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A Statistical Analysis of Changes in Low Level Students' Attitudes to English over a Year of Intensive English Instruction

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Japanese EFL learners, and in particular lower level ones, tend to also have lower levels of motivation and do not see the benefits of learning and using English as much as many of their Asian peers. This paper reports on a pilot study conducted in a low level intensive English course. A survey on the students' beliefs about English language learning in general was administered twice throughout one year of instruction. The findings show that at the end of the year, students showed statistically significant improvements in their opinions about the usefulness of English in their future careers. They also showed increased awareness of the importance of speaking practice, and slightly lower dependence on grammatical correction from the instructors. These findings represent an encouraging first step in reversing Japanese students' anxiety in relation to learning English through enrollment in intensive university English courses focused on a communicative and task-based approach.

INTRODUCTION

A comment often heard in Japan, 'This is Japan, so we don't need to learn English.' can be taken as anecdotal evidence suggesting that Japanese people, even children as young as 5 years old, are comfortable with this attitude of resistance to using English. Despite English becoming the world's most widely used lingua franca in the 21st century (Jenkins, Baker & Dewey, 2018), Japanese EFL students consistently score lower than most of their Asian peers on standardized proficiency tests such as the TOEFL (TOEFL, 2017).

Much has been discussed about the possible factors contributing to Japanese EFL learners' lack of motivation to improve their English skills as well as their low overall proficiency (Ryan, 2009). One possible explanation has to do with the perceived lack of necessity or interest to use English (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). Another possible reason often cited is the focus on test taking and the continued use of grammar translation style methodologies for teaching English in junior high schools and high schools in Japan (Gorsuch, 2001; Thompson & Yanigita, 2017).

This paper reports on a pilot study on how the opinions of low level students enrolled in an intensive English course changed over one year of instruction in relation to studying English in general. The survey administered to students focused on three specific areas; namely students' perception of the need to

use English in their future careers, their ideas on spoken fluency in English, and their opinions on how useful grammar correction is for their English language learning.

This paper will first introduce the Introductory English course offered through the Language Center in Kwansei Gakuin University, within which the survey was conducted. Next, the methodology of the pilot study will be described in detail, and finally the results will be presented and discussed, before some conclusions are drawn.

INTRODUCTORY ENGLISH COURSE BACKGROUND

The Introductory English course is offered as part of the Intensive English Program by the Kwansei Gakuin Language Center, within Kwansei Gakuin University. The Language Center mainly offers compulsory and elective courses conducted entirely in English, aimed at students with a higher level of English mastery. The compulsory courses are conducted three times a week and are meant to replace the compulsory English courses that students at Japanese universities are required to pass in their first two years of university. The elective courses cover a wide range of topics and skills, from listening and speaking to preparation for study abroad.

However, starting in 2017, the Language Center began offering the Introductory English course for the 250 students with the lowest scores on Benesse's Global Test of English Communication (GTEC), administered online, which was used for internal English placement by Kwansei Gakuin University for all first-year students. This course is a special project, financed with a grant from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, which chose Kwansei Gakuin University for the Top Global University Project. This project "selects Top Global Universities from among Japanese universities that are driving internationalization and offers prioritized support for university reforms" (Top Global University Japan, 2018).

The Introductory English course is also designed as a compulsory course and it is meant to replace the compulsory English courses offered by each individual faculty within the university. There is, however, an option for high performing students who receive a recommendation from the course instructors to transfer out of Introductory English and back into the regular faculty English courses.

The Introductory English course is offered over two years, and it is structured into two strands, each meeting once a week over both the spring and the fall semesters. One strand is taught by non-Japanese English instructors (Intro IA for first year students, and Intro IIA for second year students), and the other is taught by Japanese instructors of English (Intro IB and Intro IIB for first and second year students, respectively).

In the 2017-2018 academic year, as this was the first year of the Introductory English course, only first year students took the Intro IA and Intro IB courses. A total of five faculties participated in the program; the Theology, Law and Politics, Economics, Business Administration, and Science and Technology Faculties. The students were placed in 10 classes, organized mainly based on the

students' faculties. The 10 Intro IA classes were taught by 10 different non-Japanese instructors in the spring and 8 in the fall semester. The 10 Intro IB classes were taught by the same Japanese instructor in both the spring and fall semesters.

In order to ensure consistency, all 10 classes follow the same curriculum. The Intro IA curriculum places more emphasis on speaking and presentation skills, and also contains a vocabulary and a listening component. On the other hand, the Intro IB curriculum focuses on reading, listening, grammar, and vocabulary skills. Table 1 summarizes the course attainment objectives for the spring and fall Intro IA and Intro IB courses.

