

English as Common Business Language: Current Situations in Japan

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English as Global Common Language

- English has grown into the single most important business language
- Companies must use English in order to compete globally

English as Business Lingua Franca (BELF)

- English is now considered as the single most important business language
- Major MNCs (multinational corporations) including some Japanese companies are now using English as their official language. (Rogerson-Revell, 2007, Neeley 2011)

Language Barriers

- Language remains the ultimate barrier to global coordination to maintain competitive advantage
- Multinational corporations need better language management.
- Effective language management is a key to manage globalized operations for companies

Cultural Difference and Trust Building difficulties

- Studies reporting intercultural communication problems between employees from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005) and difficulties in trust building among employees from different backgrounds (Tenzer, Pudelko, & Harzing, 2014)

English as Corporate Common Language

- May provide many benefits to MNCs. (Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999a and Piekkari et al. 2014)
- Companies can seek the best talents globally.
- Synergy created within the whole group with English as a common communication tool.
- Enable much faster access to worldwide information, and it helps mitigate the ethnocentrism among Japanese employees.
- Positive impacts such as broadening their views. (Mikitani 2013) as well as NEGATIVE impacts

Status Loss & Status Gain

- Studies found sense of loss of status and competitive advantage in evaluations among non-native speakers of the dominant language within the company (Neeley, 2013; Sliwa & Johansson, 2014).
- Sense of uneasiness felt among the employees who are native speakers of English because the status-gain was unearned (Neeley & Dumas, 2016).

ELF(English as a Lingua Franca) /BELF (English as Business LF)

ELF is used among 'speakers from different first languages', often when it is 'the only option' (Jenkins 2009, Seidlhofer 2011, Widdowson 2013)

While these studies have investigated European and American contexts, very few have examined Japanese contexts.

Purpose: qualitative investigation to delineate the current situation of English language use in business in Japan.

Research Question

- How pervasive is the use of English in the business world in Japan? (How and where is English used in the workplaces in Japan?)
- What is the general view on using English among Japanese business professionals?
- Are there any disadvantages or negative feelings they feel about being non-native speakers of English?

Methodology

Interviews → Selected 12 participants who are bilingual business professionals with experiences of working in the business environments where English is used for communication, using my own business network to search the participants.

Findings

The interviews have revealed that English is now required for businesses in various types of corporations, across many different industries, regardless of the sizes of organizations,

English as corporate official language: All respondents think it will be inevitable over the long run. It is not possible now given the generally low level of English proficiencies. They all mentioned the need to improve English education

US Firms in Japan	European & Asian Firms in Japan	Japanese Firms
English as Native Lang.	English as Lingua Franca	English as Foreign Lang.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Native-like fluency desired. Frustrated in small talks Non-native speakers feel disadvantage <p>Investment management firm Management Consulting Pharmaceutical</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> English is required in not Mostly remote communication via E-mail & Tele-conf. Being non-native is not disadvantage <p>Investment fund owned by Chinese European Insurance company</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TOEIC requirement Non-Japanese board members require meetings in English Use English to communicate with foreign subsidiaries English is required in not only international dept but also factories because of global manufacturing network. <p>Food & Beverage Pharmaceutical Law firm</p>

Limitations & Further studies

- Need more data.
- Bilingualism and multilingualism seem more desirable than the English-only mandate as in corporations.
- Mandating an English-only policy, as in Rakuten, may mean replacing the Japanese monolingualism with another monolingualism.
- Further study → the diversification policies of JP firms in terms of language and culture in the globalized business world.

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