
Feature Article

Workplace English Language Needs of Japanese Business Undergraduates

Janice Nakamura

International Christian University

A needs assessment on business undergraduates at a Japanese university was performed to determine their Business English needs and if the existing language program meets these needs. Results analyzed from questionnaires completed by employers and subject lecturers revealed that, while English was perceived to be only somewhat important in the organizations that graduates usually work for, employers and subject lecturers placed greater importance on the study of Business English at university and identified key tasks to be included in a Business English course. The tasks identified by employers are mainly oral in nature, suggesting the importance of oral communication in business contexts. These results indicate that an English for Business Purposes (EBP) course which focuses on the key tasks identified in the needs assessment should be introduced to replace the two elective Business English courses which are currently offered to students.

本研究では、商学部の大学生の将来の職場における英語ニーズを分析し、現在の語学プログラムの中の選択科目である二つのビジネス英語コースが、学生のニーズを満たしているかどうかを検証することを目的とする。雇用者や専門教師から得たアンケートのデータに基づく分析の結果、英語はあまり必要ではないことが明確になった。しかし、雇用者や専門教師も大学でビジネス英語を勉強する必要性を認識し、ビジネス英語コースに導入すべきキー・タスクを特定した。雇用者が特定したキー・タスクは主に口頭タスクであり、ビジネスの場における口頭コミュニケーションの重要性を示す。この結果に基づいて、現在のビジネス英語コースに代えてニーズ分析で特定したキー・タスクを用いるEnglish for Business Purposes (EBP)を導入することを提案する。

With the exigencies of globalization, English in the workplace is given more

attention than ever in Japanese companies that are expanding overseas. The fast-growing online retailer, Rakuten Inc., made all documents, meetings and internal communications be in English starting from 2012 (Wakabayashi, 2012). In addition, Fast-Retailing Co., which markets clothing under the popular Uniqlo brand, started carrying out its internal business meetings in English from the same year (Maeda, 2010). English has also been adopted as the official language of Bridgestone Corp., the world's leading tire maker (Mukai, 2013). Moreover, as part of its global expansion plans, the world's largest pharmaceutical firm, Takeda Pharmaceutical Co., is recruiting only new college graduates with a score of 730 or more on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) from 2013 onwards ("Takeda to require 730 TOEIC", 2011).

It is yet uncertain whether these dramatic reforms will spur similar changes in other Japanese companies or are merely transitory. While a lackluster economy has forced Japanese companies to expand overseas and thus to recruit more English-proficient staff up to 2011, a survey by the employment agency, Doda (2013), shows that an upturn in domestic economy from thereon and employers' shifting focus to skills other than English are causing demand for English skills to weaken.

While this is an indication that the demand for English-proficient employees in Japan in the future is as uncertain as the state of its economy, as Japanese corporations continue to tap into international markets, English will have to play an important role. A major concern regarding the move towards using English in professional contexts is the ability of Japanese employees to cope with the new language demands. While they can seek language lessons privately or take those offered by their employers, as English is given greater prominence in the workplace, there will be increasing pressure for universities in Japan to produce graduates who can communicate in English-medium work settings. If the universities consider English proficiency in the workplace to be necessary, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses will have to be an important feature of their English language program, along with general English courses.

ESP has a short history in Japan. Morizumi (1994) estimated that fewer than 2% of university-level English language textbooks in Japan were ESP-

based ones. However, Moriguchi's (2010) survey shows that, while there is still a limited number, ESP textbooks had grown to 34% of all university textbooks available in Japan. Likewise, Terauchi, Yamauchi, Noguchi and Sasajima (2010) presented case studies of 19 ESP courses implemented in Japan, of which 16 were at the undergraduate level. They also introduced an ESP database created by the Japanese Association of College English Teachers (JACET) which contains more than 1,000 entries related to ESP research papers, presentations, textbook materials and books. Similarly, Terauchi (2005) gives a detailed account of the implementation of an English for Business Purposes (EBP) course at Takachiho University. While the availability of ESP materials and case studies is only a partial indicator of its popularity, ESP has ostensibly generated more interest among Japanese universities since the 1990s.

