Expectations and Dreams: Industry and Student Ideas about Future English Use

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Many students around Japan study in compulsory English lessons in the first years of university. As they transition from senior-high school, how do non-English major students' ideas about a possible future using English evolve? What expectations do future employers actually hold for English use? This article describes three parts of action research (an industry needs survey, and two classroom activities stemming from the results of the needs survey) designed to investigate these questions. First, a needs assessment was conducted via survey with 450 science and technology companies. Analysis revealed a variety of English abilities expected by employers. Based on these findings, two change-action activities were introduced to two English classes (n=56) of first-year science and technology students. The activities encouraged reflection and sharing of understandings about the purpose of English studies and ideas of an English-using future-self. Comparison of results from employers and students uncovered a vast gap in ideas of future English use. The findings suggest the importance of providing students with information about company expectations soon after transition to university.

日本の多くの大学生にとって、学士課程の1・2年次において英語が必須科目となっている。大学入学後に、英語を専攻していない学生が英語を使っている将来像をどのように構築していくのか。また、将来雇用主となる企業は実際に学生にどのような英語能力を期待しているのだろうか。本稿では、これらの課題を探求するアクション・リサーチの3つの過程（企業対象のニーズ調査とその結果を反映した2回の授業活動）を考察する。まず、450の理系企業を対象にニーズ調査が実施され、その結果によると、雇用者が要求する英語能力には様々なものがあることが示された。この結果に基づき、1年理系学生の英語の授業2クラス(n=56)を対象に、2種類の行動変化活動を導入した。活動では、学生が、英語学習の目的や英語を使っている将来像を振り返り共有した。雇用主と学生から得たデータを比較した結果、将来の英語の使用に関する考えに大きな隔たりが見られた。この結果から、学生がよ

り現実的な将来像が作れるよう、入学後すぐに企業側が求める英語能力について
の情報提供を行っていくことが重要であるといえる。

Around the world, foreign language studies are frequently a part of secondary education. However, for many adolescent students, experiences in the classroom revolve less around developing the ability to express meaning, and more around the attainment of satisfactory grades and achievement on tests. If these purposes for learning are not internalized, such a situation can lead to a decrease in motivation and negative impact on the development of second language identity (Taylor, 2014). Japan is no different, with memorization for entrance exams for the next stage of education being linked to decreases in motivation and negative affect related to English study (Falout et al., 2008; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009).

Yet, for many in secondary schooling in Japan, entrance exams at least provide a clear and proximal message of the *instrumental* necessity of English. With this requirement behind them, at what are learners to aim after they transition to the tertiary context? Although universities in Japan increasingly draw on the mindset of "globalization-as-opportunity" to promote communicative English programs (Yamagami & Tollefson, 2011), for the average person there is little to no use of English in day-to-day life. In point of fact, regarding one potential outlet for students' English after graduation from university, Kubota (2011) has been highly critical of the discourse in Japan that advances English as an essential language for work. Kubota (2011) contends that "no evidence supports the exclusive need for conversational English skills in the workplace or the need for English competence for work in general" (p. 105). That said, it has also been argued that there are opportunities to use English occupationally in Japan, especially in the fields of science and engineering, due to the globalizing nature of the workforce and collaborative projects ("Engineers Must Have English," 2009). This need is supported by research literature. For instance, Kaneko, Rozycki and Orr (2009) asked computer science and engineering graduates about English use in the workplace. The study found that while reading and writing were more commonly reported than speaking and listening, there was a very real need for English to handle tasks involving practical English for communicative purposes. Similarly, Naito, Yamada, Miura, Sakabe and Yoshida (2007) report needs for

general office tasks such as writing email and producing routine documents. In another study, Hill (2013) collected data from both students and employers in a range of science and engineering fields. In congruence with Kaneko et al. (2009) and Naito et al. (2007), he found that needs for general English abilities such as email and telephone communication and reading and writing office documents outweighed any need for technical English knowledge. However, although the majority of student participants were near the end of their studies, the research also revealed that almost half did not have any clear idea of whether they wished for a possible future using English in the workplace (Hill, 2013). Discrepancies between the expectations of students about English use and actual reported use in Japanese engineering companies were also found by Miura (2006, 2007).

