

# Learner Perspectives on Confidence, Interests and Self-evaluation of English Language Study

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## ABSTRACT

近年、学習課程における学生の観点の重要性が高まっている。これには、三つの理由がある。第一に、教師一生徒間の階級的関係が少なからず平等なものになりつつあること。第二に、技術の進歩が教育分野での情報交換を変化させていること。第三に、特に、パソコン使用の増大や将来におけるコンピューターソフトによる音声認識技術を考える時、学習課程がより個人的なものになっていくであろうということ。教育分野における高度技術の使用は、民間企業によって強力に勧められている。このように、学習者は、ある意味で教育の消費者のようになってきており、教師の役割は変化しつつある。その消費者に質の高い教育を提供することが、今、学校が供給しなければならないサービスである。このような理由により、教師一生徒間においては、今、より一層の調整をすることが重要である。そこで、本論文では、大学生の英語学習における自信、興味、自己評価について調査した。

## Introduction

In recent years, the role of student perceptions in the process of learning have come to be seen as both a previously overlooked source of data for use in evaluating courses and programs, as well as a core indicator of how courses and programs should develop in the future. This has been the result of three converging phenomena. Firstly, the growing credibility of the idea that the teacher-student relationship should resemble facilitator-learner pairings which empower learners, rather than traditionally practiced "master and disciples" type of groupings. Secondly, advances in technology have exposed many of the inefficiencies prevalent in our institutions of education. The same improvements that brought us office automation are starting to change the manner in which information is presented to learners in the classroom and elsewhere. Thirdly, the learning process itself has come to be seen as more individualistic in nature. With the advent of voice-recognition software programs, each and every student with a computer terminal will have as much individual attention as they desire. In short, how to learn better has become the focal point of education in consumer oriented societies.

The student, as a key consumer in education, is gradually being incorporated into the equation. "One important shift in perspective in the research on classroom learning is the acceptance that it is important to understand learning from the pupil's perspective, which is different from those of both teachers and researchers" (Entwhistle, 1987:56). This is especially true in regards to foreign or second language education which requires the introduction of elements of another culture and "... because the material is not merely an extension of the students' own cultural heritage, the dynamics of the classroom and methodology assume greater importance than they do in other school topics" (Gardner, 1985:8). Furthermore, it is generally agreed

that focusing on learners and their needs are fundamental to effective programs. "... for language instruction to work it must be both learning and learner centred" (Ellis, 1992:16). If learners are to be the ultimate consumers of education, how to attract and maintain their interest, as well as what is evaluated by students as effective for learning, would seem of prime importance. In addition, overall findings in the field of language education have revealed that learners who value the study highly and have a positive attitude toward the process are more likely to succeed in second or foreign language learning (Gardner, 1985). All of the above seem good reasons for educators at all levels of schooling to give proper consideration to student input.

The research in this paper was conducted to address the confidence level, interests and self-evaluations of first year university students, which are in part attributable to their prior school experiences. Having recently come from high school and now embarking upon their journey into higher education, it seems an important time to clarify these perspectives for both student and teacher alike. An assessment of the student perspectives as outlined above, based upon their insights as learners, led to formulation of the following research questions:

- 1.) To what degree do first year Japanese university students express confidence in English language skills?
- 2.) What kind of English language study are first year Japanese university students interested in?
- 3.) How do first year Japanese university students evaluate their English language proficiency overall?

As the results of a pilot study on OUEL students were startling in regards to the research questions, a follow-up study was conducted on first year students at three other universities in western Japan to help clarify that data, and is included for discussion.

## 2. Study Backgrounds and Methods

### 2.1 OUEL Study Subjects

In May of 1995, a total of 131 students (112 male, 19 female) first year students in compulsory English language courses at the Osaka University of Economics and Law were asked to complete a questionnaire regarding their confidence, interests and abilities in the English language. Most students came directly from high school, though some may have been out of formal schooling for a year or more as *ronin* or for other personal reasons. While no major in the field of English is offered at the university, it is certain that the students had been exposed in some manner to the English language for several years in secondary schools.

#### 2.1.1 3 Universities Study Subjects

To supplement the data from the OUEL study, first year students at three different universities in western Japan were asked in December of 1996 to complete a questionnaire. "University X" had 35 students (9 male, 26 female), "University Y" had 40 students (29 male, 11 female), and "University Z" had 43 students (27 male, 16 female) who participated in the study. Again, most students had come directly from high school and while these universities do offer a major in the field of English, none of these students were English majors.

