

A View of Current Student Attitudes Toward the Study of English in Japanese Colleges

Emie ISHIGE

As social values slowly but surely change in this turning of the century, I believe that greater attention must be focused on questions of attitudes and aptitudes, individual interests and the motivations of students of English in Japan. Although final grades supposedly inform language teachers of the level reached by students in their courses, many teachers still retain the misconception that high or low marks are evidence of efficient or non-efficient teaching and successful or unsuccessful learning. Do marks also tell us whether the students' interests and needs are being met or not? Especially in recent years, teachers, including myself, have noticed considerable changes in students' attitudes toward learning. In order to gain a more realistic view of present student attitudes in Japanese colleges, several surveys have been conducted of this subject. I will spotlight in this paper some major findings of this investigation with junior college and four-year college students. Different attitudes—student attitudes, attitudes of teachers, parents, school administrators and the community in which students of English find themselves were considered in this study.

Assessing the students' beliefs, attitudes and their evaluation of their classes, I was able to understand better many factors which influence these recent changes in attitude. Three questionnaires were given to 430 students (350 females and 80 males). The subjects included 290 first- and second-year English majors at a women's junior college, and 140 freshman non-English majors at a co-educational university, of which 50 were law majors, 50 were education majors and 40 who had various other majors.

EXAMINING STUDENT BELIEFS

Tumposky (1991) states that learners' beliefs can influence both their attitude toward a particular language as well as to the study of language in general. What is then a belief? *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines belief as "conviction of the truth of some statement or the reality of some being or phenomenon especially when based on an examination of the grounds for accepting it as true or real." The belief systems of students cover a wide range of issues which can, undoubtedly, influence their motivation to learn the English language, their perceptions about the language, their expectations about language learning, as well as the teaching approaches they consider to be effective (Richards and Lockhart 1994). Based on these premises, a questionnaire, adapted from Richards and Lockhart (1994), was devised and administered in Japanese

to the subject students.

The following is a selection of comments written by the students who completed the questionnaire about language students' beliefs. The answers were translated into English.

1. Beliefs about the study of the English language
 - a. English is an international language. That's why I am learning it.
2. Beliefs about native speakers of English
 - a. British people are sometimes too polite to friends. Their behavior makes me feel uncomfortable.
 - b. Americans are very casual. That's why I want to make friends with them and practice English.
3. Beliefs about the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in English
 - a. If I know a lot of slang and idioms, I will be able to understand what actors and actresses say in the movies.
 - b. I am not interested in learning how to write an essay in English. I want to learn more practical things.
4. Beliefs about teaching English
 - a. Some teachers don't use a textbook. They teach something different every class and I can't follow what they are doing; neither can I understand what they are trying to teach us.
5. Beliefs about learning English
 - a. The best way to learn English is to stay in an English-speaking country for some time.
6. Beliefs about classroom behavior
 - a. It is OK to help another student when the teacher asks a question and the student can't answer.
7. Beliefs about yourself
 - a. I feel very uncomfortable when speaking to a native speaker.
 - b. I think I am good at memorizing words.
8. Beliefs about your goals for learning English
 - a. In order to become a cosmopolitan individual, I have to be able to speak English.
 - b. I want to visit foreign countries.
 - c. I want to get a good job with a major company.

Many of these opinions are little more than stereotyping. Beliefs students have about native speakers of English may be the results of cross-cultural differences. Students' beliefs about teaching and learning, their undervaluing of classroom activities or homework assignments must shock teachers who have high academic expectations. The process by which a language is learned by students in one culture may be discouraged by a teacher from another culture. In this way, a teacher's approach and deep-seeded cultural and classroom values may clash with those of students whose equally ingrained and varied beliefs, values and attitudes influence heavily how they approach the classroom learning process.

CONSIDERING ATTITUDES

What is then an attitude?

Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines attitude as "a persistent disposition to act either positively or negatively toward a person, group, object, situation, or value." Attitudes, like other aspects, develop early in childhood. Can they not therefore be changed? How can we change them to become more favorable toward the study of language? Do the teachers' attitudes have to be changed as well?

