
Poster Presentation

English as Common Business Language: The Current Situations in Japanese Corporations

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The study explores the status of English use in businesses in Japan using an inductive approach to find out how English is being used in corporations in Japan. Many multinational corporations are using English as their official or common language. Non-Anglophone companies in Europe, as well as companies in Japan such as Rakuten, UNIQLO, and Nissan, are reported to be using English as their corporate official or common language. To find out the impacts and implications of the use of English for international communication in Japan in much broader perspectives, I interviewed Japanese bilingual professionals who use English for their daily business. Interviews were conducted on nine Japanese bilingual professionals who use English for their daily business, searching for potential patterns or characteristics, with the aim of inducing and generating a hypothesis (or hypotheses) in the end. The interviews revealed that English is now required in various types of corporations in Japan, across many different industries, regardless of sizes of organizations, and country of origin. The Japanese companies that try to implement English as their official language policy tend to be unaware of the bilingual aspects of the language policy in practice, overly emphasizing on improving the proficiency of English.

The language barrier is becoming a major issue in international business. There have been studies reporting intercultural communication problems between employees from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Harzing & Feely, 2008; Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005) and difficulties in trust building among employees from diverse cultural backgrounds (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Tenzer, Pudelko, & Harzing, 2013). Using English as a common corporate language is considered to be the best solution for the problem, and

multinational corporations are mandating English as their official language (Rogerson-Revell, 2007). Non-Anglophone companies such as Philips, Nokia, SAP in Europe, as well as Rakuten, UNIQLO, Nissan, and Honda in Japan, are reported to be using English as their corporate official or common language (Neeley, 2012).

Corporations such as Rakuten in Japan have implemented English-only policy and claim the benefits of implementing an English-official language policy. The companies argue that after the policy was enacted they can seek the best talents globally. Also, they say that the language policy has created synergy within the whole group with English as a common communication tool, enabling much faster access to worldwide information, and it helps mitigate the ethnocentrism among Japanese employees (Mikitani, 2013; Neeley, 2011). A Japanese employee of one of the companies that has implemented English as an official corporate language told me that he feels there have been positive impacts such as broadening their views.

However, several adverse effects of company-wide language policies have also been noted recently. Above all, there is an issue of status loss and gain. Studies such as Neeley (2013) and Śliwa and Johansson (2014) have found a sense of loss of status and competitive advantage among non-native speakers of the dominant language within the company. They may resent the language policy, fearing that they will never be as sophisticated, influential, or articulate as they are in their native language. On the other hand, the native speakers of a Japanese company that had mandated English as their official corporate language felt a sense of unease because the status-gain was unearned (Neeley & Dumas, 2016).

Japanese companies consider the ability to communicate in English is one of the most valuable skills for their employees to possess. According to the survey conducted by The Institute for International Business Communication in 2013, three fourths of 304 Tokyo Stock Exchange-listed Japanese companies that responded to the survey said they are using English in their work (Table 1). Some (15.8%) consider the TOEIC scores as the indicators of employees' English proficiency and use or plan to use the scores for promotion. Also, increasing numbers of Japanese companies are setting certain levels of TOEIC scores for

Table 1
English Use in Business (n = 304)

Usage	Percent of companies
There are departments/divisions that use English	45.7%
No specific depts or divisions, but use English for conducting business	29.3%
Do not use English at all	24.7%
No answer	0.3%

Source: 国際ビジネスコミュニケーション協会 IIBC (The Institute for International Business Communication) 2013年 IIBC「上場企業における英語活用実態調査」報告書 2013 IIBC “Report on Actual State of English Utilization in Listed Companies” Report

recruiting new employees, and the required scores have risen compared to the previous survey in 2011. The expected TOEIC scores are 565 on average for new graduates and 710 on average for mid-career hires, rising from 550 points and 600 points, respectively, in the 2011 survey.

The aim of the present study is to explore some of the current situations and issues surrounding the use of English for international business communication in Japan in a broader perspective.