## 2.2 OUEL Study Procedures

The questionnaire was printed in Japanese and students were encouraged to answer the questions as frankly as possible. The students were also informed the questionnaire would have no effect whatsoever upon their grades. The questionnaire has three sections focusing on student perceptions of confidence, interest and ability. The questionnaire includes both closed-response questions using Likert scales for statistical or quantitative data, and open-response questions where the students produced an answer in writing based upon their opinions and self-ratings for descriptive or qualitative data. Up to 20 minutes were provided to fill it out by circling answers and writing in Japanese. The questionnaire has been translated into English for use in the body of this paper. The questionnaire printed in Japanese appears in the Appendix.

### 2.2.1 3 Universities Study Procedures

The questionnaire was printed in Japanese and students were encouraged to answer the questions as frankly as possible. The students were also informed the questionnaire would have no effect whatsoever upon their grades. The data presented in this paper comes from three sections which correspond to the sections in the OUEL study. This questionnaire also includes both closed-response questions using Likert scales for statistical or quantitative data, and open-response questions where the students produced an answer in writing based upon their opinions and self-ratings for descriptive or qualitative data. Students were allowed up to 30 minutes to fill it out by circling their answers or writing in Japanese. The questions have been translated into English for use in the body of this paper and are printed in Japanese in the Appendix.

## 2.3 Questionnaire Formats

The OUEL and 3 Universities formats are listed together in relation to their corresponding content. The purpose of the 3 Universities data is to augment and clarify in a broader sense the rather specific nature of the OUEL data.

### OUEL Section I

Answer the following questions with regards to whether or not you have confidence in that particular skill area. (Circle your answer)

1. I can make a self-introduction in English. (Yes / No)
2. I can ask and answer basic questions. (Yes / No)
3. I can read a map in English. (Yes / No)
4. I can converse in English. (Yes / No)
5. I can write on a topic I like in English. (Yes / No)

### 3 Universities Section I

Do you feel anxiety when you use or study English?

No Anxiety

High Anxiety

0    1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

Please explain your answer in detail.

### OUEL Section II

Please answer the following questions by circling your answers.

(The same 7 point scale was used for each question- See Appendix)





particular skill area. (Circle your answer)

1. I can make a self-introduction in English. (Yes / No)
2. I can ask and answer basic questions. (Yes / No)
3. I can read a map in English. (Yes / No)
4. I can converse in English. (Yes / No)
5. I can write on a topic I like in English. (Yes / No)

Table 1

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
Confidence	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No	Yes/No
Male	42/70	26/86	23/89	3/109	1/111
%	37.5%/62.5%	23%/77%	20%/80%	3%/97%	1.0%/99%
Female	7/12	13/6	2/17	2/17	1/18
%	37%/63%	68%/32%	10%/90%	10%/90%	5.0%/94%
Totals	49/82	39/92	25/106	2/126	2/129
%	37%/63%	30%/70%	19%/81%	4%/96%	1.5%/98.5%

It is evident that confidence is extremely low especially with regard to the skill areas that involve conversation and writing. Because of the low number of girls participating in this study, the responses were further categorized by gender to see if any strong differences were observable. Female respondents are shown to have more confidence with regards to Question 2 on the asking and answering of basic questions. It should be noted, however, that the population of the student body at OUEL is in accordance with the male-female ratio in this study sampling, thus making the total percentages reflective of that school. It should also be noted that the Japanese society values modesty highly and that the wording of the question with the word "confidence" may have been culturally inappropriate.

### 3 Universities Study - Section I

In light of the impact the word "confidence" may have had upon the participants, in the follow-up study a measurement of anxiety or the term *fuan* with regards to English language study, was posed in question form. Results to this more common used phraseology are shown below.

Table 2

Do you feel anxiety when you study or use English?

No Anxiety

High Anxiety

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

X	Y	Z	Average
6.543	6.725	6.605	6.62

The source of this anxiety is further clarified by the qualitative responses written by the students and listed in order of appearance as shown below.

- 1) Correctness of speech anxiety
- 2) Grammer and pronunciation anxiety
- 3) Understanding partner's speech anxiety

The rankings are quite uniform among the schools and indicate that this represents a serious concern to students. Many of the reasons for these concerns may find their causes in culturally conditioned or psychological barriers to foreign language study. As instilling confidence in learners is important to their progress, the underlying nature for such causes demand further investigation.

