

Adults Education in Japan: Why do students study English?

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要約

英語指導者にとって、日本人成人が英語を好んで学習する理由を探ることは、教育上非常に有効である。第一の利点として、学習者に関する情報を得ることで、学習者と教育者相互のコミュニケーションが促進されることが挙げられる。また、教材選択や授業計画、授業における力点など、様々な点において有益な示唆を得ることができると考えられる。

本研究は、著者が指導している成人英語学習者からアンケートにより英語学習理由を探った記述的研究である。これにより得た結果を考察し、今後の示唆とすることを本研究の目的とする。

(Abstract)

The question of why adults in Japan choose to study English is very important for the English educators who teach them. In the first place, knowing more about their students helps educators simply communicate with them better. It also helps with deciding on textbooks or course books, lesson planning, and determining how to focus energies in classes. This is a qualitative, descriptive research paper where the author takes a sample of adult students and asks them why they are studying English. It begins with a brief overview of the Japanese education system. Finally, the author discusses the findings from the question directed toward the sample, and states possible implications of the findings.

1.0 Introduction

Adult education is an active field in Japan. Students study for many reasons. While the US tends to see many students go back to school to pick up their education where they left off, to complete a degree, or get a new qualification, Japanese adults are different. Many Japanese students study because it is their hobby or for some special interest, compared with students in the US who will likely study foreign languages for business needs, the desire for official certification for employment or promotion, or the need to study English as their second language (Elmer, 2009, October 25).

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So, why do Japanese study English in Japan? The author put this question to sample groups of Japanese students and shows the results here. This is followed by a discussion of some of the reasons for the common answers, and discusses how educators might be able to use this data for things such as lesson planning and the development of courses built specifically to address the needs of Japanese adults.

2.0 Background

One needs to understand the education system and the Japanese way of thinking about continuing education in order to fully comprehend the setting of adult education and English language studies in Japan. The US occupation government controlled much of the post-war reorganization of many aspects of Japanese lives. These included many reforms that still affect various aspects of peoples' lives. They include such things as the writing of Japan's constitution, the establishment of a social welfare system, and many educational reforms. The American education system was the basis for the Japanese 12-year education model that still exists to this day. There are 6 elementary school grades, followed by 3 years of lower secondary education and then 3 years of upper secondary education. At present, according to the Course of Study, English is part of the curriculum for lower and upper secondary education in Japan.

Japan is a "country of test-takers," according to James McChrostie (2009, August 18) of the Japan Times newspaper company. While someone can go from kindergarten to lower secondary school without having to take a test to get into a higher school, there are a great number of competitive elementary and lower secondary schools that one would have to take a test for. Most high schools require an entrance examination in order to be accepted as a student. Nearly 100% of the colleges and universities in Japan require the completion of an entrance exam in some form or another.

Japan has a well-established system of tutorial schools, or cram schools, to help students prepare for these tests from elementary school to junior high school, junior high school to high school, high school to college, and so on. These so-called *juku* can be started very young. Students often start going to these schools as a supplement to their public or private school education at a very young age. They generally focus on

studying for the test that the students will need to pass to succeed to the next level of their education.

As soon as one becomes a member of society in Japan, there are several companies that require some sort of an employment exam to enter as a full-time worker. This is not limited to major companies. There are quite a few smaller companies that will require prospective employees to pass an exam before they can work for the company in question. Public service jobs require employees to take a type of civil service exam.

After a person becomes employed, there can often be tests for advancement within that company. Many companies use tests that their company will produce in house for its employees, but there are other options in Japan. In Japan there are several standardized tests called *kentei* tests. Foundations related to the field of study, the national government, or even private companies often produce these standardized tests. Many of these tests have different levels. For example, if one were to take the standardized test for Chinese characters (Japanese *kanji*), that person could start from the level 10 test. This means that they offer 10 different tests that one can take. There are many of these *kentei* tests for fields such as business, computers, finance, and of course, foreign languages, just to name a few.