The current paper also brings together perspectives from these two vital groups of stakeholders in undergraduate education – potential employers and the students themselves. What occupational need for English is likely awaiting learners in their possible futures? How do students understand the meaning of their English learning as they transition to study in required English lessons in the first year of university? Extending Hill's (2013) work, the current study explores the ways in which a comparison of the understandings of these groups of stakeholders might facilitate more meaningful, motivating English lessons. This study describes the initial stages of an ongoing research project investigating ideas of future English use for science and technology students at the university at which the author is employed.

Motivation Towards a Possible Future with English

Theories of language learner motivation abound in the research literature. The "classic" model placed an emphasis on learners' instrumental motives (their understandings of practical advantages from being able to use the language) and integrative motives (a desire "to come closer to the other language community") (Gardner, 2001, p. 5). However, with the spread of English as a lingua franca, in which there appears to be no one "other language community", some have questioned the idea of an integrative motive in all situations (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). Such a contention is supported by research from Japan, in

which Yashima (2000) found that while learners hoped to interact with native speakers of English, they had little interest in identifying with native speakers. Rather than an integrative motive, Yashima proposed the notion of *international posture*, which she later defined as "a tendency to see oneself as connected to the international community...and possess a readiness to interact with people other than Japanese" (Yashima, 2009, p. 146).

The importance of students' ideas of themselves as future users of the additional language is also evident in Dörnyei's (2009a) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS). Based on possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), Dörnyei (2009a) proposed that motivation emerges as an attempt to draw closer to our images of our possible future. To summarize, the L2MSS is composed of three elements. Firstly, the *Ideal L2 Self* is our image of who we wish to become. Secondly, the *Ought-to L2 Self* is an imposed image about perceived expectations from significant others or society and fears of failure. Lastly, the *L2 Learning Experience* concerns the motives generated through the learning environment – such as the teacher, curriculum, lesson style, and so on. Dörnyei (2009b) argues that these subsystems interact to form language learners' motivational dynamics.

The L2MSS holds potential for classroom application due to its phenomenological basis. Dörnyei (2009b) contends that "the imagery and sensual components of possible selves approximate what people actually experience when they are engaged in motivated or goal-directed behavior" (p. 213). Indeed, there has been a great deal of work done in the area of educational intervention with possible selves (e.g., Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002; Sampson, 2012). This body of research suggests that encouraging students to reflect on and share ideas about the elements of the L2MSS might provide a more accessible and concrete way for learners to think about the purpose of their English studies.

Possible selves develop in interaction with social context (Markus, 2006). It seems natural, then, that different elements of the L2MSS will be more influential in different contexts and at different times of a student's language learning history. Of importance for the context of the current research, a number of past studies from Japan have found the Ought-to L2 Self to exert more of an influence

on motivated action. In one such study, Pigott (2011) found that Japanese high school learners' perceptions of influences from pressures and expectations regarding their English studies (i.e., the Ought-to L2 Self) far outweighed those from an Ideal L2 Self (p. 544). Many students in this context feel pressure to study English in high school through the expectation of university entrance. The strong influence of the Ought-to L2 Self has also been observed for science and engineering students at the university level in Japan. Hill, Falout and Apple (2013) found that students with a stronger sense of Ideal L2 Selves had a higher degree of English ability (Study 1, p. 214). However, across the three studies they also uncovered that the Ought-to L2 Self, as a kind of dictated social value, was perceived as having a far greater influence on students' motivation. Findings led these authors to propose that science and engineering students "may not be receiving an education that helps them to connect the social values of English with their professional and personal identities as users of the language" (p. 216).

