

English: The Useless Lingua Franca?

Laura HUSTON*

Abstract

Japan is a materially rich society with compulsory education, with university graduates having completed ten years of English instruction, yet Japan performs poorly on the global standardized TOEIC test, ranking below countries with languages at a comparable distance from English. In an investigation of Japanese attitudes toward English, the author administers a 110-item Likert scale survey to 130 Japanese university students taking required English classes. Survey responses are at risk of social desirability bias, of respondents' tendency to provide answers that they believe to be characteristic of "good" or "nice" people. The investigator attempts to lessen this risk through the inclusion of survey items that would not elicit hostility toward English, but allow respondents to show a level of acceptance of a lack of English in their lives: a lack of utility for the world's lingua franca. A large minority of respondents, about 30 to 40%, reveal satisfaction in a life without English and with low levels of interaction with the world outside Japan. The author considers these results in the context of material conditions and recent political developments in Japan.

Key words: TESOL, EFL, motivation, questionnaire, opinion survey, Japan, university

English: The Useless Lingua Franca?

Japan is a materially rich and advanced society with compulsory education through the first nine school years (i.e., until about age 14). English lessons are

* Instructor of English as a Foreign Language, School of Science and Technology, Kwansei Gakuin University

compulsory starting in the fifth year of primary school. University entrance requires a passing grade on a foreign language exam. While the examinee may choose from among a selection of languages, this is effectively an English requirement since only about ten percent of Japanese high schools teach a foreign language other than English. University graduation in almost any major field of study requires at least two more years of English, resulting in a total of 10 years of English study: 2 years at primary level + 3 in lower secondary + 3 in upper secondary + 2 years of required English at university.

Cram schools drill teenagers in academic English and there are several hundred English conversation schools across the country, with over 600 of them members of large business chains. English study materials sell well and every year, over one million Japanese take the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), a U.S.-based exam (Educational Testing Services, 2016). Japan even has its own standardized English exam, the Eiken Test in Practical English Proficiency (実用英語技能検定 *Jitsuyō Eigo Ginō Kentei*), recognized only in its country of origin and by some Australian schools, one New Zealand school, and about 350 universities in North America (Eiken Foundation of Japan, 2016).

Yet Japan fares poorly in English. As convenient as it would be to lay blame on the great language distance between English and Japanese, especially in their written forms, Japan's neighbors South Korea (2015 TOEIC score ranking 18 out of 46), China (ranked 24th), and Taiwan (37th), with native languages completely unrelated to English, consistently outperform Japan, ranked 39th out of 46 on 2015 TOEIC scores (Educational Testing Services, 2016).

Neither is isolation an excuse. Japan drew 24 million foreign visitors in 2016 (Japan Times 2017). Last year 2.23 million foreigners were resident in Japan (Murai, 2016). Internet speed is fourth highest in the world, and wi-fi coverage increases month by month. Japan's natural isolation has been beneath mention for decades and cannot be cited as a reason for any current social conditions.

If the university graduates of a rich country in the 21st century cannot speak the world's lingua franca, the first cause to look into is that nation's education system. A secondary, more nebulous site for investigation is the culture and society that produced that education system, and which will be strongly influenced by it in turn. In this paper I investigate a small, specific sector of Japanese society: university students taking required courses in English.

I have taught English in Japan for sixteen years, three of these at the university level. I have striven to show the relevance of English to my students' lives. Psycholinguist Zoltan Dornyei (2001) has shown that when students feel that a subject is relevant, they are more motivated to learn. Studies show that more motivated students learn better (Ortega, 2009).

As easy as it is to joke about lazy or apathetic university students, I have been surprised by cheerful, cooperative students who say that they like English—even those who are about to travel to study in an Anglophone country, by their own choice—who treat English as though it were not a powerful tool for personal advancement in the world, but a formal requirement to dispense with as quickly as possible. Do these Japanese university students actually believe that English is useless?

To collect data, I wrote and distributed a survey of 110 statements, eliciting responses of agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale: “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neither agree nor disagree,” “agree,” or “strongly agree.” Survey items were in Japanese, the respondents’ native language. Items referring to similar content or topics were spaced far apart within the survey, not clustered together. Respondents were a convenience sample of 130 students taking required English courses at a mid-ranked university of about 7000 students in western Japan. The sex ratio is seriously distorted: 72.31% of respondents identified as male. Most respondents (83.08%) were 19 or 20 years old. Two respondents claimed to have been educated as children in languages other than Japanese. One selected the option stating that she had spent her childhood overseas. Two more described themselves as not Japanese, raised outside Japan. All 125 other respondents described themselves as raised in Japan, speaking Japanese at home and at school.

