

An analysis of Japanese university students' English language learning beliefs

by

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Abstract

Through administration of an English/Japanese 45-item multiple choice survey, this project seeks to collect data on current SILC students'; (a) beliefs about a contemporary (communicative) orientation to learning English, (b) beliefs about a traditional orientation to learning English, (c) beliefs about the quality and sufficiency of classroom instruction for learning English, and (d) beliefs about foreign language learning aptitude and difficulty (see Sakui and Gaies, 1999).

Key Words: beliefs, attitudes, university, English, learning, experience

1. Background

Having been previously administered to Sojo University students in 2009 and 2010, Sakui and Gaies' (1999) survey of learner beliefs was designed to provide educators with valuable information about their students' beliefs, an understanding of which can greatly impact teaching and learning in the classroom. From 2012 (see Appendix A) the Oxford Online Placement Test has provided (Sojo International Learning Center) SILC management and teachers with data related to incoming students' English proficiency (See Appendix A).

In a similar way, it was decided that this survey would be conducted again in 2014 to examine the beliefs of current students, with a view to undertaking subsequent research into how these vary across proficiency levels and departments, and across years.

2. Research questions

There was one main research question:

What are the attitudes and beliefs about language learning of SILC students?

With a view that subsequent research would examine a further question:

How do the attitudes and beliefs of SILC

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students in 2014 compare across departments/faculties?

3. Methodology

The survey was conducted with 1331 students in both first and second years from all faculties. The survey was based upon the instrument developed by Sakui and Gaies (1999), *Japanese Learners' Beliefs About Language Learning*. This survey had previously been administered twice at this institution. The initial administration was part of a preliminary consultation conducted in 2009 before the establishment of the purpose-built SILC. The title of this project was "How English Education is viewed by the prospective students" and was intended to provide key information for the prospective management of the SILC. The second administration was in 2010, in the first year the SILC was open. In this case, it was intended to add to the data collected in 2009 to inform further curriculum design.

The survey was delivered in Japanese, using an online program (QUT Key Survey) and utilised a 4-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-agree, 4-strongly agree). It had previously been conducted in multiple educational institutions in Japan, back-translated and validated. However, further piloting was conducted to ensure accuracy. Firstly, the survey was back-translated by two native Japanese speakers with high level English proficiency. One is a learning advisor within the institution in which the survey was to be conducted, and the other an external consultant. Next, they were asked to indicate any other relevant concerns. Following their advice, some questions were adapted to better fit the current context (Q.15, Q.33). In the case of Q.15, this was due to technological advances since 1999. In the case of Q.33, this was to better represent the educational context of the students being surveyed.

Once these edits had been made, both the learning advisor and external consultant took the survey online in test conditions to check the timing of the survey and to ensure the process was efficient. No technical issues were discovered.

A pilot was conducted with one class ($n = 30$) to check that there were no connectivity issues and that the software would work with a large group of students. This was considered necessary because the institution had previously experienced difficulties with internet connection when large numbers of students accessed the system simultaneously. No issues were found, and all students were able to complete the survey within ten to fifteen minutes.

Following this extensive piloting, the survey was made available on Moodle, an online service available to all teachers and students in this institution. The survey period was three weeks, and, in total, 1331 students (83.1% of enrolled students) responded to the survey. Absent students and those who have withdrawn from university (but remain on class lists) account for the remaining non-respondents.

4. Statistical Data from Student Surveys

The mean for these statistics has been calculated based on applying a value of 4-strongly agree, 3-agree, 2-disagree, 1-strongly disagree, so that although an individual neutral response is not possible, a mean of 2.5 would signify an overall neutral response to any particular statement.

Items 1-45: The six items with which the respondents agreed most strongly (Items 1, 2, 11, 15, 17, 21 - which had a mean of 3.33 or higher) provided evidence of a variety of beliefs: that it is easier for children to learn English than adults; that certain patterns of behaviour assist English acquisition; that learning English should be enjoyable; that there would be many opportunities

to use English in the future and that it would assist in getting a "good job". Four of these six items also featured in the original six most strongly held beliefs of the university students (n = 1296) surveyed by Sakui and Gaies in 1999.

The six items with which respondents disagreed most strongly (Items 3, 6, 16, 23, 26, 27 - which had a mean of 2.12 or lower) also dealt with a variety of beliefs: "satisfaction with one's progress, the limitations of English education (at school), the ability of Japanese to learn foreign language(s), and the importance of producing correct speech" (Sakui and Gaies, 1999, p. 483). Five of these six items also featured in the six least strongly held beliefs in the original survey.

Response patterns are also revealed through a factor analysis of the 45 items, which delivered four separate factors.

1. Beliefs about foreign-language aptitude and difficulty
 2. Beliefs about the quality and sufficiency of classroom instruction for learning English
 3. Beliefs about a communicative approach to English language learning
 4. Beliefs about a traditional (grammar-translation) approach to learning English
(Sakui and Gaies, 1999)
1. Beliefs about a traditional (grammar-translation) approach to learning English items 16 (2.12), 23 (2.03), 30 (2.40) indicated a disagreement with the idea that English ability is innate, that women are inherently better at English than men, and that ability in maths/science has a negative correlation with language learning ability. For a predominantly male, science-based university, these are very encouraging figures, and were quite surprising results for the researchers.
 2. Items 3 (2.10), 7 (2.23), 26 (1.99), 27 (1.97), 45 (2.57) indicated a generally strong belief that English education within a formal environment

is sufficient to achieve active and passive proficiency, dissatisfaction with language progress, neutral response to educational experiences related to English, and quite a strong belief that Japanese people are generally poor at learning foreign languages.