METHODOLOGY

This paper focuses on the results of one section of a broader survey administered to all first year students in the Introductory English course at the end of the spring semester and at the end of the fall semester. The broader survey consisted of 4 sections in the spring semester and 5 sections in the fall semester, as follows:

Spring semester survey

1. Demographic questions and questions related to the students' placement in Intro English
2. Questions about both the Intro English course strands (Intro IA and Intro IB)
3. Questions related to transferring out of Intro English
4. Questions related to students' opinions about English study

Fall semester survey

1. Demographic questions and a general question about changes from the spring semester
2. Questions about Intro IA
3. Questions about Intro IB
4. Questions related to transferring out of Intro English
5. Questions related to students' opinions about English study

TABLE 1
Intro IA and Intro IB Course Attainment Objectives

	Spring semester	Fall semester
Intro IA	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students will learn basic strategies for understanding and using English in the classroom. 2. By listening to a variety of different English dialects, students will acquire the ability to understand basic words, letters, and numbers. 3. Students will acquire the ability to convey simple information about themselves using wider vocabulary, basic phrases, and formulaic expressions. 4. Students will become capable of asking and answering about personal topics using familiar expressions and basic sentences. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Having learned basic strategies for understanding and using English in the classroom last semester, students will learn to function in an all English environment. 2. By listening to a variety of different English dialects, students will acquire the ability to have short conversations and deliver presentations. 3. Students will develop the ability to convey simple information about themselves using wider vocabulary, basic phrases, and formulaic expressions. 4. Students will further practice asking and answering about personal topics using familiar expressions and basic sentences.
Intro IB	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To understand short, beginner-level passages thoroughly 2. To understand facts and principles of basic but longer texts 3. To achieve basic reading fluency (graded reader level 1+, 150+ wpm) 4. To acquire automatic syntactic parsing in simple passages 5. To improve phonological awareness of written texts 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To understand short, beginner-level passages thoroughly 2. To understand facts and principles of basic but longer texts 3. To achieve basic reading fluency (graded reader level 1+, 150+ wpm) 4. To acquire automatic syntactic parsing in simple passages 5. To improve phonological awareness of written texts

Whereas the other sections of the two surveys varied depending on the semester when each survey was administered, the section assessing students' opinions on English study was purposefully kept the same in order to ensure that the results could be compared.

Data collection instrument

A separate section of the survey was designed to assess the students' opinions on English study in general. The survey was constructed following the guidelines offered in Dornyei and Taguchi (2010). The survey was adapted from Donnellan (2013) based on Willis (1996) and Willis & Willis (2007). These authors offered a combined total of 18 items designed to elicit opinions about language learning, thus we contend that they are well suited to the goal of the current study; namely to elicit student opinions about language learning. Of the original 18 items, 9 were selected for the current survey. The responses for all the 9 questions utilized Likert scales from 1 to 5, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 "strongly agree."

The survey items were divided into 3 categories: learning English for the future, speaking competence in English, and focus on English grammar. The items were randomized when the survey was given to students and then recategorized before the statistical analysis was carried out. Table 2 below summarizes the 9 survey items in both English and Japanese.

Data collection procedures and participants

The survey was administered using Google Forms during the last class of the semester in order to ensure as high a response rate as possible. It was administered to all 10 classes in the Introductory English course in both the spring semester and the fall semester. The survey was administered in the students' L1, Japanese.

In the spring semester, 201 students from 5 faculties replied, and 191 students from 5 faculties responded in the fall. For the statistical analysis, only students who responded in both the spring and fall were included.

Data analysis

The data collected through Google Forms was first tabulated separately for the spring semester survey and the fall semester survey. The data analysis was then conducted in R software (R Core Team, 2017). Duplicate or incomplete entries were omitted. A histogram of the survey results was created to show the overall trend. The paired Welch's t-test, or unequal variances t-test, was conducted, comparing the spring and fall surveys in order to establish statistical significance. The t-test allows researchers to make an assertion about the difference between two data sets if the p-value is below 0.05, which is considered statistically significant; however, if the p-value is above 0.05, that does not mean that the two data sets are the same, but merely that there is not sufficient information to make a judgment about the difference between the data sets. This consideration is important when reporting the results in this study.

