

Student Engagement with English Language Resources at Okayama University of Science

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(Received October 31, 2022; accepted December 5, 2022)

This research aims to identify the extent to which students at this university are aware of and interested in the abundance of free English materials by which they can enjoy learning English outside of their class time and in addition, increase their exposure to the language for their professional qualifications and future lives, such as TOEIC exams. A survey was conducted to explore students' awareness of and interest in accessing these materials and the results showed that the students were largely unaware of their existence. On introduction, however, a positive attitude was recorded.

Keywords: English as a second language; student motivation; learning resources.

Study population

The questionnaire was administered to all the students in the author's classes in the autumn semester, a total study population of 114 of whom 90 (78.94%) answered the survey. These are Japanese students at Okayama University of Science who were requested to participate in this survey to obtain data in relation to their use of English language facilities. The participants are undergraduates; 84 (72.41%) freshmen; 32 (27.586%) sophomores. The students are majoring in science 58 (50.87%), engineering 41 (35.96%), and education 12 (10.52%). 85 (72.41%) of them were males, 29 (25.43%) females. None of the students majors in English. All students are required to achieve a single credit in English. The survey was administered in the first classes of the second semester. It is anticipated that by this point in the academic year, even freshmen students will have familiarised themselves with the campus and the administration of the university.

Background

This research aims to raise awareness amongst students of the resources available to them to support their English-language acquisition and to encourage them to take pleasure in these activities. In order to do this, a survey was conducted of university students in their second semester to establish their knowledge of the resources provided free of cost by the university and also the profusion of English-language media, both free and paid, available to them to access in their free time.

The purpose of the present research is to establish the extent to which students are aware of the educational options available to them, and the extent to which they engage with these resources. It is widely accepted that engagement with a second language outside the classroom contributes to successful language learning. In European countries such as Holland or Sweden, English language TV and contact with the spoken language in a natural context is a

vital element of the formation of the second language self, that is, a belief in the ability to understand and speak another language. In a single example “a recent survey by the Swedish National Agency for Education (English Here and There and Everywhere, p. 27): described how “93% of Swedish schoolchildren surveyed in the final year of compulsory school (aged 15–16 years) stated that they could understand English language radio and TV programmes very or relatively easily.” The Japanese government’s Action Plan (2002) stated that it is ‘important for all Japanese people to aim at achieving a level of English commensurate with average world standards’.

This research looked at various factors inside and outside the campus that may affect learners exposure to English and the prospect of achieving the government’s stated goal of most Japanese people speaking the language at “average world standards’. The recognition is that the traditional classroom-based, grammar-based approach has not succeeded in forming young people who are confident speakers or even consumers of English.

This Action Plan states: ‘in English classes, instruction mainly based on grammar and translation or teacher-centered classes are not recommended.’ It adds: ‘it is important for teachers to establish many situations where students can communicate with each other in English and routinely to conduct classes principally in English.’ In grades 5 and 6 of elementary school, the objective is for students:

1. ‘To experience the joy of communication in the foreign language’
2. ‘To actively listen to and speak in the foreign language’
3. ‘To learn the importance of verbal communication’¹

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Technology (MEXT) has, in recent years, put much emphasis on the importance of English in primary and secondary education settings. This is part of a series of reforms aimed at cultivating “Japanese people with English-speaking abilities” in response to the forces of globalization. From April 2020, a foreign language has become a required subject for students in the 5th and 6th grades of elementary school and such classes are being expanded into 3rd and 4th grades. At present, students are to receive one hour a week of “foreign-language activities”. In elementary school, children will be exposed to English in an enjoyable and non-academic setting, through the use of songs and games, with the intention of preparing them for a more formal approach in junior high school and beyond. The Ministry has suggested targets for students of passing the Eiken (Test in Practical English Proficiency) Grade 3 before graduating from junior high school and Grade Pre-2 by the time they graduate from senior high school. The Eiken test consists of two parts- the first is a written test which evaluates reading, writing and listening skills. If a student passes this first stage successfully, they proceed to take a speaking test in the form of a face to face interview. MEXT aims at preparing Japanese students for their future lives and sets out in a publication from 2013 how that can be achieved:

The 21st century is said to be the age of a knowledge-based society, where new knowledge, information, and technology will dramatically grow in importance as the basis for activities in politics, economy, culture, and all other fields of society. In a knowledge-based society, where competition and technological innovation constantly take place, people are required to have the ability to create new sense and value

¹ Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’, 31 March 2003, Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology), p. 23.

based on their broad knowledge and flexible thinking. Furthermore, the globalization of social structures accelerates international competition for new ideas and knowledge, as well as for qualified human resources, and also increases the necessity to seek coexistence and international cooperation among different cultures and civilization. [...]