There are 2 notable tests for English. One is produced in Japan by an educational foundation. It is the STEP Eiken test, and is backed by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. This test is often used by schools for the purpose of checking the abilities of junior and senior high schools students, along with college students. Since it is used nationally, it is also considered to be a good check of a student's ability compared with other students across the country. There are 7 different levels (5 regular levels, and additional Pre-2nd and Pre-1st levels).

The other test is the TOEIC test. The TOEIC test is produced by an American company called The Educational Testing Service and administered by a Japanese company that pays royalties to the ETS. The ETS is the same company that produces other college entrance exams in the US. This test has a bias toward English used in the workplace. Because of this fact, many companies use this test as a standard. College and university students, along with entry-level candidates seeking employment, can

take this test as a kind of qualification for entering a company. Moreover, companies can use this test to find out if their employees have communicative abilities that will help the company in the workplace. So, it is widely used for those purposes. The test was taken 1.7 million times in Japan in 2008 (McChrostie, 2009, August 11).

Finally, it is important to note that there is a deep infrastructure in Japan for studying foreign languages. This is a bit unique when contrasted with the situation in the US.

In America, adults can study a variety of subjects at local community colleges and even universities. Many of these institutions have well-established night courses, correspondence courses, and even Internet-based courses. Anyone can take these courses with regular students, and simply opt not to get a degree, while still receiving regular college/university credit. Company workers, teachers, the unemployed, or people who are looking to change their work, can easily take classes either for continuing education purposes or to learn a new skill or trade. They can do this on a part-time basis, by taking night courses, weekend classes, web-based classes or even satellite classes.

In Japan, this system does not exist like in the US, with a few limited exceptions. Moreover, companies generally do not allow for students to study on a part-time basis. There are systems in Japan where employees can take a type of sabbatical from their work to become full-time students, but even this is rare when compared to the US.

As for foreign language education, however, the infrastructure is well established in Japan. There are many ways for people in Japan to study many languages, especially English. When one walks down the street in any of Japan's cities, it is difficult not to come across several advertisements for language schools. There are also large sections of bookstores and libraries devoted to foreign language study. The national television and radio network NHK provides several foreign language classes. Students can even easily buy accompanying textbooks for most of the language classes broadcast by NHK on both radio and television. There are community center courses, college continuing education courses, and all sorts of private teachers to teach foreign languages in Japan.

3.0 The Sample

The author gave a questionnaire to adult students in Kagawa Prefecture in November 2009. There were students from a public international center, a private language school, a community culture center and a college continuing education class. The ages of the students range from approximately early 20's to mid 70's. A total of 62 out of 62 people responded to the questionnaire in one form or another. 42 written responses were received, 16 people were interviewed face to face, and 4 people were interviewed by telephone. Of the total sample, 13 people were retired persons, either waiting for their pension or already drawing their pension. 9 people were unemployed and 4 of those people were either spending their time looking for a job every day. Others were working part-time while looking for a job. The remaining 40 people were gainfully employed. 22 of the respondents were advanced level English learners, and 40 were intermediate or beginners.

4.0 Findings

Many of the respondents had primary and secondary reasons for studying English. Table 1 summarizes the primary reasons why the total sample said that they are studying English. These reasons should be contrasted with the secondary reasons that many people stated. This information is given in Table 2.

The interviewer wrote down the employment/social status of the respondent upon receiving the data from him/her. The next chapter will discuss how these conditions seemed to be a factor in many respondents' answers. Otherwise, the only question asked on the survey was, "Why are you studying English?" Still, many of the respondents seemed to want to tell quite a bit of anecdotal information along with their answer to the main question. Some interesting and possibly significant data was collected beyond the answer to the main question.