TABLE 2
Opinions about English study

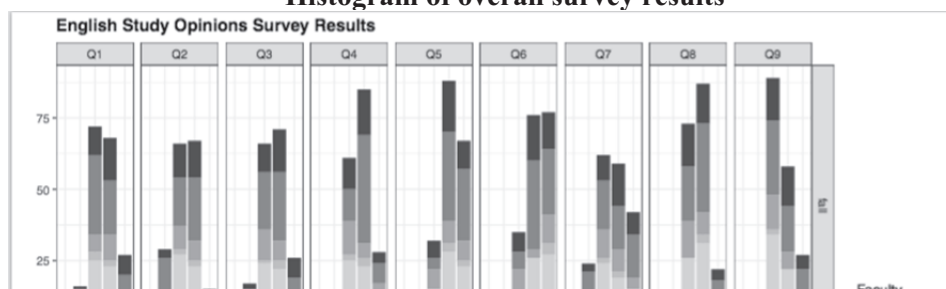
	English	Japanese
Q1	Do you think you will use English in your career after you graduate?	卒業後、仕事で英語を使うと思いますか。
Q2	Do you believe the English you learned in high school is useful for actually communicating in English?	高校で受けた英語教育は実際の英語コミュニケーションに役立っていると思いますか？
Q3	Exams such as TOEIC, TOEFL and Eiken are important for my future.	TOEIC, TOEFL や英検のような試験は私の将来に重要である。
Q4	English classes where you speak a lot will help you to prepare for exams such as TOEIC, TOEFL, or Eiken.	スピーキングを中心した英語の授業は TOEIC, TOEFL や英検のような試験の準備に役立つ。
Q5	It is important to understand the meaning of the English being used in class.	使っている英語の意味を理解することは重要である。
Q6	You have to have speaking opportunities to gain competence in English.	英語能力を高めるために英語を話す機会が必要である。
Q7	You should learn the grammar rules before trying to speak.	英語を話そうとする前に英語の文法を覚えるべきである。
Q8	Even if your teacher corrects your grammar, you might make the same errors again.	先生に文法の間違いを訂正されても、同じ失敗をする可能性がある。
Q9	Teachers should always correct your mistakes.	先生は学生の誤りを必ず直すべきである。

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the statistical analysis, first showing the general trend, and then discussing in detail the three categories of survey questions; namely learning English for the future, speaking competence in English, and focus on English grammar.

The histogram of the survey results in Figure 1 shows the overall trend of increasing means from the spring semester to the fall semester, which holds true for the first 8 survey questions, but not for the 9th question. The t-test analysis established that only Q1 and Q4 showed a statistically significant increase in means.

FIGURE 1
Histogram of overall survey results



Learning English for the future

This first category comprises the following three survey questions:

- Q1: Do you think you will use English in your career after you graduate?
- Q3: Exams such as TOEIC, TOEFL and Eiken are important for my future.
- Q4: English classes where you speak a lot will help you to prepare for exams such as TOEIC, TOEFL, or Eiken.

For Q1, the spring semester mean was 3.19 and the standard deviation was 1.11, whereas the mean for the fall semester was 3.48 with a 0.96 standard deviation. For Q3, the spring mean was 3.39 with the standard deviation at 1.11, and the fall mean was 3.45, with a 1.01 standard deviation. Finally, in the case of Q4, the spring

mean and standard deviation were 3.43 and 0.96 respectively, whereas the fall semester mean was 3.64 with a 0.86 standard deviation. The t-test showed that the difference in means was statistically significant for Q1 and Q4 with $p < 0.05$. Table 3 below summarizes these results.

TABLE 3
Q1, Q3, Q4 statistical results

	spring mean	spring sd	fall mean	fall sd	means diff	p value
Q1	3.194	1.116	3.484	0.963	0.289	0.00009
Q3	3.394	1.111	3.452	1.010	0.057	0.415
Q4	3.436	0.967	3.642	0.871	0.205	0.007

Q1 and Q4 in this category showed the only statistically significant difference in means in this pilot study. This result in regard to Q1 suggests that enrolling low level students in intensive English classes with communicative and task-based teaching approaches is indeed very beneficial to their long-term perceptions about English as a necessary tool for success in their future careers.

Moreover, students came to appreciate the increased chances to speak in class and saw this as a valid way to increase their scores on standardized tests, such as the TOEIC or the TOEFL, as shown by the statistically significant increase in means from the spring to the fall semester for Q4. This is despite the fact that they did not seem to change their opinions much from the spring to the fall semester in regard to the usefulness of standardized testing such as the TOEIC or TOEFL tests in general, as shown by the small difference in means for Q3.

These findings are an important step towards dispelling the notion that proficiency in English is not necessary for Japanese people. Also, it is particularly important to point out that even in the case of the low level students that participated in this study, when placed in a supportive and stimulating English learning environment such as was created in the Intro IA and Intro IB courses, their opinions showed a statistically significant change in relation to their need to learn English. This could offer a solution to the perceived lack of motivation on the part of Japanese learners of English reported by previous research (Ryan, 2009; Taguchi et al, 2009).