In order to cultivate the ability to think, to make decisions, and to express themselves, which is one of the weaknesses of Japanese children, it is necessary to have them acquire basic and fundamental knowledge and skills in each subject, and at the same time, to provide them with more opportunities for language activities to utilize their acquired knowledge and skills, through such activities as observation and experiments, the preparation of reports, and dissertations.²

It is with this background that students reach their first year at university. Regardless of their major, each student is required to achieve a minimum of one credit in English. That is, one class in Basic English, 90 minutes per class per week for one semester. In addition, they are required to achieve one further credit in a third language, Chinese, Korean, French or German.

The majority of learners will have received the standard Japanese education which includes at least six years of English instruction in junior high school and senior high school. English is a required subject for the majority of university entrance examinations with the result that freshmen embarking on their university lives are expected to be at least familiar with English. The extent to which it is a required skill will vary depending on the faculty. English instructors at university level will continue to teach the four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. In this article, the focus will be on the extent to which these skills can be supplemented outside of the classroom.

Reading: There are three libraries at this university, two are specialised but the main library has a large quantity of graded readers available to the students. The benefit of extensive reading at an appropriate level in a second language has been well-researched (see Waring, 2009). However, the majority of students who participated in this research were unaware of the existence of the collection. The present author encouraged the learners to access the library in their free time, without any pressure to write a book report or in any way be assessed on what they have read. The only requirement was to show one reader to the teacher in class. Several students reported that they had heretofore not visited the library at all. The intention of this exercise was to introduce them to what is available at no cost and at considerable convenience. The students are further encouraged to make a habit of reading at least one of these readers per week.

Writing: class homework consists of two types: brief exercises done in the textbook and focusing on the vocabulary and grammar introduced in the unit studied in class time. In addition, every second assignment consists of free writing on a topic related to the textbook. Students are graded on this writing and are instructed that the more writing they produce, the higher will be the score received. Japanese learners have had few opportunities to express their ideas and feelings through English. Again, extensive writing is recognised as a powerful tool in enhancing student fluency. There are, however, few opportunities outside the classroom to exercise this skill. Highly motivated individuals seek out online friendships and language exchanges through chat functions.

² The Vision for ICT in Education – Toward the Creation of a Learning System and Schools Suitable for the 21st Century – April 28, 2011 Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

Listening: this is the skill which has the potential to convey the greatest pleasure to the learner. Focused listening is carried out in class exercises wherein audio is used for specific listening and comprehension tasks. While this is undoubtedly beneficial, it is hoped that by introducing English music into class activities, students will be encouraged to listen to music in their free time. Copyright is an issue which must be considered when using music and the instructors should familiarise themselves with the concept of “fair use”. In addition, English movie events are held on a regular basis at the university. These activities are not connected to any pedagogical requirements. The students are entirely free to join the events or not as they wish and in accordance with their schedules. Movies are chosen for their appeal to various departments at this science university and have proved very popular with students across all grades. The present writer also introduces free English learning apps of which the learners may not be aware.

Speaking: classes are of 90 minutes duration and each class will include speaking activities aimed at increasing confidence in communication activities and cover topics that will be of use in everyday real world situations. In addition, all students have access to the various speaking opportunities at the Global Centre, located in one of the central buildings of the main campus. Here, they can take part in conversation activities in small groups or, for the less confident, individual sessions. In addition, the Global Centre provides opportunities for learners to engage with their contemporaries in other countries through online exchanges. An annual English Speech Contest is also held under the auspices of the Global Centre and provides a further occasion for confidence-building through public speaking. Certificates of participation are rewarded to all who join the event and the benefit for their future careers is emphasised.

