

# Awareness towards Growing English Skill Needs

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我が国の英語科目の授業は、義務教育である小学校高学年に開始され、義務教育終了後も英語の学習が課せられている。これは、教育制度を通し、国民の英語能力を向上させてきた文部科学省の長い政策に基づくものである。しかし、この目標に反し、多くは大学の入学試験のための英語の学習を目的となりがちであることから、実際は、英語による自己表現が困難な状態にある。さらに、英語教師中心の授業法が多く、学生の学習意欲を重視していないのではないかと考えられる。学生の意識向上に関する研究は数多く発表されてきたが、日本の教育に特化した意識調査に関する文献は多いとは言い難い。そこで本研究では、英語学習に対する意識を、より理解するために英語教育に関する学習者の意識調査を行った。その結果、7割以上の学生が英語学習の必要性を感じていることが分かった。

キーワード: 看護学部生、意識調査、アンケート、英語学習の必要性

Abstract: In Japan, English language education begins as early as elementary school and continues until end of high school. However, students are exposed to more English in the tertiary education. The Ministry of Education (MEXT) aims students to be able to acquire enough English language knowledge to carry out daily conversations. However, in reality, students are taught grammar-heavy English that there is very minimal instances of communicative output. Through years of compulsory education, students begin to lose their interest in English language learning. In this study, 39 first year nursing students participated in an anonymous survey that aimed to look at their reasons for studying English, their purpose, and most importantly, their awareness levels towards the growing need for English skills. As a result, more than 70% of the students said that they would like to use English in their future workplaces and to be able to communicate with patients. While it was interesting to find that slightly more than 15% of the respondents were studying English for instrumental reasons such as to pass their courses, most of the students with intrinsic motivation responded that they should not only actively participate in English language learning in and outside the class but also to pass the proficiency tests.

Keywords: Nursing students, Awareness check, Survey, English language learning needs

For decades, the Ministry of Education (MEXT) has been pushing towards English competency among Japanese citizens (MEXT Website, 2011). English lessons begin as early, or as late as, the fifth grade in public elementary school ( “English Education Reform Plan corresponding to Globalization” , n.d.). Throughout the three years in junior high school and three years in senior high school, students are exposed to English at least once a week (MEXT Website, 2011). They sit through hours of grammar explanation input with very minimal communicative output. It is well known that students are taught English for one major reason: to pass the entrance exams for universities. Therefore, students spend most of their junior and senior high school days, preparing for

exams. Most of these students have difficulties expressing themselves and carrying out conversations in the English language. However, MEXT’s aim for students to achieve a level of language competency, whereby they are able to express themselves and carry out conversations in English ( “Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency” , 2011). It is true that having a foreign language skill is advantageous when applying for jobs or going abroad. Ideally, after being exposed to six to eight years of compulsory English, learners would have sufficient skills for this. However, in the real world, that is not the case. Policy makers must be aware of what they are expecting teachers and students to achieve in the given time frame (MEXT Website, 2011).

The cookie-cutter objectives that MEXT (2011) outlines in detail may be appropriate for students, however it is not the best method of approaching foreign language teaching and learning if they want students to be able to achieve communicative competency. The teacher-centered classroom approach is not the way to teach communicative skills. In fact, it has produced more *eigo-girai*, or a rejection of the English language, rather than producing more motivated students. Throughout their school career, students lose their sense of purpose for studying English. This affects their retention rate, which in turn leads to poor overall English skills. This vicious cycle has to be changed and it has to be changed from the top.

Language awareness is important because through awareness learners can become more conscious of linguistic usage, knowledge, and how to approach their language learning (van Lier, 2013: p. 161).

The purpose of this study was to investigate this awareness in English language education. Thirty-nine first-year university students participated in an anonymous survey that was designed to better understand their awareness towards English language usage and learning. While there is an abundance of research and available on consciousness-raising or awareness-raising, there is minimal literature available on awareness checking, especially in the Japanese context.