In summary, past research has found occupational needs for English in Japan for scientists and engineers (Hill, 2013; Kaneko et al., 2009), while studies related to the L2MSS imply that ideas of expectations about English study may play an important role in student motivation in the classroom. As a beginning point for determining potential career-related expectations for my students, I wanted to gain more specific information about English use at companies at which they might find employment. Such information could suggest likely content for the future English-using selves of students. Furthermore, at the university in question, learners majoring in science and technology are required to undertake English studies in their first and second year. The move from senior high school to university seemed to provide an ideal time window to gain valuable learner perceptions of a possible future with English. At this point they would still have classroom English study before them. I employed an action research design, through which the following research questions emerged:

1. What are the expectations of occupational English use held by representatives from companies at which my science and technology students may be employed?

2. In what ways do students understand the meaning of their English study

as they transition to the first year of university study?

3. In what ways does a comparison of industry and student ideas of future English use offer suggestions for more motivating English study?

Methods

Action research aims to understand social phenomena through the deliberate introduction of change (Burns, 2010). It commonly involves a series of research cycles (Lewin, 1948). Typically, a cycle begins with the recognition of some challenging, localized issue or area about which an individual or group would like to deepen their knowledge. Those inside this social group then develop *change-action*, intervention above and beyond regular practice directed to further these understandings. This change-action does not however merely give insight to the challenging issue but is also intended to foster outcomes perceived as more beneficial to participants in the social group (Herr & Anderson, 2005). These understandings are then reflected upon to develop additional change-action. Each consecutive cycle works to deepen understandings about the original questions as well as suggesting new, connected areas for exploration.

The current, ongoing study used a sequentially-timed mixed-methods action research approach (Ivankova, 2015), in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected in sequence. Decisions about what qualitative data to collect were made based on the insights from initial quantitative data. A description of the cycles follows.

Cycle 1: In order to gain a greater understanding of what awaits students upon graduation, the first cycle focused on potential employers. Data were collected via an anonymous 8-item closed and open-ended survey. The survey was included in the document package for each company attending a week-long job fair at the university in question. Items asked about company profiles and needs for English. A total of 450 companies were represented.

Responses were input to a spreadsheet and imported to NVivo 10 as a dataset. Numerical responses were coded in an overlapping fashion to allow later matrix queries (a type of Boolean search). These matrix queries drew out relationships and connections across survey items. For example, overlapping coding allowed

comparison of what size companies perceived English as important. Open-ended responses were content coded, and where pertinent, related to numerical data.

Cycle 2: Analysis from Cycle 1 provided concrete information about activities that students may be required to perform with English after employment. My interest was therefore piqued to also introduce change-action encouraging freshmen to reflect on the meaning of their English studies. Data were collected from 56 science and technology students in two first-year, compulsory English classes. As action research is located in a social group of which the researcher is also part, these classes were selected out of convenience. Student scores upon entry to the university equated to 400 to 800 points on the TOEIC.

An open-ended writing exercise prompted learners to write about their past experience of English lessons (PEEL) (Appendix). The activity furthermore asked their perceptions of the purpose of English study. Given past findings that English motivation for Japanese secondary learners is heavily connected to exams (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009), I wanted to see if my students' perceptions of the purpose of English study connected with entrance exams (something now in their past) or had a future-oriented perspective. These student data were collected and coded by searching for repetitions and regularities across the participant group (Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Cycle 3: Emergent from my understandings at this point, I was concerned by a great number of students who connected the purpose of English study to their newly-completed entrance exams. In addition, due to the vague nature of other students' attestations that English study was for "the future", I was also eager to push learners to explore more concrete images of using English in the future.