What sets an ESP course apart from a general English course is that it is driven by specific needs. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) consider a needs analysis to be the "irreducible minimum of an ESP approach to course design" (p. 54). Long (2005) adds that, "Just as no medical intervention would be prescribed before a thorough diagnosis of what ails the patient, so no language teaching program should be designed without a thorough needs analysis" (p. 1). The concept of a formal analysis of needs was first established in the 1970s as a result of the Council of Europe's language projects and was taken up most vigorously in the field of ESP (West, 1994). Munby (1978), who introduced the first systematic and structured approach to analyzing target situation needs, has been highly influential in making needs analysis a central feature of ESP course design. Early needs analysis mainly focused on the target situation but, from the 1980s, it expanded to include deficiency analysis, strategy analysis, and means analysis. At a larger scale, language audits for a company, country, or professional sector were used in both ESP and general language teaching (West, 1994).

Needs analysis is an information-gathering method that is not only limited to courses for in-service language learners but also one that is increasingly common among universities offering ESP courses. Since Coleman's (1988) report of an early needs assessment on an Indonesian university, there have been not only assessments of academic language needs such as on writing (Bacha & Bahous,

2008) and business studies (Jackson, 2005), but also on specific fields of study such as engineering (Kaewpet, 2009; Kassim & Ali, 2010), pharmacology (Holme & Chalauisaeng, 2006) and textile and clothing merchandising (Li & Mead, 2000).

While an assessment of the needs of students from broader majors may be more difficult due to their different careers paths, Crosling and Ward's (2002) study on Monash University's business students shows how this can be done. They conducted a survey in the workplace to determine the importance and frequency of oral communication, the people with whom employees communicate orally and the forms of oral communication. Their results revealed that oral communication in the workplace was frequent and important with most of it occurring within a company's own department (e.g., work-related discussions with peers and supervisors). These results led them to suggest that the teaching of presentation skills in the university curriculum did not adequately equip the students for the oral communicative demands of the workplace.

Likewise, Taillefer (2007) investigated the professional needs of French economics students planning to pursue diverse careers in banking and insurance, civil service and media communication as advisors, consultants, analysts, auditors, project leaders and customer relations managers upon graduation. Responses from past graduates to a broad skills-based questionnaire revealed that, despite their different career routes, an overall high level of competency was required, particularly in oral communication.

Lambert (2010) is arguably the most detailed work done to date on the needs of students from a broader major with varied career tracks. In his needs assessment of English majors at a Japanese university, data was collected from past graduates based on a multi-tiered approach by using interview data to design a preliminary open-item questionnaire. This was followed by an email questionnaire to selected participants. The data were subsequently used to build a final closed-item questionnaire sent out to 2,603 past graduates, of which 198 were returned. The user-focused and consensus-based assessment helped identify five common key tasks for graduates who embark on careers in business and education. While 72% of the English major graduates advanced to careers in 11 different industries

and 21% started careers in education, he demonstrated how, despite such varied career tracks, key tasks can be defined with reasonable precision for inclusion in a university ESP program.

While Cowling (2007) has assessed the Business English needs of new employees in a Japanese corporation, as far as the researcher is aware, there is no study yet reported on the needs of business undergraduates in Japan. Moreover, while there is arguably more focus nowadays on Business English and TOEIC at Japanese universities due partly perhaps to the recent emphasis on English by some major Japanese corporations, Business English courses currently offered to students may have not been implemented based on a needs assessment. Thus, they may not reflect actual workplace needs. The gap between the teaching of Business English and the actual communicative needs can be considerable. For instance, Bremner's (2010) examination of business communication textbooks revealed that they do not adequately provide students with activities to acquaint themselves with collaborative writing tasks in real business contexts.

In light of the potential relevance of EBP courses at the tertiary level in Japan, this study assesses the language needs of students majoring in business administration at a large private university in Tokyo. One objective is to determine if an EBP course is necessary because, at the time this study commenced, out of the 82 compulsory and elective English courses offered to business majors, 36 (69%) were general English, 14 (27%) were TOEIC-related, and only two elective courses (4%) are Business English ones. Another aim of this research is to identify the key tasks to be taught by means of a needs assessment if an EBP course is introduced.

Method

Questionnaires were used as the data-gathering method for this study. A 4-point Likert-type questionnaire was designed with reference to previous studies including Reeves and Wright (1996), Chia, Johnson, Chia and Olive (1999) and Abdul Aziz (2004) and Business English textbooks and materials. The questionnaire was translated into Japanese and began with two general questions to determine the importance of Business English studies for business

undergraduates. The first question was “How important is Business English in the workplace?” and the second question was “How important is Business English as part of the university’s language program?” to which respondents were asked to rate as *Very Important*, *Important*, *Somewhat Important* and *Not Important*. This was followed by 38 specific tasks grouped according to the four language skills to which respondents rated in the same way. An empty column was created at the end of each section for respondents to write down additional tasks that they considered important.