Asked to agree or disagree with direct statements of the general utility of English, respondents usually agreed or strongly agreed.

<i>English is useful for</i>	percentage who agree or strongly agree
a. <i>international business</i>	92.3%
b. <i>international aid and diplomacy</i>	87.69%
c. <i>international sports</i>	86.16%
d. <i>international arts and culture</i>	71.54%

The researcher also included survey items to show respondents’ opinions of the utility of English for them in their work and earning power.

	percentage who agree or strongly agree
e. <i>It would be worth the effort to become proficient at English to earn more money.</i>	77.69%
f. <i>It would be worth the effort to become proficient at English to get a more interesting job.</i>	73.85%
g. <i>If I can use English, I can earn more money.</i>	70.77%
h. <i>English is useful for my future career.</i>	63.85%
i. <i>Jobs in Japan that require English usually pay well.</i>	66.07%

- j. If I can use English, I can get a more interesting job.* 62.31%

The researcher included statements of the importance of English in the students' education. These items are open to interpretation as students' opinions of their current English classes, rather than their opinions of English overall.

- k. In university English classes, I will learn things useful for my future career.* 86.15%
- l. It's important for me to get good grades in English at university.* 65.38%
- m. In university English classes, I will learn things useful for my everyday life.* 57.69%
- n. Doing well in English class will help me do well in other university classes.* 56.16%

Some statements investigated opinions of largely work-related "push factors" that make English necessary, rather than merely advantageous.

- o. Someday I will need to understand foreigners speaking to me in English.* 76.15%
- p. For my future career, I will have to communicate with foreigners in Japan.* 65.38%
- q. Someday I will need to speak with foreigners in English.* 66.16%
- r. For my future career, I will have to communicate with foreigners outside Japan—for example, by e-mail.* 56.16%

It's difficult to feel surprised at agreement with these statements. The international prominence of English is inescapable. The survey might also have elicited such high levels of agreement due to social desirability bias, a tendency to respond to a survey item as one thinks a "good" or "nice" person would, regardless of the respondent's true opinion or experience. Another possible distortion of responses could come from acquiescence bias, the disposition to agree with or answer affirmatively to survey items when uncertain.

As a check against the social desirability bias—the students telling the researcher "what [they believed] she wanted to hear"—the researcher included survey items that did not lead the respondent to declare English to be useless, yet still referred to the role of English in their lives. For example, how often do the respondents actually use English?

- s. *I listen to music with English lyrics not connected to any classes or assignments.* 81.54%
- t. *I watch English-language movies not connected to any classes or assignments.* 52.31%
- u. *I play English-language video games not connected to any classes or assignments.* 40.77%
- v. *I use English-language websites not connected to any classes or assignments.* 25.38%
- w. *I watch English-language TV shows not connected to any classes or assignments.* 22.30%
- x. *I listen to English-language podcasts not connected to any classes or assignments.* 20.77%
- y. *I speak English outside class, unrelated to any assignments.* 18.46%
- z. *I read English newspapers not connected to any classes or assignments.* 12.31%
- aa. *I read English magazines not connected to any classes or assignments.* 10.77%

Consumption of Anglophone media is not surprising in the face of the juggernaut of the American entertainment business. One serious deficit of item *t* is that it does not refer to the presence or absence of Japanese subtitles. Yet these responses show that for all their belief in the utility of English for international activities, better jobs, and academic requirements, the respondents don't actually use it all that much. Low figures of agreement with *z* and *aa* are certainly due to the decline of print media, especially among the young. But the numbers are still striking considering the easy availability of English print media in urban Japan—about forty minutes from campus, in the case of these respondents.

In another strategy against social desirability bias, I presented respondents with items measuring their acceptance of a lack of English use and international experience in their lives. (In a largely monocultural, monolingual society like Japan, much use of the world's lingua franca is likely to be result of going abroad-- rather than, say, answering an e-mail or attending a meeting in one's home country.)