## Research Questions and Hypotheses:

Research Question 1: Are the first-year lower and middle level Nursing students aware that there is a need to study English?

This question simply aimed to check students' awareness towards the English skill needs among lower and middle level students. Due to the upcoming Tokyo Olympics in 2020 and the country's strong push towards English literacy and competency, it could be hypothesized that more than half of the respondents would feel the need to study the English language because they will possibly be looking after patients from English speaking countries or going overseas to practice their nursing skills.

Research Question 2: Do they have a purpose, other than to pass the course? Why are they studying

English and how do they plan to achieve their goals before graduating their 4-year program at the university?

This question aimed to investigate whether the students had a purpose for studying English, and a goal for using the English skills that they have acquired after their four years of university education. As a hypothesis, students are studying English because they feel that they need English for their future jobs/workplaces. Students will have the opportunity to do training abroad for a week at the end of their second year so they may feel an urgency to learn the English language.

## Methodology

### Setting

The university has six departments with Nursing being the newest one. The department began in April 2014 and is growing. Unlike many other universities, this particular Nursing Department has a unique curriculum in which students participate a week-long study and training tour in Hawaii at the end of their second academic year. The students get hands-on training using the latest medical technology and obtain an insight into the field of nursing outside of Japan through lectures and interactions with the local students. Although this program is not compulsory, students are highly encouraged to attend the study trip. In addition, when high school students apply for the department, they are made aware of this trip, which helps to differentiate the university's program from other universities.

Students are also required to complete various onsite training courses, and by the end of their fourth year are required to take the national nursing license examination.

### Participants

Thirty-nine first year students in the Nursing Department were asked to participate in the survey, which was written in Japanese. These students had studied English for an average of 8.3 years prior to their university's General English classes (Ota, 2017). Some students studied at a cram school, language school, or had some form of English language exposure outside their regular schooling. The first-year students in the Nursing Department are divided into three levels according to their English ability: high, middle, and low. There are

about 20 students in each class. They were divided using the scores of an English proficiency test known as CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communication), which they all took upon entering the university in April. Only the students in the middle and low-level classes were asked to participate in the survey.

The students have two compulsory English classes a week in their first year. They study basic grammar in one class and in the other, English that is specific to nursing (such as phrases and terminology). Although the students go to Hawaii towards the end of their second year, they do not have any English classes due to time constraints and schedule conflict with their hospital training. In their third and fourth years, students can choose to take elective communicative English courses. These classes are only a semester long, but classes meet twice a week for 90 minutes. All the information on scheduling and the required courses are made known to the students during the first-year guidance period when they begin registering for classes.

#### Survey

The survey was given near the beginning of the first semester because the purpose was to investigate the students' attitude towards the need for studying English. The survey questions were extracted from a previous study by Ota (2017). The questions were written in Japanese in order to ensure comprehension. Responses to the open-ended questions were written in Japanese, again to ensure that the respondents could convey and express their thoughts clearly. The questions were (1) Why are you studying English? (2) What is your purpose for studying English? (3) What would you like to do in the future with your English skills? (3a) What measures can you take before graduation? (3b) How would you meet this goal? (see Appendix for the survey questions written in both Japanese and English).

## Results

In both questions 1 and 2, responses were divided into four categories: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, no reason, and others. Intrinsic motivation refers to the motivation which comes from within and where learners show interest in performing various learning tasks (Ellis, 2012: p. 972). In contrast, extrinsic

motivation is the motivation that derives from a desire to achieve some instrumental outcomes (Ellis, 2012: p. 687). For example, the responses obtained for intrinsic motivation include communicating with foreign patients. An example of extrinsic motivation would be to pass the course being taken. In Graph 1 (see Appendix), 74% of the respondents stated that their reason for studying English was intrinsic and related to their fields. 17 out of 39 respondents wrote down that they wanted to help others and be able to communicate freely with foreign patients – perhaps reflecting a typical quality one might expect from responsible caretakers. 19% of the responses stated that they were studying English in order to pass the course or to get course credits. 2% responded that they had no reason for studying English, and 5% gave reasons that were intrinsic, but not related to the nursing field. These responses were categorized as 'other'.

