergraduates. In addition, Nakamura conducted semi-structured interviews with six full-time English subject lecturers with one interviewee from each of six different business disciplines at the university: taxation, management, economics, logistics, information technology, and accounting. The employers that participated in the researcher's survey were the major employers of the business graduates from the same Japanese university where the six subject lecturers were employed.

The average mean Likert scores from Nakamura's study show that the two participant groups (employers of graduated students and the EOP subject lecturers) gave moderate support for the importance of Business English in the workplace and as part of the university's language program with mean averaged support of $M = 2.17$ and $M = 2.50$, respectively. Interestingly, when asked to evaluate the importance to the learning of Business English in general at the university level the two groups responded with higher mean levels of importance with employers having a mean score of 2.83 and subject lecturers even higher at $M = 3.17$.

The most important specific English language tasks Japanese employees should possess in order to communicate effectively in the workplace are perceived differently between the two respondent groups in Nakamura's study. First, the major employers, those who were hiring most of the graduates from the university in the study, identified the five key English tasks needed as: 1) introducing the company and its products; 2) making telephone calls; 3) answering telephone calls; 4) answering complaints; and 5) rejecting a proposal or a suggestion—all speaking tasks. The prioritization of speaking tasks by the employers in Nakamura's study coincides, according to the researcher, with the findings of Dudley-Evans and Johns (1996) in that most common tasks perceived in business are spoken ones. Nakamura's explanation of why Japanese employers chose 'introducing the company and its products' as having highest priority relates to the belief that if this task is not performed well in English by employees it would "reflect negatively on the company's image" (p. 158). Making and receiving business telephone calls were prioritized as the second/third most important tasks because telephone calls are challenging. Conversations on the telephone lack body

gestures and facial expressions, both invaluable for effective communication, and may expose Japanese employees to a greater risk of being misunderstood because of the increased usage of paraverbal signals such as tone and accent. ‘Answering complaints’ received high priority as well as in Japan it is considered extremely important for companies to create and maintain good customer relations. Lastly, ‘rejecting a proposal or a suggestion’ was considered important for employees to accomplish as an English task because it is difficult for Japanese speakers to engage in direct refusal. According to Nakamura, there is a cultural preference in Japan for a more indirect communication style. As a result, Japanese employees who have mastered this pragmatic function in English are highly valued by their employers. It is worth noting that all five of these speaking tasks listed above are not necessarily the most commonly engaged-in English tasks in the Japanese workplace; however, they were considered to be the most important skills to possess by Japanese employers because of the potential “negative impact on corporate image when such tasks are not performed well” (p. 158).

According to the subject lecturers in Nakamura’s study the most important specific English language tasks Japanese employees should possess in order to communicate effectively were: 1) obtaining information from the Internet (reading); 2) answering telephone calls (listening); 3) listening and understanding native English (listening); 4) understanding business documents (reading); 5) understanding emails and business letters (reading); and 6) understanding manuals (reading). This list of English language skills lies in stark contrast to what Japanese employers deem as needed in the work environment and suggests that educators and employers are out of touch. It is apparent that subject lecturers attach a higher level of importance to the use of Business English, but are not as familiar with their own graduates’ English needs in the workplace as employers are. Nakamura notes that “[t]he lower importance attached to Business English in the workplace and the higher importance attached to the study of Business English as part of the university’s program suggest that the need for business undergraduates to learn Business English is a perceived rather than an actual need” (p. 161).

Knowing what employers want from their employees in terms of English

usage in the Japanese workplace remains a priority that requires further investigation. However, the problem is that knowing the English needs of employers is as varied as is the diversity of Japanese organizations and industries that include English as a requisite for employment. Perhaps the most comprehensive needs analysis to date in Japan comes from Lambert (2010) who considered five sources of information in order to gauge the future English work place language needs of Japanese university students. These five sources consisted of: 1) job placements records in the Office of Student Affairs at one Japanese university; 2) interviews with two experienced informants; 3) direct mail surveys of university graduates over the five-year period to the study; 4) a follow-up email survey of a sub-group of respondents to the first survey; and 5) a closed-item direct-mail survey of graduates from over the 25-year period preceding the study. Results of this exhaustive work shows more consensus between business employers and educators than did the Nakamura study and also reveals few differences in English task types across the diverse workplace domains involved in the study (Lambert, 2010). In terms of the relative importance of English workplace skills there were five English tasks that received similarly high priority from the business and the education respondents: 1) locating information; 2) translating documents; 3) summarizing information; 4) editing documents; and 5) interpreting between speakers, which suggests that in certain contexts business and educators may reach consensus.

4 Conclusion

A determination of the kinds of English used in the Japanese workplace is difficult to ascertain as this is a rapidly developing and fluid situation. A conglomeration of small and large scale studies is likely the best approach as there may be fundamental differences in the extent and type of English used according to business type, location, and size. At least one thing is undeniable, a continuation of needs assessments will better inform university administrators and lecturers as to the extent and type of workplace English skills most needed by university graduates and thereby inform decisions

related to the development of specialized curriculum whether that curriculum is specifically EOP or ESP or rather involves English for the workplace activities within more generalized communicative English courses.

References

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