- ab. *If I never use English overseas, that's OK.* 30%
- ac. *If I never use foreign media in English, that's OK.* 31.53%
- ad. *If I never speak with foreigners, that's OK.* 34.62%
- ae. *If I never travel outside Japan, that's OK.* 34.62%
- af. *If I never study in another country, that's OK.* 38.47%

<i>ag. If I never use English in Japan, that's OK.</i>	41.53%
<i>ah. If I never work overseas, that's OK.</i>	46.15%
<i>ai. If I never live overseas, that's OK.</i>	49.23%

For item *ad*, 22.31% of respondents agreed, and 12.31% agreed strongly. 23.08% of respondents agreed with item *ae*, while only 11.54% agreed strongly. While never claiming a majority of responses, these large minorities reflect a reluctance to use English and participate in activities that would require English. This is not a mere rejection of the Anglo-American hegemony. With the prominence of English in the world, those who shun it deprive themselves of direct interaction around the world in the fields of business, science, diplomacy, sports, the arts, and the humanities—unless they happen to speak a few other widely-used languages, which is unlikely in Japan, where English utterly dominates foreign-language education.

This rejection of the world beyond Japan is, in this very small sample, rather widespread—thirty to forty percent—and yet quiet, with low rates of disagreement with statements of the utility of the world's lingua franca and their own need for it. A point to consider is whether respondents might be correct to say that, in the barest material terms, English is useless to them—or at least that they don't need it. A foreign language widens the outlook, enhances life, stimulates the mind, but cannot be called necessary in Japan. There is no such thing as a neighborhood in Japan where you can't use the national language in the shops. You can live a long, secure, healthy life, physically comfortable, educated and entertained, from snowy Hokkaido to tropical Okinawa, without ever setting foot outside Japan or speaking a word of a language other than Japanese. (Indeed, millions do.) English is for personal development, not (in most fields of endeavor) material well-being. Millions of other Japanese invest time, money, and effort on English as a hobby, but unless their work has some international scope, this investment is completely optional, not a necessity. And when something is both unnecessary and unwanted, then it is certainly useless.

Yet, if we are speaking of material welfare, English proficiency is the global mark of education, and the better-educated tend to earn more than the less-educated. Questions of the correlation of English proficiency with wealth in Japan, along with causation—Do English-speakers get rich, or do the rich spend on English study?—are topics for another paper.

Where English is necessary is at school. As mentioned earlier, it's a required subject from the seventh year of school through the first two years (at minimum) of university. For those nine years, students need to master enough English to fulfill academic credit and earn diplomas. Anthropologist Brian McVeigh (2004) has argued that Japanese school English is not at all the English recognized by proficient

users worldwide, but is instead a different entity we may call *Eigo*, the Japanese word (英語) for “English.” *Eigo* is a code clearly based on English, but used only in Japan.

Since all Japanese residents of Japan speak Japanese, there is no need for a lingua franca in Japan, so *Eigo*’s use is restricted to schools, universities, and these institutions’ instructional materials. So while we might first be inclined to say that in Japan, English is necessary at school, some would argue that it’s not: *Eigo* is. In Japanese education, *Eigo* plays a role similar to that of Latin in Western schools until the twentieth century, an academic gatekeeper and a logical puzzle to be solved, and with no function beyond these. The important difference is that in the nineteenth century, no one’s mother tongue was Latin, while today English is the native language of about 450 million people, and a language in daily, complex use by one billion people.

If our sample of university students doesn’t need English to live comfortably in Japan, surely they appreciate English as at least a useful tool for engagement with the world. Do they expect their native language to serve them just as well as English might in linking them to the world?

<i>aj. Computer translation makes it unnecessary for me to learn English.</i>	10.77%
<i>ak. Computer translation is just as good as human translation.</i>	15.39%
<i>al. Foreigners want to speak with me in Japanese.</i>	33.08%
<i>am. Everyone I will ever need to talk to will understand Japanese.</i>	36.15%
<i>an. Everyone I will ever want to talk to will understand Japanese.</i>	40.76%
<i>ao. All the information I will ever need will be available to me in Japanese.</i>	41.54%
<i>ap. All the information I will ever want will be available to me in Japanese.</i>	41.54%
<i>aq. If I ever go to a foreign country, I will depend on Japanese-speaking tour guides, interpreters, and other staff, and on information translated into Japanese, and that’s OK.</i>	45.38%
<i>ar. In the future, more foreigners will be able to speak Japanese.</i>	60.76%

For item *ao*, 29.23% agreed and 12.31% strongly agreed. 24.62% and 16.92% agreed and strongly agreed, respectively, with item *ap*.