In Graph 2 (see Appendix), students wrote down their goals for studying English. The responses were sorted to three categories: 'intrinsic motivation', 'extrinsic motivation', and 'no reason'. Here, the majority of students' goals were intrinsic (88%) and very few extrinsic (3%). A surprising 9% were in the 'no reason' category of response. The most common responses included ability to communicate, working overseas, and studying abroad in the intrinsic motivation category. It can be inferred that many nursing students not only think communication is important, but are interested in the study of nursing practices overseas.

The students who in Question 1 responded that they have no reason to study English, responded in a similar way for Question 2. It can be inferred that these students do not see a purpose or need to study English. These students may either be unaware that English might be needed in the future, or have given up on pursuing English language acquisition due to prior learning experiences.

Question 3 asked what the students would like to do in the future with their English skills. Seventeen out of the 39 responded that they would like to use English to help patients and foreigners in their future workplaces, to work as nurses overseas, or to study nursing overseas. Other responses included carrying out daily conversations with English speakers – not necessarily patients or in

their future workplaces. Three of the 39 responses were either “none” or left blank.

As a follow-up question (3a: What measures can you take before graduation?), two (of the 17 respondents that replied using English for work-related purposes in the future) responded they intend to pass an English proficiency test such as the EIKEN test supported and approved by the MEXT, and two responded that they need to understand English grammar. The remaining 13 responded that they wanted to increase their spoken fluency and listening skills. In another follow-up question (3b: How would you meet this goal?), two of the 17 did not provide any answer, while nine mentioned the need to actively study in and out of classes, and seven commented on the need to improve their speaking and listening skills. Other responses included studying and memorizing vocabulary and grammar.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Research Question 1: Are the first-year lower and middle level Nursing students aware that there is a need to study English?

As hypothesized, close to three-fourths of the responses obtained showed that students were aware that there is a need to study English in the future and the remaining 26% responded otherwise. Although this result is derived from a small sample of nurses-to-be, the students who participated in this study responded well and perhaps ideally, to MEXT’s attempts to promote English competency.

Research Question 2: Do the students have a purpose, other than to pass the course? Why are they studying English and how do they plan to achieve their goals before graduating their four-year program at the university?

Thirty-six out of the 39 respondents had a purpose for studying English. The majority of responses included reasons related to their future needs as practicing nurses in or outside of Japan. The second and third most frequent responses were to be able to communicate with foreigners and travel abroad, respectively. Thirty-five students mentioned specific ways of achieving their goals and 10 students commented on the need for daily studies.

It was interesting to see the first-year nursing

students’ perception of a growing need for awareness towards the English language skills. It could be argued that nursing students may be more responsible learners as compared to students of some other majors, in that they have clearly chosen career path. They can expect to work closely with patients and doctors and therefore their responsible nature may have influenced their responses and views towards studying English at the university level. However, it should be noted that students need to be taught how to study in order to achieve their future goals using English, since studying grammar or vocabulary alone will not necessarily lead to conversational fluency. Finally, as a concluding thought, it would be even more interesting to see how these students’ awareness changes over time and what the reasons for such changes might be.

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## Appendix

Survey questions: Questions below (in Japanese, followed by the English translations in parentheses) were printed and given to the first-year nursing students towards the beginning of their first semester.

1. 英語を勉強する理由を教えてください。

(Why are you studying English?)

2. 英語を勉強する目的を教えてください。

(What is your purpose for studying English?)

3. 将来、英語を生かして、何がしたいですか？

(What would you like to do in the future with your English skills?)