The questionnaire was mailed to major employers of the university’s business graduates. The university’s job placement database was used to derive a sample of companies for questionnaire distribution as it contained information on each company’s line of business, the number of employees and the number of past graduates employed. Twenty companies were chosen from the top four industries where the university’s business graduates usually found employment, that is, wholesale/retail (35%), service (24%), transportation (12%) and manufacturing (9%). The companies selected were large organizations with more than 500 employees and have hired at least four of the university’s graduates in the past 15 years. Overall, they have employed 270 of the university’s graduates, of which 110 were business majors.

The questionnaires were addressed to the companies’ human resource department with a cover letter and self-addressed envelope because that department can make an overall assessment of the organization’s Business English needs and the language skills it expects graduates to bring into the workplace. The questionnaire response rate was 35% with seven questionnaires returned. Although the response rate is low, unlike individual questionnaires, the data from the employers reflected the Business English needs of the organization as a whole and therefore, were considered worthy as a basis for analysis. To triangulate the results from the survey, semi-structured interviews were also carried out with six full-time subject lecturers of the undergraduate business program who taught six different business disciplines: taxation, management, economics, logistics, information technology and accounting. The same language needs questionnaire was first completed in the interview sessions and followed by open-ended

questions asked by the researcher.

Results

At the beginning of the questionnaire, the employers and subject lecturers were asked to evaluate the importance of Business English in the workplace and as part of the university's language program. Responses to the questionnaire were scored as 4 for *Very Important*, 3 for *Important*, 2 for *Somewhat Important* and 1 for *Not Important*. Means scores were computed and, as shown in Figure 1, both employers ($M = 2.17$) and subject lecturers ($M = 2.50$) considered English as only somewhat important. It is interesting to note that despite this, both employers ($M = 2.83$) and subject lecturers ($M = 3.17$) attached higher importance to the learning of Business English in university.

Employers' rating of specific language tasks allowed us to identify five key tasks which have the highest mean scores ($M = 2.50$ and above) as shown in Table 1. The key tasks, introducing the company and its products ($M = 2.86$), making telephone calls ($M = 2.71$), answering telephone calls ($M = 2.71$), answering complaints ($M = 2.67$), and rejecting a proposal or suggestion ($M = 2.50$), are mainly speaking tasks. These findings concur with Dudley-Evans and John (1996) observations that the most common tasks in business are perceived as spoken.

Introducing the company and its products, which was rated the highest in

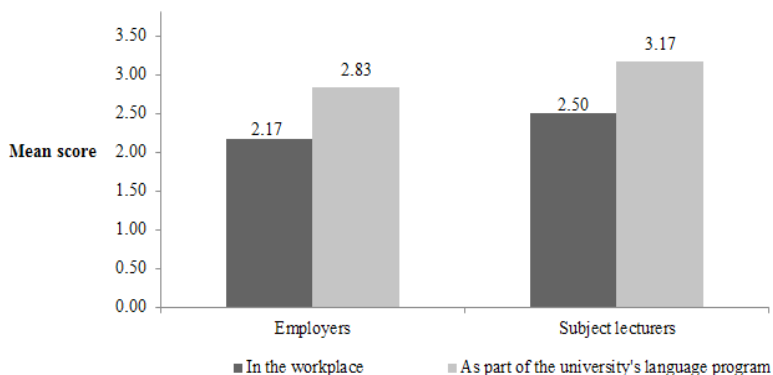


Figure 1. The perceived importance of Business English

terms of importance, is an oral task prioritized by employers potentially because an inability to perform the task well will reflect negatively on the company's image. Making and answering business telephone calls in English were also regarded as important tasks in the workplace probably because they are more difficult than face-to-face communication. Japanese employees find telephone tasks in English challenging because they cannot rely on gestures and facial expressions to understand what was being communicated (Naitou, 2008). Moreover, the lack of body language signals in telephone communication is replaced by a greater usage of paraverbal signals (Halbe, 2012) which may pose a challenge to Japanese employees. Answering complaints is also a key task presumably because companies need to maintain good customer relations. Finally, the importance of the task of rejecting a proposal or suggestion reflects the difficulty it poses to Japanese speakers whose indirect "roundabout" communication style contrasts starkly against a Western style where expressions that are to the point are preferred (Kameda, 2001). These results do not appear to reflect the importance of the tasks in terms of frequency of occurrence, but on the negative impact on corporate image when such tasks are not performed well.