It is interesting to compare items *am* and *an*, above, with earlier-cited items *o*: “Someday I will need to understand foreigners speaking to me in English” (76.15% agree or strongly agree) and *q*: “Someday I will need to speak with foreigners in English” (66.16% agree or strongly agree).

EFL educators will take heart at the low levels of agreement with *aj* and *ak* above, and might react to *aq* by considering how many of their students can, after eight years of English lessons, ask spontaneously in English where the nearest toilet is. High levels of agreement with *al* and *ar* might be the result of the past twenty-odd years of the international popularity of manga and animé and other products of “cool Japan,” and perhaps encounters with eager tourists. (Maybe the statements in *al* and *ar* are both, to some degree, correct!)

Items *ao* and *ap*, on the availability of information in Japanese, deserve additional focus. While the day-to-day experience of life in Japan is that of the personal freedom taken for granted in rich countries, Japan’s press freedom ranking has recently fallen from 61st to 72nd out of 180 nations, behind such countries as Haiti and Mongolia (Reporters Without Borders, 2016). On December 6, 2013, the Diet (national legislature) approved the Act on the Protection of Specially Designated Secrets (SDS) (特定秘密の保護に関する法律 Tokutei Himitsu no Hogo ni kansuru Hōritsu), Act No. 108 of 2013, proposed by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s cabinet, which widens the scope of information that the government can designate as state secrets, defines terrorism in part as the forcing of “political and other principles or opinions on the state or other people,” and imposes ten-year prison terms for journalists who leak state secrets. The administration of U.S. President Barack Obama supported this bill (Cain, 2013). Japanese who care about the freedom of information might want to seek sources of news and analysis outside their own country, and accordingly improve their reading skills in a foreign language.

Respondents’ confidence in their native language is not quite as strong as their confidence in their homeland and in its role in the world.

<i>as. The world would benefit from greater Japanese influence.</i>	53.08%
<i>at. When and where Japan has had an influence, the rest of the world has benefitted from that influence.</i>	58.46%
<i>au. There are some things that the world needs that can be found only in Japan.</i>	68.46%

It’s not one-sided: respondents favor international exchange overall.

<i>av. Japan would benefit from more foreign influence.</i>	49.23%
<i>aw. Japan has benefitted from foreign influence.</i>	50%
<i>ax. There are some things that Japan needs that can be found only outside Japan.</i>	56.92%

But if such a large minority of respondents, as shown in *aj-ar*, are content not

to engage with the world outside Japan, then presumably someone else, not the respondents themselves, is to undertake all this international exchange: perhaps the Japanese-speaking foreigners of *al* and *ar*.

Of the survey items analyzed so far, none of the percentages of agreement response raise any alarm bells. We have a picture of a university student who is well aware of the utility of English for international activities, and of its necessity for the completion of university education and more prestigious careers, but who does not especially seek out its media, has little need for the territory of English, and is not compelled to use any language he did not learn in infancy. This paper has not yet shown any evidence of respondents' grave misconceptions of the role of English, or of any low estimation of the importance or worth of the world beyond Japan.

Now let us consider:

<i>ay. English is useful for science.</i>	54.62%
<i>az. To complete my education, I will have to communicate with foreigners in Japan.</i>	46.93%
<i>ba. English is useful for studying the humanities.</i>	46.15%
<i>bb. Jobs in Japan that require English are usually interesting.</i>	40%
<i>bc. To complete my education, I will have to communicate with foreigners outside Japan—for example, by e-mail.</i>	38.46%
<i>bd. If English credit were not required for my degree, I would take an elective English class for credit.</i>	33.85%
<i>be. I will be more successful in life if I do well in English in university.</i>	29.63%
<i>bf. For my future career, I will have to travel outside Japan.</i>	29.23%
<i>bg. If English credit were not required for my degree, I would still study it on my own.</i>	29.23%
<i>bh. To complete my education, I will have to travel outside Japan.</i>	24.61%

While a majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with item *ay*, that majority is still astonishingly small, given that 75% to 90% of the world's scientific papers are published in English (Deng 2015). Item *az* demands notice because about 53 of the respondents were the author's students, and they would have communicated with the author within a few minutes of completing the survey, to say nothing of how they needed to interact with the author over the semester to pass their required class. While agreement with item *be* is low, English teachers may be consoled that it is only a little lower than the 36.15% agreement with the more general "I will be more successful in life if I do well in my university classes."