3. Items 2 (3.67), 4 (2.28), 5 (3.31), 9 (3.09), 15 (3.40), 17 (3.33), 21 (3.33), 40 (3.06), 43 (2.83), 44 (2.43) indicated a very strong belief that English language learning should be enjoyable, in the efficacy of communicative approaches to language learning, the intrinsic importance of English ability for future job prospects, but conversely a relatively strong belief that English proficiency would be difficult to achieve.
4. Items 8 (2.45), 14 (2.64), 20 (2.40), 32 (2.68), 36 (3.01), 41 (2.71) showed that a generally positive belief in grammar translation persists.

5. Conclusion

Based on survey data it appears that in 2014, SILC students' (a) beliefs about a contemporary (communicative) orientation to learning English are generally very positive, although (b) beliefs about a traditional orientation to learning English remain somewhat entrenched; (c) beliefs about the quality and sufficiency of classroom instruction for learning English are quite negative, as are; (d) beliefs about the foreign language learning aptitude of Japanese learners. Further research will be conducted in 2015/16.

6. Acknowledgements

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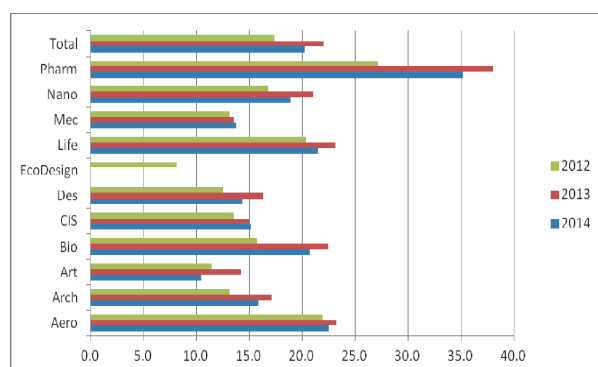
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8. Appendices

Appendix A: Student Performance on Oxford Online Placement Test 2012-2014



Appendix B: Survey Results 2014

	Mean	S/D
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn English.	3.42	0.65
2. English class should be enjoyable.	3.67	0.53
3. In order to learn to read and write English very well, English education at school is enough.	2.10	0.74
4. I believe that someday I will speak English very well.	2.28	0.78
5. It is useful to know about English-speaking countries in order to speak English.	3.31	0.63
6. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can speak it correctly.	1.75	0.72
7. Considering the amount of time I have studied English, I'm satisfied with my progress.	2.23	0.70

8. In English classes, I prefer to have my teacher provide explanations in Japanese.	2.45	0.75
9. It's O.K. to guess if you don't know a word in English.	3.09	0.61
10. If a person studies English by herself for one hour a day, how many years will it take to become fluent?	2.97	0.87
11. In learning English it is important to repeat and practice a lot.	3.68	0.50
12. I would feel embarrassed to speak English in front of other Japanese students.	2.77	0.79
13. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning, it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	2.67	0.74
14. Learning English is mostly a matter of learning grammar rules.	2.64	0.73
15. Listening to CDs and watching English programs on television are very important in learning English.	3.40	0.58
16. Girls are better than boys at learning English.	2.12	0.77
17. If I learn to speak English very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	3.33	0.69
18. It is easier to speak English than to understand it.	2.55	0.86
19. Learning English is different from learning other subjects.	2.99	0.71
20. Learning English is mostly a matter of translating from Japanese.	2.40	0.74
21. If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me get a good job.	3.33	0.66
22. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	2.64	0.82
23. People who are good at maths and science are not good at learning foreign languages.	2.03	0.72
24. Japanese people think it is important to speak English.	2.96	0.72
25. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	2.97	0.79
26. Japanese people are good at learning foreign languages.	1.99	0.67

27. In order to speak and understand English very well, English education at school is enough.	1.97	0.70
28. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	3.24	0.63
29. You can learn to improve your English only from teachers who are native English speakers.	2.19	0.71
30. Some people are born with a special ability that is useful for learning English.	2.40	0.85
31. Speaking and listening to English are more useful than reading and writing English.	3.12	0.64
32. Learning a word means learning the Japanese translation.	2.68	0.70
33. I am studying English only in order to graduate.	2.52	0.79
34. I can improve my English by speaking English with my classmates.	3.01	0.61
35. I make mistakes because I do not study enough English.	2.99	0.66
36. To say something in English, I think of how I would say it in Japanese and then translate it into English.	3.01	0.63
37. I should be able to learn everything I am taught.	2.81	0.67
38. I want my teacher to correct all my mistakes.	2.41	0.71
39. If my teacher is a native speaker, he/she should be able to speak Japanese in class when necessary.	2.88	0.71
40. I study English because it is useful to communicate with English speaking people.	3.06	0.66
41. To understand English, it must be translated into Japanese.	2.71	0.71
42. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	2.85	0.7
43. The longer I study English, the more enjoyable I find it.	2.83	0.74
44. If I heard a foreigner of my age speaking English, I would go up to that person to practice speaking.	2.43	0.8
45. I am satisfied with the English education I have received.	2.57	0.72