### 3.2 Section 2

#### OUEL Study - Section II

Students were asked the following questions regarding their interests in

English:

Please answer the following questions by circling your answers.

- A. I want to speak in English
- B. I want to listen to the television and radio in English.
- C. I want to read the newspaper in English.
- D. I want to write letters in English.
- E. I want to make friends using English.
- F. I want to get a qualification in the English language.
- G. I want to live in an English speaking country.

(The same 7 point scale was used for each question)

Want to very much	want to	want to a little	don't care	not really	don't want to	Not at all
7	6	5	4	3	2	1

The averages for the rankings are presented below.

**Table 3**

	QA	QB	QC	QD	QE	QF	QG
Male	5.08	4.65	4.00	4.16	4.51	4.39	3.83
Female	5.38	4.97	4.78	4.78	5.05	5.47	4.40
Totals	5.10	4.67	4.08	4.34	4.57	4.53	3.88

While it appears the female respondents have more of an interest in the study overall as indicated by higher ratings in each of the categories, both male and female students exhibited the same high interest in speaking English. In the total averages, only Question G, "I want to live in an English speaking country" fell below the level of indifference or a "don't care" rating of less than four points overall.

To gain a clearer understanding of how the students answered these seven questions, the total number of positive rankings of 5, 6, and 7 (+) grouping, 4 rankings for a neutral (=) grouping, and the 3, 2 and 1 rankings for a negative (-) grouping are shown below.

Table 3.1

	QA	QB	QC	QD	QE	QF	QG
	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%	#/%
Male							
5+	80/71%	64/57%	47/42%	48/42%	53/47%	60/53.5%	44/39%
4=	14/13%	29/26%	23/21.5%	28/25%	41/37%	23/21.5%	14/12.5%
3-	18/16%	19/17%	42/37.5%	36/23%	18/16%	29/26%	54/48.5%
Female							
5+	15/79%	12/63%	10/53%	11/58%	13/68%	13/68%	10/53%
4=	1/5%	3/16%	5/26%	3/16%	3/16%	3/16%	7/37%
3-	3/16%	4/21%	4/21%	5/26%	3/16%	3/16%	2/10%
Total							
5+	95/72%	76/58%	57/43.5%	59/45%	66/50.5%	73/56%	54/41%
4=	15/12%	32/24.5%	28/21.5%	31/24%	44/33.5%	26/20%	21/16%
3-	21/16%	23/17.5%	46/35%	41/31%	21/16%	32/24%	56/43%

It is clear from this data that the female responses have a higher concentration in terms of percentage in the positive groupings. It also should be noted that answers of the neutral and negative groupings when combined exceed the positive responses in terms of percentages in Questions C, D, and G which indicates the activities of reading a newspaper, writing a letter, and living overseas carry less appeal to the students than the other categories of questions.

### 3 Universities Study - Section II

Having seen that a variety of interests in English language study appealed to the students, in the follow-up study the idea of the importance of the study to the students was investigated. As pointed in Table 4, the results are again strong and uniform.

Table 4

Do you think the study of English is important?

Totally											Extremely
Unimportant											Important
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

X	Y	Z	Average
8.371	8.05	8.093	8.17

It is clear the students reported a high and uniform rating for the importance of English language study. The qualitative responses written by the students indicate the reasons why students perceive it to be so. The responses which appeared most often are listed in order below.

- 1) English is the common language.
- 2) Need English in international society
- 3) English will be a useful job skill

The interests of the students are shown to be related both to their perception of English as a tool for international communication, and as a skill that would be advantageous to their future careers.

### 3.3 Section 3

#### OUEL Study- Section III

This question asks for strictly descriptive data based upon the individual student's self-evaluation and the responses in order of their appearance are as shown below. The number of times the response appeared is in parenthesis and it should be noted that more than one response was possible from a given student.

Please write in Japanese about your English language proficiency.

1. None or near no proficiency (72)  
(e.g. not worthy of mention)
2. Unable to converse (64)  
(e.g. Speaking, Listening weak)
3. Can understand exam type English (40)  
(e.g. grammar, translation)

Clearly the students showed the same lack of confidence in their written evaluations as they showed in the first section. Again the possibility of the wording of the question may have thrown them off, but this qualitative data can hardly be viewed as encouraging.

#### 3 Universities - Section III

In light of the responses obtained above, in the follow-up study a more objective skill-by-skill rating by the students was asked for as shown below.