Earlier results showed majority agreement that "It would be worth the effort to

become proficient at English to get a more interesting job” (item *f*) and “If I can use English, I can get a more interesting job” (item *j*), yet only 40% agree with item *bb* that “Jobs in Japan that require English are usually interesting.” Low levels of agreement with items *bc*, *bf*, and *bh* further contribute to the picture of a comfortable life untroubled by engagement with the world outside Japan.

As the preeminent language of scholarship, English is, of course, useful for studying the humanities, despite these students’ response to item *ba*. How could they be so mistaken about this large field of inquiry? This merits a digression into Japanese educational policy. On June 8, 2015, following instructions from Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Hakubun Shimomura, the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology, issued instructions to Japan’s 86 national universities to take “active steps to abolish [social science and humanities] organizations or to convert them to serve areas that better meet society’s needs.” (Social Science Spaces, 2015) (Universities in Japan are categorized by funding sources: national, prefectural, city, or private.) Two of Japan’s most prestigious, highest-ranking universities, Tokyo University and Kyoto University, both nationally funded, replied that they would not follow these instructions. However, according to a survey by the Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper, 26 national universities have already partially complied, making changes to their humanities departments, and seventeen have stopped recruiting students in these areas. This is not a plan or a threat: this has already happened. (English classes unrelated to literature or linguistics are not considered areas of the humanities.) While the survey featured in this paper was conducted at a private university, not a nationally-funded one, it’s difficult to imagine that the directive issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Technology has not affected the standing of the humanities in the academy and in student opinion.

This paper presents raw data from a very small pilot study. Much more about the role of English in the lives of Japanese university students could be learned from the administration of this survey to many more students, more diverse academically, over a wider geographic area, and especially to more women, who make up only 27.69% of current respondents. This paper also refers only to the percentages of respondents who agree or strongly agree with the survey items. Future papers could investigate levels of disagreement and the large numbers of responses to “neither agree nor disagree.” I would also like to find out whether respondents who, for example, had greater confidence in the usefulness of the Japanese language, or more favorable opinions on international exchange, were more likely or less likely to believe in the usefulness of English. With a respondent identification system and a team of interpreters, this study could move farther in qualitative directions.

The next inquiry would be how to apply findings to the benefit of Japanese students of English at all levels.

Two final results to consider:

<i>bg. If I were better at English, I would use it more outside class and outside schoolwork.</i>	78.47%
<i>bh. I want to speak with foreigners in English.</i>	78.46%

Heartfelt thanks and お疲れさま to Brandon Linder for translations and to Timothy Pollock for reference materials.

References

- Cain, G. (2013, December 6.) "Japan passes a democracy-muzzling Patriot Act." PRI. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-12-06/japan-passes-democracy-muzzling-patriot-act>
- Deng, B. (2015, January 6.) "English is the Language of Science." Retrieved from <http://www.slate.com>
- Dornyei, Z. (2001.) *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Educational Testing Services. (2016.) 2015 Report on Test Takers Worldwide: The TOEIC Listening and Reading Test. Retrieved from https://www.ets.org/s/toeic/pdf/ww_data_report_unlweb.pdf
- Eiken Foundation of Japan. (2016.) "Institutions Recognizing Eiken." Retrieved from <http://www.eiken.or.jp/eiken/en/>
- Japan Times. (2017, January 17.) "Japan saw record foreign visitors, tourist spending in 2016." Retrieved from <http://www.japantimes.com>
- McVeigh, B. (2004.) "Foreign Language Instruction in Japanese Higher Education: The Humanistic Vision or Nationalist Utilitarianism?" *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 3(2) pp.211-227
- Murai, S. (2016, March 11.) "Japan sees record high number of foreign residents: Justice Ministry." Japan Times. Retrieved from <http://www.japantimes.com>
- Ortega, L. (2009.) *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Understanding Language Series. London: Hodder Education, an Hachette UK Company.
- Reporters Without Borders. (2016.) "2016 World Press Freedom Index." Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>
- Social Science Space. (2015, August 25.) "Japan's Education Ministry Says to Axe Social Science and Humanities." Retrieved from <http://www.socialsciencespace.com/2015/08/japans-education-ministry-says-to-axe-social-science-and-humanities/>