I introduced a classroom activity which I entitled "Opening Doors" (adapted from Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2014). The activity asked students to write up to three ideas to finish the sentence "With English I can…" Learners then mingled and shared ideas with classmates. I again explored prevalent themes across the student group. Furthermore, matrix queries were used to examine ways in which the content of individual students' ideas varied across data-collection points. In order to develop further change-action which might facilitate more purposeful and motivating English lessons, I also compared student ideas with

the expectations of company representatives elicited in Cycle 1.

In the data extracts that follow, Japanese versus English responses are noted with J or E; all student names are pseudonyms.

Results

Industry Expectations of Occupational English Use (Cycle 1)

Of the 450 represented companies, 380 (84%) returned valid survey responses. The majority of companies (233) had over 501 employees (Table 1). Companies had an overlapping mix of specializations: 143 companies identified as having a mechanical engineering focus, 127 as electrical and electronic engineering, 125 as information technology focused, 70 as chemical industry related, and 55 as construction and civil technology based (companies could select multiple specializations, so the numbers do not add up to 380).

Considering the apparent lack of English use in general occupational settings inside Japan (Kubota, 2011), one item asked representatives about their company's international connections. Table 2 displays the number of companies that chose each response, as well as the number of companies that chose multiple responses. Forty-eight companies responded that they had no overseas connection. The majority of these (31) were smaller companies of fewer than 500 employees. The remaining companies noted a mix of ways in which their company has connections outside Japan. These relations increased with the size of the company; for example, of the 217 companies that had an overseas factory or office, 167 of these (77%) were companies of over 501 employees.

There was an increasing recognition of the importance of English for the workplace as companies grew in size (Table 3). Of the 69 companies that claimed English was not so important, 35 of these were companies that also had no overseas connections. This means that around half of the companies that claimed

Table 1
Number of Employees at Surveyed Companies

< 10	11 – 50	51 – 100	101 – 500	> 501	Unspecified
1	5	23	117	233	1

Table 2

Number of Companies With a Particular Overseas Relationship

	Overseas office / factory	Contacting overseas company	Collaborative research / development with overseas company	No relation	Other	Unspecified
Overseas office / factory	217 (1)	64	37	0	3	0
Contacting overseas company	64	125 (2)	31	0	2	0
Collaborative research / development with overseas company	37	31	63 (3)	0	2	0
No relation	0	0	0	48 (4)	0	0
Other	3	2	2	0	35	0
Unspecified	0	0	0	0	0	2

English was not important *did* have such a connection. It is important to keep in mind that they may have relations with companies in countries in which English is not useful as a communication tool.

Of particular relevance for the introduced change-action was another item which inquired about employee English use. Figure 1 shows the number of companies that selected each type of activity, with companies again able to choose multiple responses. Practical English was most necessary, for working overseas, communication via email and fax, and document and information

Table 3

Number of Companies Noting Importance of English

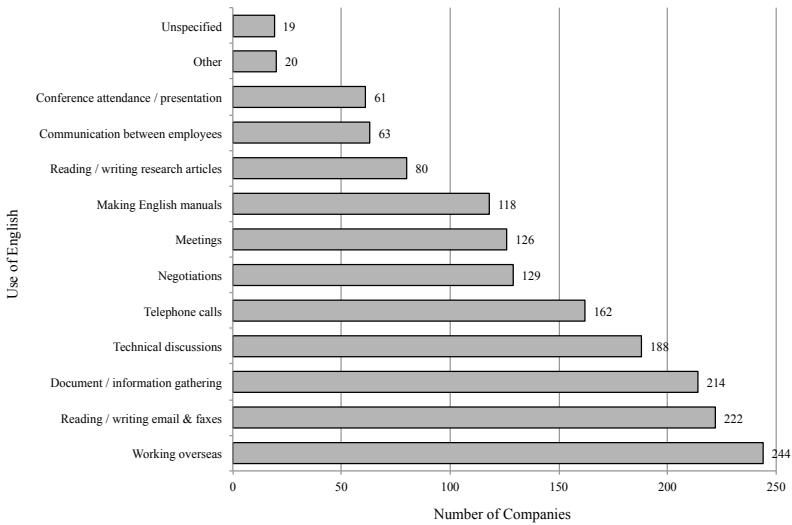| Important for all employees	Important for specific sections	Not so important	Unspecified
69	236	69	6

Figure 1. Number of companies noting particular uses of English.

gathering. In contrast to past findings for the need for more general English abilities (Hill, 2013; Kaneko et al., 2009), 188 companies (around 50% of responses) also asserted the need to conduct technical discussions in English.