Speaking competence in English

In this category assessing students' beliefs on the importance of speaking competence in English, the following three survey questions were included:

Q2: Do you believe the English you learned in high school is useful for actually communicating in English?

Q5: It is important to understand the meaning of the English being used in class.

Q6: You have to have speaking opportunities to gain competence in English.

For Q2, the spring semester mean was 3.1 and the standard deviation was 1.01, whereas the mean for the fall semester was 3.22 with a 1.02 standard deviation. For Q5, the spring mean was 4.01 with the standard deviation at 0.91, and the fall mean was 4.14, with a 0.78 standard deviation. Finally, in the case of Q6, the spring mean and standard deviation were 4.12 and 0.85 respectively, whereas the fall semester mean was 4.2 with a 0.77 standard deviation. Table 4 below summarizes these results.

TABLE 4
Q2, Q5, Q6 statistical results

	spring mean	spring sd	fall mean	fall sd	means diff	p value
Q2	3.105	1.012	3.221	1.025	0.115	0.143
Q5	4.010	0.914	4.142	0.787	0.131	0.051
Q6	4.126	0.857	4.2	0.771	0.073	0.247

Despite the fact that the t-test analysis did not show statistical significance for the survey questions on speaking competence in English, the means did show an increase from the spring to the fall semester. This can be taken to mean that students became more aware of the importance of developing their spoken fluency, following a year of Intensive English courses that employed a more communicative and task-based approach to English teaching than the English courses that students had taken in high school.

It is also important to note that the mean values for Q5 and Q6 were the highest in the survey, while the standard deviations were among the lowest, especially for the fall semester. This suggests that students were already highly aware of the importance of sustained exposure to English in class, and after one year of instruction, they appreciated having the opportunity to practice their English speaking and listening skills in conversation.

Focus on English grammar

The three questions in this final category were designed to gauge students' opinions on the importance of mastering accurate grammar for English communication:

Q7: You should learn the grammar rules before trying to speak.

Q8: Even if your teacher corrects your grammar, you might make the same errors again.

Q9: Teachers should always correct your mistakes.

For Q7, the spring semester mean was 3.58 and the standard deviation was 1, whereas the mean for the fall semester was 3.59 with a 1.01 standard deviation. For Q8, the spring mean was 3.55 with the standard deviation at 0.9, and the fall mean was 3.63, with a 0.76 standard deviation. Finally, in the case of Q9, the spring mean and standard deviation were 3.53 and 0.89 respectively, whereas the fall

semester mean was 3.49 with a 0.86 standard deviation. Table 5 below summarizes these results.

TABLE 5
Q7, Q8, Q9 statistical results

	spring mean	spring sd	fall mean	fall sd	means diff	p value
Q7	3.589	1.002	3.594	1.017	0.005	0.948
Q8	3.557	0.905	3.636	0.769	0.078	0.229
Q9	3.531	0.894	3.494	0.865	-0.036	0.600

The questions in this category showed the smallest differences in means between the spring and fall semester surveys. This may be due to the fact that grammar was not a major focus of either the Intro IA or the Intro IB course, which focused on communication competence and reading and listening skills, respectively. Even so, students' opinions did slightly shift towards seeing fluency as more important than learning grammar rules. Moreover, the negative means difference for the Q9 demonstrated that students prefer to be allowed to speak rather than being interrupted by the teacher with grammar corrections. Further research will hopefully show a stronger shift in students' understanding of the role that grammar correction plays in improving their English fluency, and thus validate the move towards a more communicative and task-based approach to language learning.

CONCLUSION

This paper reported on a pilot study of a survey on opinions about English learning in general conducted with first year low level students enrolled in the Introductory English course offered by the Language Center at Kwansei Gakuin University. The survey was administered at the end of the spring semester and at the end of the fall semester and attempted to gage the students' opinions on learning English for their future, speaking competence in English and attention to English grammar.

The statistically significant results showed that following one year of intensive English instruction, students' perception of English as a useful tool for their future improved. Positive, but not statistically significant, changes in responses to the remaining six questions may indicate that students also became more aware of the need to develop their fluency in English and became slightly less dependent on constant grammar feedback from teachers.

Whereas this pilot study has a number of limitations, chiefly the fact that a baseline was not established at the beginning of the course, the positive changes in students' perceptions of English as a tool for communication in a globalized 21st century are valid. These findings are indeed encouraging in terms of dispelling Japanese students' apathy towards the use of English and its role in their future.

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