1. STUDENT ATTITUDES

A. Students' Attitudes from a Motivational and Interest Point of View

The subject students were given a second questionnaire in Japanese with 20 questions and they had to decide whether they (A) strongly agree, (B) agree, (C) have no opinion, (D) disagree or (E) strongly disagree, and check the appropriate box. The original questions and the results are shown as percentages.

QUESTIONNAIRE - Student Attitudes

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Have no opinion (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
1. It is a waste of time to study English.	2	5	15	68	10
2. I enjoy studying English.	12	47	20	17	4
3. I think I've done well in English since junior high school.	0	23	64	13	0
4. I want to be able to understand in English what English speakers think about several matters.	14	50	30	6	0
5. After studying English for six years, in junior and senior high school, I discovered that Japanese culture is not as advanced as English and American cultures.	0	4	37	51	8
6. I can have an accurate understanding of American, British, and other English cultures through the Japanese language. I don't need to know English well.	0	48	28	21	3
7. I don't see the need to learn English or a foreign language well if I have to live or work in a foreign country only temporarily.	1	8	24	63	4
8. If I want to speak English well, I just need to stay in an English-speaking country for a year.	0	0	24	63	13

	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Have no opinion (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
9. I will never be able to speak English well if I don't live in an English-speaking country.	0	29	36	31	4
10. A Japanese will never have a native, English-like pronunciation if he/she does not live in an English-speaking country for some time.	4	13	40	40	3
11. I wish I could speak another foreign language besides English.	3	63	21	13	0
12. The study of English and other foreign languages is more important than studying mathematics and physics.	0	40	38	16	6
13. Traveling to English-speaking countries is very high on the list of things I want to do in the future.	0	76	12	12	0
14. If I know English, it will be useful in getting a good job.	7	54	37	2	0
15. Knowing at least one foreign language well, especially English, earns a person some social recognition.	6	63	29	2	0
16. An intelligent and educated person who cannot speak English or a foreign language suffers bias in society.	0	31	41	28	0
17. Most Japanese will not be able to understand the true feelings and thoughts of westerners because of basic cultural differences.	13	39	36	9	3
18. As I don't like Japanese music, I want to be able to understand the words of English songs.	0	9	23	68	0
19. I want to be able to speak English well to make foreign friends, especially from English-speaking countries.	1	11	34	36	18
20. I'm taking English classes only to meet college requirements.	6	11	12	69	2

Note: The questions were not organized into similar topics to make the students comfortable, with the hope to get their honest feelings.

The outcome of this questionnaire shows wide variety in individual attitudes which is

probably the result of family socialization, events in the subject's past, reasons and results of emotional strivings, individual and family education, family income, parents' occupations, family social life, peer-group influence, mass media, housing conditions, religion, and basic personal variables including intelligence, age, sex, interests, and aptitudes, and a host of other sources.

B. Students' Classroom Attitudes from the Teachers' Eyes

Assessing my own students' attitudes, I observed certain common classroom attitudes. Wishing to have my suppositions confirmed or denied, I interviewed eight English teachers, four Japanese, two foreign and two native English speaking teachers. The following are impressions and comments gathered in this survey.

1. Behavior

It used to be a normal reaction of the students to stop talking when the teacher entered the classroom. But the teacher's arrival is often ignored now. Teachers have to ask for silence to check attendance. This attitude has become quite common in classrooms with only female students, both male and female students, and even in male predominant groups. Teachers known to be strict also encounter difficulties handling this type of situation. Teachers who have been trying to encourage students to discuss their opinions in groups are now facing the problem of not being able to control this activity properly. It has become difficult to check whether they are really involved in the assigned task, as many students are caught chattering in Japanese when the teachers come to talk to them in the classroom rounds. Could this type of attitude be the result of difficulty in concentration or a lack of responsibility for learning with psychological explanations caused by social influences?