Table 1 also shows that other than the five key tasks, 11 intermediate tasks all with the same mean scores of 2.43 have been identified. Seven of these are productive tasks, indicating that an EBP course has to focus on speaking and writing tasks and not on receptive ones. Five of the intermediate tasks are writing ones, such as filling out forms, writing emails and translating documents. While writing tasks are less important than key speaking and listening tasks, they are still valued. It is interesting to note that, although translation is not typically featured in a communicative English course, it has been identified as an intermediate task required in the workplace, presumably because in-house translation services may not be readily available, particularly at smaller organizations, and are too expensive to contract out. The remaining 22 tasks in the questionnaire had mean scores between 2.00 and 2.33 and are low priority tasks probably because they are generally performed in Japanese.

Results from the semi-structured interviews revealed that, in contrast to the employers, the subject lecturers attached a higher level of importance to all of

Table 1

Key and Intermediate Tasks Identified by Employers

Skill Type	Task	Mean Score ($n = 7$)
Key Tasks (5)		
Speaking	Introducing the company and its products	2.86
Speaking	Making telephone calls	2.71
Listening	Answering telephone calls	2.71
Speaking	Answering complaints	2.67
Speaking	Rejecting a proposal or suggestion	2.50
Intermediate Tasks (11)		
Speaking	Entertaining overseas guests	2.43
Listening	Understanding presentations, suggestions and proposals	2.43
Listening	Understanding questions about the company and its products	2.43
Reading	Understanding emails and business letters	2.43
Reading	Obtaining information from the Internet	2.43
Reading	Reading and translating office documents from English to Japanese	2.43
Writing	Filling up business forms	2.43
Writing	Writing emails	2.43
Writing	Translating office documents from Japanese to English	2.43
Writing	Preparing presentation materials	2.43
Writing	Preparing simple agreements and contracts	2.43

the tasks listed in the questionnaire. As shown in Table 2, by ranking the tasks according to their mean scores, it was possible to identify six key tasks with mean scores of 3.33 or more and eight intermediate ones with mean scores of at least 3.00. In contrast to the employers' emphasis on speaking tasks, the subject lecturers placed more importance on reading tasks, as four out of the six key tasks are reading ones. They only identified one key task that is the same as that of the employers, that is, answering telephone calls. Overall, there were six key and

intermediate tasks which were identified by both parties.

These results demonstrate how different parties can have a different perception of needs. Subject lecturers attached higher importance to the use of Business English in the workplace than employers ($M = 2.83$ vs. $M = 2.17$). While subject lecturers have knowledge in a specific business-related field, they may not be able to provide a clear perspective of graduates' English needs in the workplace as well as employers. Being teachers, some of them may not also be up-to-date with changes in the work environment. Likewise, in answering the question on the importance of studying Business English as part of a university's language program for business majors, subject lecturers attached higher importance than

Table 2

Key and Intermediate Tasks Identified by Subject Lecturers

Skill Type	Task	Mean Score ($n = 6$)
<i>Key Tasks (6)</i>		
Reading	Obtaining information from the Internet	3.67
Listening	Answering telephone calls	3.50
Listening	Listening and understanding native English	3.33
Reading	Understanding business documents	3.33
Reading	Understanding emails and business letters	3.33
Reading	Understanding manuals	3.33
<i>Intermediate Tasks (8)</i>		
Writing	Filling up business forms	3.17
Writing	Writing emails	3.17
Listening	Listening and understanding other varieties of English	3.17
Speaking	Making telephone calls	3.00
Listening	Understanding presentations, suggestions and proposals	3.00
Listening	Understanding instructions and explanations in briefings and training sessions	3.00
Reading	Reading minutes of meetings	3.00
Reading	Reading and understanding proposals	3.00

employers ($M = 3.17$ vs. $M = 2.5$). Both parties' perceptions were also divergent as to some of the key tasks in the workplace.