TABLE 1. Top primary reasons for studying English

Primary reason	Number of respondents
I want to travel	16
I want to talk with foreigners/my foreign friends.	11
I want to watch foreign movies/news	10
I like English/It's my hobby	6
I want to maintain my English ability	5
I want to enjoy spending time with classmates	3
English is the international language	3
I want to prevent the onset of senility	3
I want to improve myself	2
I need it for business	1
I want to improve my test score for a better job	1
It's important for the future	1
Total	62

TABLE 2. Top secondary reasons for studying English

Secondary reason	Number of respondents
I want to travel	17
I want to maintain my English	9
I want to talk with foreigners/my foreign friends.	8
I want to watch movies/news	5
I like English/It is my hobby	5
I want to enjoy spending time with my classmates	3
It's important for the future	2
I want to prevent senility	1
I want to improve my test scores	1
Total	51

10 people said that English was one of their favorite subjects when they were in junior high school and/or senior high school. Another 4 people said that they did not like English during at least some of those years of secondary education. 5 people said that they were motivated to begin studying English again because their children began studying English for one reason or another in the past. Still, none of this data seemed to have significant relevance to the main question. It is also important to note that not all of the respondents had a secondary reason.

5.0 Discussion and Implications

This is a descriptive, qualitative research project with one simple question. The findings clearly show that a more scientific quantitative research is indicated, and the research question shows room for expansion.

These findings deal with many people who had to think on the spot about how they felt. In some cases, the interviewer noticed that people were struggling to think of an answer. This might simply be the nature of some individuals when asked such a question, but there might be a need for there to be further time given to students, or more of discussion to let them understand their own feelings in this matter.

Clearly there is a great interest in travel to foreign countries and communication with foreigners. Both of these answers were popular with respondents as either a primary answer or a secondary reason across all ages, regardless of social status. This shows that Japan has truly become a global society with connections all over the world. People are traveling more than ever to foreign countries.

Many people also see English as an international language, and therefore important for the future. These seem to be the same kind of people who want to improve themselves. It is clear that Japanese feel that the world is becoming more of an international society and that Japanese people want to take an active role in that society. They see English as the gateway to International understanding and the world outside Japan.

Still, some respondents wrote that they “want to communicate with foreigners,” while others said that they wanted to “communicate with foreign friends.” This author lumped both of those in one category, but this was a very popular answer in these 2 variations, and the distinction could be important. In successive research it might be better to clarify whether people are expecting to meet foreigners at some point in the future, or whether they already have foreign friends.

Successive research should also clarify the difference in age groups and English ability levels as they relate to the main question. There was a casual recognition that students with higher levels of English were apt to state that either their main or secondary reason for studying English was to maintain their English. These advanced

students were also more likely to say that their hobby is English. At the same time, it is obvious that older students and retirees were more apt to write that they were studying English to prevent the onset of senility.

Students who were looking for work or looking to change their job were the only respondents to indicate that they were studying to increase their test scores. This appears to support the discussion in the background that people will take tests in order to make themselves more marketable for employment. Still, while this seems to be a trend, further research with a larger sample of people who fall into this social status would be important to analyze. In contrast to the situation in the US, none of the Japanese respondents said that they were studying English in order to get a promotion or a raise in salary in their current job.

The interest in watching foreign movies, television programs or news cannot be overlooked. This is indicative of the mass popularity of these media in Japan. As Japanese now have access to more and more foreign programs, this has without a doubt sparked interest in studying foreign languages. These can also be tools for educators in English classrooms.

The social aspect of adult education classes was also significant. Many people seem to study English just to enjoy spending time with their classmates. Educators need to be especially aware of this fact and they need to make activities that allow students to interact with each other. Educators can also use this as a motivation factor to assist students in their learning.

In general, since adult learners are typically more motivated, and have a lot to bring to the education process, educators should use data such as this to help them better communicate with adult learners and keep them active in their classes and the education process. For community centers, language schools, college and university continuing education departments, and even private language teachers, this information also shows that there may be a market for foreign language audiences targeted toward people with special interests. Examples might be:

1. A class for job seekers wishing to improve language test scores
2. Travel English classes.

3. Movie English classes.
4. Business English classes
5. English for seniors

Finally, knowing this kind of information can help educators and instructional designers of adult education courses a great deal. Textbook writers can also use this information to design course books that can better meet the needs and desires of adult students in Japan.

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