What this research sought to quantify is the degree to which the students are aware of these chances and if they are, how much have they exploited the opportunities afforded to them?

The questionnaire was administered as a Google Form, written in English and Japanese and consisted of two sections. The first section asked the students to evaluate their knowledge of the facilities provided to them on campus, that is, graded readers, Global Centre amenities and so on. The questions could be answered by multiple choice with three options:

Yes, I have taken part.

No, I haven't taken part but I would be interested in this activity.

No, I haven't taken part and I would not be interested.

The initial ten questions referred to activities run by the Global Centre. Only one of these activities is a requirement for freshmen, that is, the Freshman Orientation, which is held during the first weeks of the first semester and is intended to introduce the centre and its works. This forms part of two weeks of orientation during which students receive a dizzying amount of information on their new learning environment. For many, it will be the only point of contact with the Centre.

The second section refers to materials that can be freely accessed outside of the university and on students' phones or other devices, such as their TV, radio, apps et cetera. Many students are vaguely aware of these materials but have not in fact used them, or most of them. We will now examine the data received through the questionnaire.

Data analysis Quantitative Results

Table 1 Responses to questions relating to on-campus activities

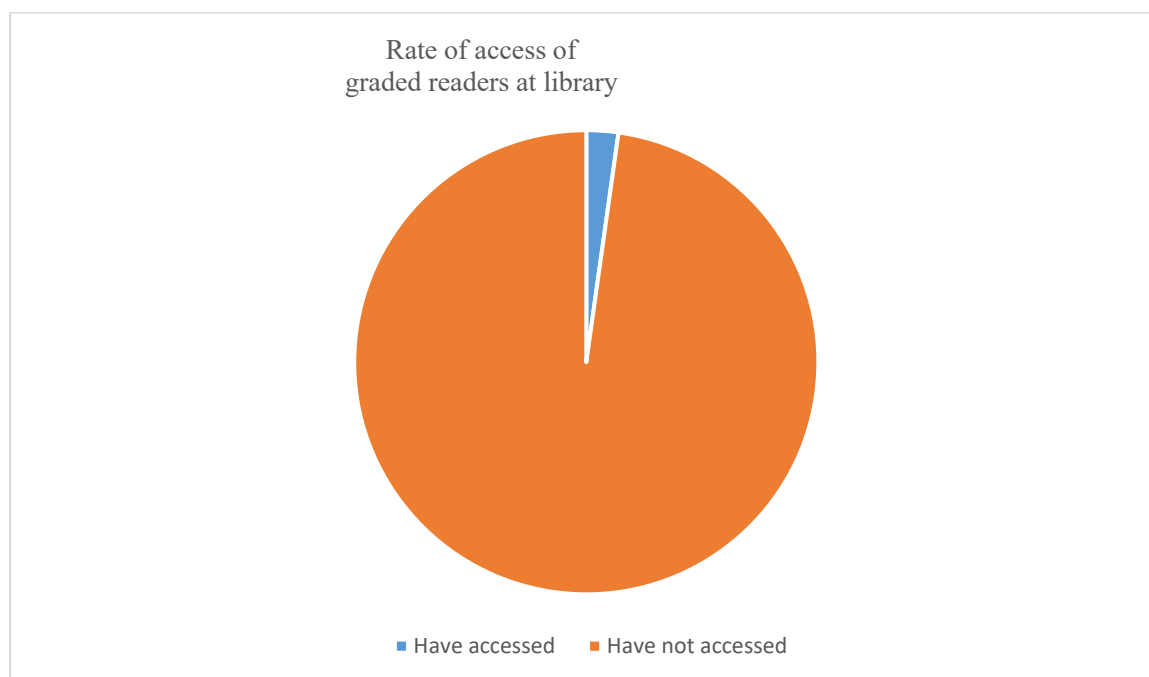
| Activity | 1. Yes, I have taken part | | 2. No, I haven't taken part but I would be interested | | 3. No, I haven't taken part and I would not be interested. | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------|-------------------------------------------------------|-------|------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Welcome Party for International Students | 0 | 0 | 48 | 53.33 | 42 | 46.66 |
| 2. Freshman Seminar (required activity in Global Center) | 83 | 92.22 | 5 | 5.55 | 2 | 2.22 |
| 3. Let's Watch a together! | 1 | 1.111 | 68 | 75.55 | 21 | 23.33 |
| 4. English party -online exchange with university in the Philippines | 0 | 0 | 54 | 60 | 36 | 40 |
| 5. Halloween party and events | 1 | 1.111 | 44 | 48.88 | 46 | 51.11 |
| 6. Ridai English Speech Contest | 1 | 1.111 | 65 | 72.22 | 24 | 26.66 |
| 7. Christmas party | 5 | 5.55 | 37 | 41.11 | 48 | 53.33 |
| 8. Lunch break English conversation time | 1 | 1.11 | 55 | 61.11 | 34 | 37.77 |
| 9. English tea time English conversation time | 1 | 1.11 | 53 | 58.88 | 36 | 40 |