Research Questions

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

Methodology and Participants

The present study is based on interviews with 12 Japanese bilingual professionals who use English for their daily business. The study is based on a framework of qualitative and inductive approach. The data was collected through interviews, using semi-structured and open-ended interview questions, asking the participants about their unique experience, and their opinion and feeling about

using English as common or official language (Appendix A).

Using my business network to search for participants, I selected people who are bilingual business professionals with experience of working in the business environments where English is used for communication.

E-mails were sent to the prospective participants asking whether they would be interested in participating in the study. The E-mail exchange included the explanation of the purpose and nature of the research. Each participant was contacted, and a convenient location and time were determined for the interview. The participants chose the language for the interview; English or Japanese, whichever they felt comfortable to express their feelings or opinions. Some participants may be sensitive to disclosing their feelings and opinions about the company language policy, and the disclosure would result in a loss of their credibility and reputation. Therefore, each interview was conducted in an environment where a participant could feel relaxed: some participants were interviewed outside the office after work, while the majority preferred the meeting rooms of their offices. Each interview took approximately one hour on average. Prior to the interview, each participant was asked to sign a consent form.

The participants work in various working environments: a global consulting firm, a subsidiary of a large U.S. company initially founded as a joint venture with a Japanese company, a major Japanese pharmaceutical company, a Japanese mid-sized law firm, the venture capital arm of a Japanese technology company, a Japanese real estate investment fund, a national medical research institute, a subsidiary of a Spanish re-insurance firm, and a Japanese e-commerce company. The levels and degrees of English use vary among the organizations. See Appendix B for a profile on each person.

Results

English is now required in various types of corporations, across many different industries, regardless of size of organization and country of origin. A breakdown of the usage and feelings toward English is shown in Table 2 for the participants in this study. Participant companies were divided into three categories: American companies in Japan, European and Asian companies in Japan, and Japanese companies.

Table 2

Summary of Findings

U.S. Firms in Japan (English as Native Lang.)	Europ. & Asian Firms in Japan (English as Lingua Franca)	Japanese Firms (English as Foreign Lang.)
Native-like fluency desired.	English is not required for day-to-day business	TOEIC requirement
Frustrated in small talks	Mostly remote communication via E-mail & Tele-conf.	Non-Japanese board members require meetings in English
Non-native speakers feel disadvantage	Being non-native is not disadvantage	Use English to communicate with foreign subsidiaries English required in international dept. and factories because of global manufacturing network
Examples: Investment management firm Management Consulting Pharmaceutical	Examples: Investment fund owned by Chinese European Insurance company	Examples: Food & Beverage Pharmaceutical Law firm

Research question 1 asked how and where English is used in the participants' workplaces in Japan. The case described by Participant 3 indicates that even the employees of a Japanese company where English is not used for daily business are now required to use English to provide services to their Japanese clients who have close ties to medical communities overseas. Participant 4, a lawyer who provides legal services to Japanese corporations, must negotiate and prepare documents in English using legal expertise he acquired in the law school in the US. Finally, it was indicated by the interview findings that as an employee progresses in his/her career path, English becomes more important. Increasing numbers of Japanese companies have begun to appoint non-Japanese board members. Therefore, as a person goes up the career ladder, the need to be proficient in English becomes greater.

As for research question 2 (disadvantages or negative feelings), some of the respondents working in the U.S. firms said that they do not feel disadvantages as

non-native speakers of English in their business, except for small talk: not being able to participate in the high pace of casual conversations. They fear that they may be missing out on valuable information or opportunities to build a stronger relationship with the management because they feel excluded from the “small talking” corporate insider network.

In U.S. companies in Japan, native-like English proficiency is often required, and the top of the operation of the business is often either a native-speaker or a near-native speaker of English. However, from the perspective of Japanese employees, they are not necessarily equipped with high levels of expertise and knowledge of business expected for the position. There are cases where dissatisfaction and frustrations were felt in the narratives of the participants who work in such an environment. They expressed that they are not appreciated by their efforts and the business performance they had achieved. They indicated the feeling that being non-native speakers of English is disadvantageous for their promotion.

Regarding research question 3 (general view on using English), the responses about English as corporate official language are most relevant. 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 to accomplish this.