Student Ideas of Future English Use (Cycles 2 and 3)

To no surprise, the vast majority of students did connect the purpose of their English studies to university entrance exams, as evident in the following extracts:

> English is to pass the exam. Not to speak English. So I can't speak English well. (Atsuhito, PEEL, E)

> English study at senior-high school was all for entrance to university, so it was good that I had a lot of chances to solve problems... But because the purpose was to solve problems, I became able to do that, but not to talk at all. (Shiho, PEEL, J).

Aligning strongly with an instrumental motive, such students wrote extremely clearly of their recognition that past English study had been primarily in order to gain a high score on entrance exams. However, in a handful of cases there were students who did project past entrance exams (see below). What was puzzling, nevertheless, was that these references to "the future" were frequently exceedingly vague and lacked specific detail:

My junior high school teacher said to me, 'English will need in the future!' so I studied English. (Kazue, PEEL, E)

Was I studying for the future? (Rie, PEEL, J)

In a few cases, slightly more concrete references to the future revolved around interaction with an imagined community of English speakers. These students invariably had a higher level of English ability. Their understandings of the purpose of English study reminded me of Yashima's (2009) notion of international posture, an idea that one is connected to the international community:

I'm studying English because I want to talk many people who live in all over the world. (Sena, PEEL, E)

I studied because English is the main language that is used by people from the entire world. (Junji, PEEL, E)

Of the 56 students, only two mentioned work at all in the PEEL:

I was studying English for getting a job. (Mamoru, PEEL, J)

I studied because I want to work in another country someday. (Yoichiro, PEEL, E)

Table 4

Student Ideas of Possible Future English Use Coded by Type of Projected Activity

Activity code (n)	With English I can...
For travel (21)	...enjoy Walt Disney World. ...travel in America. ...go to London because I like Sherlock Holmes.
Communication in general (15)	...talk to people who come from abroad in English. ...help trouble foreign people in the station.
Pastimes & hobbies (13)	...read Harry Potter written in English. ...understand movies of English.
Friendship (7)	...make friends with a person from abroad.
Occupational (6)	...communicate with foreign scientist. ...be scientist. ...work around the world.

My understandings of the data at the end of Cycle 2 led me to introduce the Opening Doors activity. I hoped to encourage students to construct anew a revised image of a future English-using self. A sample of the emergent student ideas coded by activity is presented in Table 4 (all responses were in English).

Due perhaps to the focused prompt of this activity, analysis revealed more concrete detail of what students imagined a possible future-self *doing* with English. Once again there was little connection with future occupation. This lack of connection was puzzling - as students had entered majors leading to potential employment in the science and technology fields, and English is the accepted lingua franca for such jobs ("Engineers Must Have English", 2009). Consequently, I had expected more cognizance of the possibility of occupational English use in their future. An additional surprise was that the only two students who had connected English studies to future occupation in the PEEL activity did not write about using English for work in the Opening Doors activity.

While perhaps not altogether clear from the examples in Table 4, analysis revealed that students more often considered a possible future-self in an overseas context, in particular the U.S. As I have argued previously (Sampson, 2015, 2016), English remains very much a *foreign* language for young Japanese. Moreover, there was a considerable inclination to imagine the future self *speaking* English. Listening and reading were mentioned to some degree, but writing English was not mentioned explicitly by any student. Through cross-reference with the PEEL data, a great many learners positioned past English study for university entrance exams in direct opposition to developing speaking ability. The analysis implies that these students feel particularly drawn to the possibility of a future-self speaking English and not using it in any other way.