It is recognised that as the target students are freshmen and the survey was conducted at the start of the autumn semester, many students will not yet have had the opportunity to take part in many of the events, for example, seasonal events that take place in the latter part of the school calendar. The second table represents the reasons students gave for non-participation in any of the above-named events. Respondents were given multiple choice options which included the option of 'other', where they were free to give their own reasons.

The most frequently cited reason for non-participation was 'I didn't know about the activities', which represented 50% of responses. This represents the crux of the situation for organisers of these events, that is, how best to disseminate the information in a form that can demonstrably reach the target audience. The majority of the information shared with learners during the academic year is sent by email and each student has his or her own college email address. The obstacle to be overcome is that the students are overwhelmed by the number of unrelated emails that they receive on a daily basis from the university. Making the information stand out from the bulk of ignored emails is a pertinent issue. The most effective method of promulgation is undoubtedly by individual teachers sharing the details of each event in a timely manner in the classroom in the form of a shared handout, preferably with QR code attached.

Table 2 Reasons for not taking part

| | N | % |
|------------------------------------|----|-------|
| I didn't know about the activities | 45 | 50 |
| I lacked confidence to join | 10 | 11.11 |
| Didn't fit in with my schedule | 10 | 11.11 |
| I wasn't interested | 8 | 8.88 |
| I was shy | 8 | 8.88 |
| Too busy | 10 | 9 |
| Other | 1 | 1.111 |

Chart 1 Question 2: Have you ever accessed the English-language graded readers at the library?

When asked if they had ever accessed the English graded readers at the college library, a mere 2.2% of students replied that they had. 97.77% (88) replied that they had never taken one of the readers out. It is the responsibility of the instructors to bring the students attention to the presence of these valuable learning materials.

A convenient and enjoyable way to access listening practice and to increase cultural awareness outside of the classroom is through watching movies. Studies have shown that watching movies is still popular amongst young Japanese people at a time when terrestrial TV watching is declining. According to a recent survey (October 14th 2022, Statista.com) the second highest group of those who watch movies in a theatre is that of 15-19 year olds at 58%. (The highest in 2021 was in the age group 20 to 24 years old, with nearly 60 percent.)

To establish the rates of movie-watching amongst the target group, they were asked about how often they watched Japanese and also English movies. They were asked to answer the questions by choosing an option on a six-point Likert Scale of Frequency.

Table 3 Question 5: How often do you watch movies in Japanese?

| | Never (0 times a year) | Rarely (a few times a year) | Not much (a few times a month) | Sometimes (about 3 times a week) | Often (about 5 times a week) | All the time (about every day) |
|--------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Number | 0 | 36 | 48 | 5 | 1 | 0 |
| % | 0 | 40% | 53.33% | 5.55% | 1.11% | 0 |

Table 4 Question 6: How often do you watch movies in English?

| | Never (0 times a year) | Rarely (a few times a year) | Not much (a few times a month) | Sometimes (about 3 times a week) | Often (about 5 times a week) | All the time (about every day) |
|--------|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Number | 19 | 42 | 25 | 1 | 3 | 0 |
| % | 21.11% | 46.66% | 27.77% | 1.111% | 3.33% | 0 |

The responses suggest that movie-watching as a whole is not a frequent pastime of the students at this university. A comparison between the rates of viewing demonstrates a lack of enthusiasm in regard to English-language movies amongst our students. 61% responded that they rarely or never watched an English-language movie while 36% rarely or never watched a Japanese-language one. An English-movie watching group has been established by the author with the aim of introducing both popular and lesser-known movie titles and thereby to spark an interest in further viewing in the learners’ free time. An interesting line of enquiry may be a comparison between time spent playing video games and watching TV or movies.