A comprehensive needs analysis involving external parties such as employers is a time-consuming task. It may be easier for ESP course designers to seek the advice of colleagues who are subject specialists about the students' English language needs in their future workplace. However, as these findings demonstrate, that information from subject lecturers alone is not sufficient, and additional information from employers is necessary to gain a better picture of English language needs in the workplace.

Discussion

This needs assessment revealed that English is only somewhat important in the business students' future workplace because, as a subject lecturer explained in the interview, the university's graduates do not usually proceed to careers in Japanese multinational companies where English plays a bigger role. They usually secure employment with smaller companies in the wholesale/retail, service, transportation and manufacturing sectors that generally do business within Japan so English is not frequently encountered. Nevertheless, employers and subject lecturers placed greater importance on the study of Business English as part of the university's language program than on the use of Business English in the workplace.

The lower importance attached to Business English in the workplace and the higher importance attached to the study of Business English as part of the university's program suggest that the need for business undergraduates to learn Business English is a perceived rather than an actual need. While Business English is only somewhat important in the workplace, suggesting perhaps that it is used in limited contexts and by selected employees, employers may prefer their employees to be equipped with some ability to perform certain tasks in English (e.g., answering telephone calls) regardless of whether they actually have to perform them or not. This might also reflect their opinion that students majoring in Business Administration should, to a certain extent, study the English that is related to their major.

Subject lecturers also placed higher importance than employers on reading and writing tasks in Business English partly because they may help students to understand better the content of business-related courses taught in Japanese. A taxation lecturer who participated in the semi-structured interviews commented that Business English courses can help students to grasp the technical English terms that they encounter in his classes. However, these are not workplace needs but academic ones because the language skills learnt complement students' business-related studies.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) acknowledged that "target needs" is an umbrella term and further analyzed it as *necessities*, *lacks* and *wants*. *Necessities* are the needs determined by the target situation whereas *lacks* are the gap between target and existing proficiency. *Wants* are the perceived subjective needs of the learner. We can perhaps think about the greater importance employers and subject lecturers place on the study of Business English as their *wants* for the business major students. While these *wants* are the employers' and subject lecturers' perception of the students' need to learn Business English, they should not be ignored, as meeting them may improve the employability of the university's graduates and the competitiveness of the university's business program. Consideration of the subject lecturers' *wants* in relation to the study of Business English also helps students in their business-related studies.

Based on the results which showed that Business English is perceived as only somewhat important in the workplace, Business English skills are not a necessity for students to function competently in their future workplace. However, because employers and subject lecturers' perception of the importance of Business English as part of the university's language program were higher than their perception of the importance of Business English use in the workplace, an EBP course should be introduced to replace the existing two elective Business English courses in the existing language program, that is, Business Writing and Commercial English.

The Business Writing course currently teaches writing emails, faxes and letters, whereas one of the skills taught in the Commercial English course is the writing of resumes, an activity which students will find little practical use given the local nature of their employment. The EBP course could teach the key and

intermediate tasks identified from the needs assessment, particularly oral ones. In designing an EBP syllabus, it is proposed that the key and intermediate tasks identified by the employers are prioritized, followed by those identified by subject lecturers. Given the mostly oral nature of business communication identified in this study, it is important that these tasks are taught in an EBP course because they are not likely to be covered in general English courses or TOEIC preparatory ones which emphasize listening and reading tasks for examination purposes. To address the *wants* of the subject lecturers for students to learn aspects of the language related to business studies, the EBP syllabus can also include elements of Business English for Academic Purposes (BEAP) so that students can learn business terminology and concepts in English which can facilitate learning in the courses that the subject lecturers teach in Japanese.

The present study is a small-scale needs assessment performed on a limited number of respondents. Nevertheless, it has shown how the future workplace English needs of business undergraduates who will seek employment in diverse organizations and industries can be identified. While some universities in Japan may implement a full ESP program to equip all of their students with academic and professional English skills (e.g., Shi, 2014), the lack of a strong case for ESP for the business undergraduates in this needs assessment demonstrates that the introduction of an EBP course to replace the current two elective Business English courses adequately addresses the students' needs as perceived by employers and subject lecturers.

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Author's bio

Janice Nakamura is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Education Research and Service, International Christian University, Tokyo. She holds a Ph.D. in Education and is interested in research in the fields of English for Specific Purposes and early bilingual acquisition. janice-n@sky.sannet.ne.jp.

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