Comparison of Industry and Student Ideas

The current study reveals a vast gap between employers' and students' ideas of future English use. The lack of a connection by students between English and occupation may broadly imply little attachment to any kind of occupational possible-self. Considering their age, this might be considered par for the course. However, in light of the importance and needs for English expressed by many

company representatives, and given the fact that students only study English as a required subject at the university in question in their first and second years, this disconnect could have negative consequences for learning. If left unattended, these learners may well replicate those in Hill's (2013) study, unconfident or undecided about the potential to use English in an occupational setting even near the end of their studies. This gap suggests that activities in English lessons that overtly connect to potential future occupational English use—based on the findings from the industry survey—may prove useful in assisting students to revise their future English-using self perceptions.

Far removed from the kinds of activities in which company representatives noted English use, students drew on their own interests in the Opening Doors activity: travel, Disney, Sherlock Holmes, Harry Potter, movies, friendship, and so on. There were also other apparent mismatches. While students frequently imagined a future-self using English in the U.S., analysis from the open-ended section of the company survey more often placed overseas English use in developing countries. No student imagined a future-self writing English either, yet a range of activities that company representatives noted require writing ability.

Various researchers (e.g., Taylor, 2014; Ushioda, 2011) argue for the benefits to language learning motivation and identity development of students being able to make a connection between personal interests and their language studies. Yet, many students' ideas seemed far more like inconsequential dreams rather than more pragmatic projections of a likely future. Although they might pursue these dreams, at some point a working-self is waiting in their life to come.

Transitions, such as the move from senior-high school to the first year of undergraduate study, are a key time of dynamicity in self-concept (Oyserman & James, 2012). Especially considering that required English study occurs in the first and second years of university in this context, it seems there could be a vital informative role for the Ought-to L2 Self. Language learners' access to information regarding future expectations may be crucial in their development of any possible self. One possibility for classroom intervention would be to ask students to discuss together to make guesses about the rank-order of ways in which English is used by technologists in their major field. By then showing

students the actual company results from this research, they could then compare a summary of their own data (from the Opening Doors activity) with company needs. Another potentially beneficial activity would be to introduce near peer role models (Murphey & Arao, 2001) of older students or graduates. These role models could be either invited to the classroom or introduced through a video of interviews. While findings from Hill et al. (2013) imply that an overemphasis on the Ought-to L2 Self can be detrimental to language development, results to date of this ongoing action research suggest that such explicit input regarding one aspect of learners' *likely* future could assist them to leave their fantasies behind, and instead develop more grounded ideas of future English use.

Conclusion

The current research is ongoing, and therefore this paper offers only a work-in-progress glimpse of the potential benefits of gathering and comparing industry and student ideas. Moreover, while the expectations of industry were collected from a large sample, the study is also limited in its focus on only two small groups of students. Nevertheless, analysis to date has uncovered a large discrepancy between the understandings of future English use held by industry and students transitioning to undergraduate studies. Continued exploration through action research change-action will hopefully reveal the motivational benefits to attempting to foster in students more balanced ideas of the Ought-to and Ideal L2 Selves. It will also potentially offer insights into the usefulness (or not) of the L2MSS as a way to both theorize motivation and assist students to reflect on the meaning of English learning for their own future.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix

Past Experience of English Lessons Activity

You	Other student
1 What was a usual lesson like? What did the teacher / students do? _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Name: _____ Similarity: _____
2 What was a good point about lessons? Why? _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Name: _____ Similarity: _____
3 What was a bad point about lessons? Why? _____ _____ _____ _____	Name: _____ Similarity: _____
4 Why were you studying English? _____ _____ _____ _____ _____	Name: _____ Similarity: _____