

Corporate views on needs for English in agriculture industry

Glen Hill, Obihiro University of Agriculture and Veterinary Medicine

Introduction

• The relevance of English for careers is a strong motivator for studying. Teachers and science & engineering (S&E) majors often hear that a TOEIC score is needed:

- for hiring purposes
- for achieving promotions
- for assignment to overseas posts

• Globalization forces companies of all sizes to consider using more written and oral English with customers, whether or not the parent office is in a foreign country.

• Studies have shown that study abroad experience is valuable in improving English fluency and in acquiring cultural awareness. These are both strong assets for companies who conduct business with clients in English.

But to what extent are these factors applied in all fields of science and engineering?

Methods

Companies (N=96) who visited Obihiro University in December 2013 for recruitment purposes were surveyed for their responses to the 3 issues above.

Results and Discussion

- Response rate was 58%. Two thirds of the 96 companies had businesses directly related to student majors in various fields of agriculture.
- Companies comprised two major groups of employers: manufacturers & retailers. Most were mid-sized (101-300 employees) or large (>1,000 employees).

Table 1. Employer offices and foreign contacts

Domestic office, no foreign clients (DO)	Domestic office, foreign clients (DO-F)	Foreign offices (FO)
22	13	21

Table 2. Breakdown of types of companies

	DO		DO-F		FO	
	% of industry	% of DO	% of industry	% of FO	% of industry	% of DO-F
Mfg.	29	23	12	33	59	48
Retail	29	23	41	50	29	24
Financial	25	4	0	0	75	14
Other	61	50	22	17	17	14

- FOs have more of the manufacturing (59%) and financial (75%) businesses.
- DO-Fs have the biggest share of the retail businesses (41%).

Table 3. Are TOEIC scores needed?

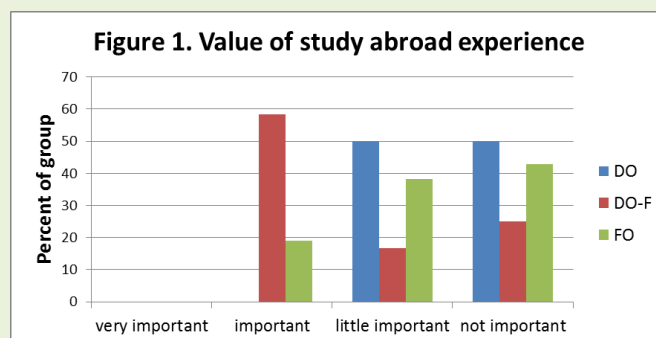
Reason	DO		DO-F		FO	
	yes	no	yes	no	yes	no
Hiring	1 ^a	18	1 ^b	12	0	22
Promotions	0	19	0	13	0	22
Posts abroad	0	19	0	13	3 ^c	19

^a450

^b~600 preferred

^c750 (2), 800 (1)

Foreign offices showed more requirement for TOEIC score (in no. & %), but almost no employer expressed a need for any of the 3 commonly cited reasons. The value of TOEIC score increased with amount of foreign exposure to workers.



Nobody rated the experience as “very important”. Most DO-Fs rated it “important”, far higher than FOs for some reason. FOs and DOs were similar in ranking it as “little important” and “not important”.

WHY?

- For 28% of FO companies, English training takes place in a formal pre-departure system. None of DO-F companies have this training.
- 19% of FOs said workers study after departure. Perhaps this on-the-job experience is deemed more valuable than studying abroad.

Table 4. Explanations for Fig. 1 rankings

Value of study abroad experience	Patterns based on:		
	Customer countries	Type of company	Size of company
Important	DO-F has no Oriental clients; FO clients are 50% Oriental and Occidental	DO-F mostly retail; FO has the largest mfg companies	None (wide range of sizes)
A little important	None	None	DO-F medium FO large
Not important	None	None	DO-F (none) FO medium(?)

Conclusions

- Despite needs imposed by globalization, claims that TOEIC is needed for S&E majors, and recognized benefits of study abroad time, this survey of agricultural employers generally does not find them to be valid or recognized.
- A more detailed investigation is needed to determine any patterns within employer groups.