3 a. 大学を卒業するまで、「英語」の目標、勉強法などあれば、教えてください。

(What measures can you take before graduation?)

3 b. この目標を達成するため、あなたはどのような対策をしますか・していますか？

(How would you meet this goal?)

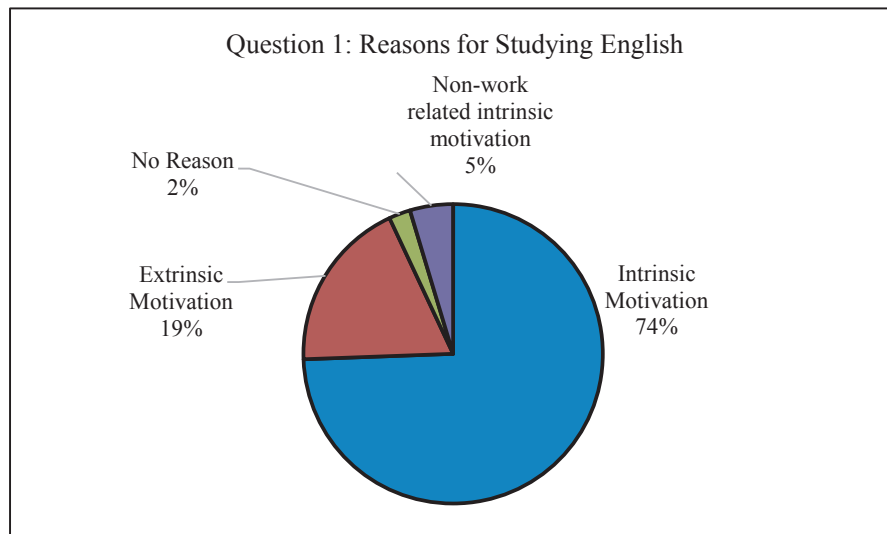


Figure 1. Student responses were separated into four categories: intrinsic motivation (relating to their future work, such as taking care of foreign patients), extrinsic motivation (such as passing the English language course), no reason, and non-work related intrinsic motivation (such as watching English language movies without Japanese subtitles). Seventy-four percent of the respondents were aware that there might be a need for English language skills in the future.

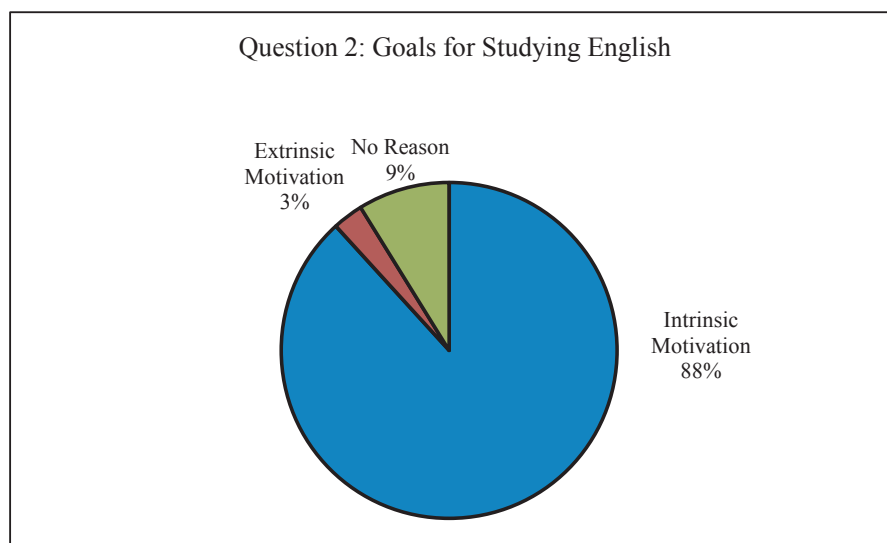


Figure 2. Student responses were categorized into three: intrinsic motivation (work-related motivation), and extrinsic motivation, and no reason.