Table 5 Use of free online English-learning apps

| Number of students who have used the material | N |
|-----------------------------------------------|----|
| Duolingo | 22 |
| Quizlet (flashcards) | 7 |
| Exam Lift (ケンブリッジ英語検定で練習する) | 0 |
| Hello Talk | 4 |
| ELSA (IELTS/TOEFL/TOEIC practice) | 0 |
| MOOC e.g. “TOEIC®テスト 600 点突破” | 0 |
| Not applicable. /None of the above. | 57 |

Duolingo, a free language-learning app, is well-established amongst students and 22 participants, or 24.44% claim to be using or have used this app. The present author encourages students to use Quizlet to memorise new vocabulary which may explain the 7 students (7.77%) who report that they are using that app. A small number of 4 (4.44%) use Hello Talk. The majority chose the 'None of the above' option, 57 or 63.33%. Although most students will take TOEFL or TOEIC tests when they commence job-hunting activities in their senior year, none of the participants were aware of or using the apps designed to improve their test scores. Again, the students had not known of the existence of such apps before they participated in the survey.

Future Directions

The data compiled in this survey revealed a low level of engagement with the abundance of English language materials and opportunities to use the language outside of the classroom. The next step in research will be a follow-up questionnaire at the end of the semester to establish the extent to which, once made aware of these opportunities, students take advantage of them. The present survey was conducted amongst the author's classes only. It is clear that all students of English would benefit from expanding their familiarity with these resources. Therefore, the intention is that in coming years, the survey will be conducted at the beginning and end of each course. In addition, it would be useful to expand the subject population by sharing the survey with all English instructors to then spread the information amongst their students.

Conclusion

Through the data collected herein, it was found that there was a low rate of knowledge of the available facilities for English-learning amongst freshmen students. The results of this research clearly demonstrate that the overriding reason for student lack of engagement is a shortage of information about the excellent resources provided. Counteracting this lack of information is a relatively straightforward task that can be undertaken with little extra endeavour by instructors. This survey may be a first step in the right direction, encouraging teachers and assisting learners to explore further opportunities to create a positive learning environment. Foreign language facilities are both an underappreciated and yet vital resource.

There are many challenges facing instructors of English in the present era. Covid-19 has nearly stopped travel abroad and no study abroad programmes are being conducted at this university in 2022. The popularity of other Asian cultures such as China and Korea has reduced the number of young Japanese who consider English to be their first choice when focusing on learning a second language. The rise of K-pop and K-drama may have had a deleterious effect on English popular culture in this country.

The onus is on the instructor to present the language as both interesting and enjoyable and to counteract possible negative impressions that may have resulted from the entrance exam focus on grammar. English instruction will be greatly advanced if students can engage with material in the target language outside the classroom and the curriculum. By providing class plans and materials utilising such material, instructors can increase student engagement. Dissemination of information on what facilities are available, both on campus and online, will facilitate student awareness of the many opportunities open to them to become successful communicators in their university and future lives.

It is the hope of the present author that by drawing the attention of students to the many and varied opportunities available at their university and beyond, they will be inspired to exploit these to their lasting benefit and contribute towards achieving the ambitions enunciated by the Japanese Ministry of Education over several decades; while at the same time, contributing to their self-confidence in the use of English in their future lives and careers.

It is recommended that each instructor involved in the teaching of English at this university engages with these approaches that serve to connect classroom language activities with the pleasure of learning a language, improving communication skills and expanding one's horizons. In this way, the aims of the Ministry for Education set out for elementary school learners, that is, to 'experience the joy of communication in the foreign language' and 'to actively listen to and speak in the foreign language'³ may be realised. This is the method by which students can be supported in the construction of their second language selves in an informal, non-structured manner, not assessed, but enjoyed as a valuable aspect of their university life.

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³ The Vision for ICT in Education – Toward the Creation of a Learning System and Schools Suitable for the 21st Century (2011)