2. Attendance

The number of students with frequent absences has increased in the last two years. Chattering has been a common, but not serious problem. Poor attendance, however, is now a topic for conversation and discussion among the teaching staff. Together with absences, tardiness has also increased in frequency.

3. Homework

Until two or three years ago, students used to come to class prepared with their homework assignments done. Students seemed to feel the obligation to do so. But recently, more students are not fulfilling this requirement. Although teachers strongly call students' attention to this serious matter, few efforts to correct this wrongdoing are seen. Rather, more disobedient behavior has been observed. Unless teachers make the rules about homework very clear, emphasize the consequences of failure in this regard, and consistently enforce these rules and appropriate punishment, students will continue to ignore these warnings and their obligations as students to do homework.

4. Eagerness to learn

Eagerness to learn, taking notes, checking the meaning of unknown words that are written on the board while the teacher is lecturing, or giving a supplementary explanation are fading away. Frequently teachers have to urge the students to open their dictionaries and check, for example, how a word introduced in the lesson is used. In the past, teachers did not have to alert the students so often to do on-the-spot research. It used to be only a once-in-a-while caution.

5. Participation

Student class participation has always been a problem in Japan. Although Japanese students are known to be culturally very quiet in class, until recent years, in the second semester of a course for freshman pupils, there was more active participation. We could see more students raise their hands and volunteer to make a short individual, pair or group presentation. Second-year students in junior colleges have lost a lot of the enthusiasm they used to have in class activities as they had become more confident in their English abilities and felt comfortable with college life. Course drop-outs, which were few in Japan, have increased. When students find their graduation pre-requisites are met, a lot drop out of the course.

This summary of observations and comments collected from interviewed teachers, including my own, point out deteriorating attitudes. These poor attitudes are observed in a number of students. It is a relief, though, to know that diligent and motivated learners still exist and will continue to be present in every class.

2. TEACHER ATTITUDES

A. Teacher Attitudes Regarding English Learning and Teaching

It is true that learning cannot be done if the learner does not accept the linguistic goals set by the teachers and school administrators, no matter how exacting they may be. In order to understand what functions as the basis of programs when teachers and administrators design them, we can't fail to study the Japanese and foreign English teachers' attitudes and assumptions regarding English learning and teaching. Here are the most relevant answers and comments collected.

1. *On Vocabulary, Grammar and Structures*

- a. A prerequisite to develop second language communication skills is to master its basic grammar.
- b. Since English language structure differs from the Japanese, it is advisable that time is reserved every class for repetition (single/paired and small group) and for habituation drills (substitution, transformation or a combination of substitution-transformation), especially when basic structures are being introduced. While this activity should be done extensively, it should not take more than one third of the class period. Forming a new language habit is necessary.

2. *On Oral Production*

- a. A very simple explanation of the English sound system should be given in the first phase of English language learning. At the beginning of the first phase, only the sounds that cause problems to the Japanese students should be treated separately. Every time they appear in the materials being taught, a brief explanation on how the sound is produced, followed by choral and a couple of individual repetitions would be sufficient. Extensive theoretical explanation of the English sound system would only confuse the students.
- b. Taped and video-taped lessons are excellent models for oral exercises. They also attract student interest.
- c. Dialog practice combined with memorization is an effective technique in the process of developing and firming the language.
- d. When teaching or practicing English sounds that Japanese students find difficult, contrasting minimal pairs has shown to be effective.
- e. If the school has a language lab, it is effective to use it more than once a week. For an average learner, repetitive practice of the same material has shown to be very productive.
- f. Listening and speaking practice of any new material should precede reading and writing.
- g. Constant correction of pronunciation or grammatical mistakes during group oral activities should be avoided. This distracts the student's attention and very often embarrasses the learner. For some sensitive students, it hurts their individual pride in front of others.
- h. From the early stages of language learning, teachers should program simple activities to develop conversation skills. These are beneficial and effective if done every class. These activities should not require long preparation, so as not to burden the teacher's workload. The same activity can be done throughout the year or for one whole semester. Again, the habit of speaking and listening in English should be formed, not bothering about language accuracy.