Table 5

Of the seven skill categories listed below, rank by number your proficiency now in each of the skills

Complete											Native
Beginner											Speaker
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
	X		Y		Z		Average				
Reading	5.4		4.575		4.67		4.88				
Writing	4.74		4.25		4.442		4.48				
Speaking	3		4.05 *		2.767		3.27				
Listening	3.31		3.25		2.884		3.15				
Grammer	5.54		4.675		5.047		5.09				
Vocabulary	4.6		3.7 *		4.488		4.26				
Pronunciation	3.11		3.2		3.256		3.19				

evaluate their skills highly, they do agree on what direction of study is required for them to improve their skills, namely practice in speaking, listening and pronunciation.

The data presented in this paper is based upon the perspectives of students and to some educators it might appear to be lacking in empirical or complex statistical correlations. Unfortunately, we need not look far to see how much improvement statistics can show English education in Japan to be in need of. For example, examinees from Japan placed a poor 162nd of the 182 countries whose students took the TOEFL test in the years 1993 to 1995 (ETS:1996). Such statistics, however, provide little direction for efforts of improvement. As researchers, we find the students' input to be a long and sorely missed piece of the education puzzle, and descriptive classroom research a practice that should be promoted.

Because of the trends in private industry via technology which are encroaching upon the previously sacred ground of our academic institutions, people are now looking at education as consumers, seeing it rather as a commodity that is in tune with the marketplace than a set of pedagogical theories. That is to say, what can be done cheaper and more efficiently in our homes with computers will likely be done less and less in our schools. The roles of teachers and what it means to learn are constantly being redefined. To provide the valuable service of education in our schools, coordination between learners and facilitators cannot go overlooked.

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## Appendix

### OUEL Study

#### Section I

下記の質問について、自信があるかどうかを教えてください。

- |                    |           |
|--------------------|-----------|
| 1. 英語で自己紹介が言える     | ( 有 / 無 ) |
| 2. 英語で基本的な質問ができる   | ( 有 / 無 ) |
| 3. 英語で書いてある地図を読める  | ( 有 / 無 ) |
| 4. 英語で対話をする        | ( 有 / 無 ) |
| 5. 英語で好きな話題について書ける | ( 有 / 無 ) |

#### Section II

英語で話したい

大変 したい	したい	すこし したい	どちら でもない	あまり したくない	したくない	まったく したくない
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英語のテレビかラジオを聞きたい

大変 したい	したい	すこし したい	どちら でもない	あまり したくない	したくない	まったく したくない
-----------	-----	------------	-------------	--------------	-------	---------------

新聞を英語で読みたい

大変 したい	したい	すこし したい	どちら でもない	あまり したくない	したくない	まったく したくない
-----------	-----	------------	-------------	--------------	-------	---------------

英語で手紙を書きたい

大変 したい	したい	すこし したい	どちら でもない	あまり したくない	したくない	まったく したくない
-----------	-----	------------	-------------	--------------	-------	---------------

英語で友達を作りたい

大変 したい	したい	すこし したい	どちら でもない	あまり したくない	したくない	まったく したくない
-----------	-----	------------	-------------	--------------	-------	---------------

英語の検定試験を受けたい

大変 したい	したい	すこし したい	どちら でもない	あまり したくない	したくない	まったく したくない
-----------	-----	------------	-------------	--------------	-------	---------------

英語が母国語の国に住みたい

大変 したい	したい	すこし したい	どちら でもない	あまり したくない	したくない	まったく したくない
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Section III

自分の英語能力について、日本語で意見を書いてください。

3 Universities Study

Section I

英語を勉強したり使う際に不安を感じますか。番号で答えて下さい。

たいへん  
感じる

10   9   8   7   6   5   4   3   2   1   0

まったく  
感じない

そう思われる理由を詳しく述べて下さい。

Section II

英語を勉強することは重要だと思いますか。番号で答えて下さい。

非常に重要

10   9   8   7   6   5   4   3   2   1   0

まったく重要  
ではない

そう思われる理由を詳しく述べて下さい。

### Section III

以下に示す七つの能力のそれぞれについて、今の自分の到達レベルを番号  
(0-10) で答えて下さい。

	ネイティブ・ スピーカー のレベル										全く初心者 のレベル									
読むこと	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0									
書くこと	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0									
話すこと	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0									
聴くこと	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0									
文法	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0									
語意	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0									
発音	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0									