Conclusion and Further Studies

The purpose of this study was to uncover and analyze the ways in which English is used for business purposes in Japan. However, although the study provides interesting insights as to how English is used as a common business language, it is not possible to present conclusions through generalization due to the limited data collected at this stage. The study is ongoing and has not been completed yet. Presently more data is being collected through interviews and questionnaires.

Also, to propose better corporate language policies and strategies to multinational corporation management, further studies will be needed to explore and analyze the diversification policies of Japanese firms in terms of languages and cultures, since many of them operate outside Japan in the countries where many

different languages are spoken, and where English is not used as a native language.

Most of the participants in this study are vocal about the English-only corporate language policy, such as the one reportedly implemented in Rakuten Co. Although both English and Japanese are used in all of the organizations they presently work, they did not mention about the bilingualism practiced in their organization. Since the organizations and companies where they work for operate globally in different countries where local languages are used along with English as a common business language, bilingualism and/or multilingualism need more attention. For example, the English-only mandate implemented in Rakuten meant replacing the Japanese mono-lingualism with another English mono-lingualism and did not incorporate Japanese language and expertise or knowledge transferred within the Japanese speaking business culture in the company into the language policy, as well as other languages used in their international locations.

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Author bio

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

General Questions

1. Demographic Information (age, gender, nationality, languages spoken, etc.)
2. Educational Background
3. Profession
4. Living Experience abroad: Countries, Years, Age, Purpose
5. How many languages do you speak?
6. What do you think about the corporate policy to mandate English as the official language?
7. Tell me anything related to the above.
8. Do/did you use English at work?
9. What do you think about the ways in which English is used in your work place?
10. Do you use English in meetings?
11. Do you write E-mails in English?
12. Do you write memos/reports in English?
13. Do you use English in telephone conversations?
14. Do you use English in teleconferencing?
15. Do you use English to communicate with your colleagues?
16. Do you use English to communicate with your clients?
17. Who do you speak English with the most?
18. Tell me anything you think about the use of English in your business.
19. Do you feel any disadvantages in your business because you are not a native speaker of English?
20. Do you think it is fair to recruit or promote employees based on their abilities to communicate in English?
21. Do you think it is good for business to recruit or promote employees based their abilities to communicate in English?
22. Tell me any thing related to the above.
23. What do you think about how English is used in Japan in general?
24. Is there anything that should be improved in terms of using English in Japan?
25. If so, what is the best or better way(s) to improve it/them?
26. Please let me know anything related to the above questions.

Appendix B

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Age	46	49	55
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Education	BA (ICU/Japan) MBA(Northwestern)	BA (Waseda), MA (Iowa), MBA(Northwestern)	BA (Waseda), MA (Illinois), MBA(Northwestern)
Profession	Human Resource	Strategic planning	Compliance
Years Living Abroad	6	4	11
Industry	Consulting	Pharmaceutical	Pharmaceutical
	Participant 4	Participant 5	Participant 6
Age	42	48	43
Gender	Male	Male	Male
Education	LLB (Univ. of Tokyo) LLM (UC Berkeley)	BA (Waseda) MBA(Northwestern)	BA (Univ. of Tokyo) MBA (Northwestern/ HUST)
Profession	Attorney	Investment Specialist	CFO (Finance)
Years Living Abroad	9	2	3
Industry	Legal	Venture Capital	Real Estate Investment
	Participant 7	Participant 8	Participant 9
Age	53	51	43
Gender	Male	Female	Male
Education	BS (UC Berkeley)	BA (Aoyama Gakuin)	BA (Waseda)
Profession	Operation Consultant	Finance Manager	HR Manager
Years Living Abroad	20	13	None
Industry	National Research Institute	Insurance (Reinsurance)	e-commerce
	Participant 10	Participant 11	Participant 12
Age	43	mid 50's	mid 50's
Gender	Female	Male	Male
Education	BA (U of Tokyo) MBA (Northwestern)	BA(Kyushu U) MBA(Northwestern)	BA(Waseda), CFA
Profession	Consultant	Regional (Asia) Director	Regional Director
Years Living Abroad	2	20	3
Industry	Management Consulting	Pharmaceutical	Investment Management