3. *On Teaching (Materials, Strategies, Approaches)*

- a. The students' motivation to continue English language study is very often directly related to how successful they are in actually being able to use spoken language. Therefore, simple and natural language phrases should be taught and practiced in dialogs simulating real-life situations, and short written passages with contents of interest to the students would be the materials for discussions in later learning stages.
- b. Proficiency goals based on sophisticated theories and approaches, which especially attract scholars, are many times set for high school and college students. In most applied cases they have proved to be unrealistic. The gap between theory and practice seems to be wider now.
- c. Oral competence should be more strongly emphasized from the first year of junior

high school in present English language programs in Japan.

- d. Although pattern practice is criticized by many teachers and scholars as “old-fashioned” and mechanical, it still has a great following among teachers, even in the younger group, who have experienced its effectiveness in actual lessons.
- e. Should there be room for games in the class? Games can be part of a yearly curriculum, but how frequent they are played should be carefully considered.

4. *On Cultural Insights*

- a. In every possible instance, the cultural aspects of English-speaking people should be introduced in teaching materials. Knowing the Japanese language and the students' culture would make the teacher's observation on the cultural point modeled or alluded to in the lesson more effective, real and interesting.
- b. The introduction of cultural materials should not be limited to differences. It is important that we do not make the students forget that people all over the world share many similar feelings, values and customs, although their ways of expression may differ.
- c. If a teacher is familiar with a student's culture, a more correct selection of cultural materials can be done, increasing the student's motivation to practice and speak the language.

5. *Considerations on Psychological and Related Aspects*

- a. There are both students who do not have to struggle to speak English and those who encounter great difficulties even to construct a simple message. It is more comfortable for the teacher to assist and talk to those who speak well. Teachers should, instead, approach those who speak poorly and gradually allay their fear and reluctance to communicate in English. Although it is tiring work and requires a lot of patience, many teachers have reported success in this approach.
- b. Teachers who teach three or four basic skills to the same students in different classes often notice students who do not speak well but write well or vice-versa. Balanced achievement in all four skills is difficult for some students. These teachers will then have to analyze the student's ability and possibilities of development in each skill, and instruct accordingly. Support is welcome but excessive attention with constant corrections may, depending on the student's nature and innate ability, result in the pupil's exhaustion and frustration.
- c. Generally, for a successful language learning, one should start to study English at an early age and continue until mastery is achieved.
- d. Before going to study in an English-speaking country, students should be linguistically and psychologically prepared to survive in the country to make the most of their stay abroad. Thousands of Japanese students return from one, two or three-year stay in English-speaking countries still unable to use correct English. Though many can speak rapidly, the pronunciation is not clear and the English falls short in

many respects.

- e. Classes and learning should be fun. There are, however, teachers, especially foreigners, who think they should exert themselves to appeal and sound funny. A lot of Japanese students today do not seem to applaud this attitude. In the past, when foreign teachers were few, the students accepted this overdone type of humor. Some school administrators are to be blamed for this non-academic behavior, since they request the foreign teachers to be “funny” in class.
- f. To the extent possible, teachers should provide for individual differences with individualized instruction. Although many teachers say it is not possible in foreign language instruction, the amount of time spent on each individual can be regulated so that it won't overburden the teachers' workload.

B. Attitudes of English Teachers from the Students' Eyes

Of equal importance for this survey was to know the attitudes of English teachers observed from the students' eyes. A third questionnaire covering items on course content, homework, examination, evaluation, the teacher and the class, and the teacher's personal qualities and attributes was given to the same students. The comments in the last section of the questionnaire were valuable data about what the students want to learn in their English classes, and the kind of instruction they expect to receive from the teachers. In the hope that the students expressed their true feelings, I grouped the most frequent ones together for review below.

1. *On the Course Content*

- a. Learning how to solve a puzzle will not help me develop my four English skills.
- b. Playing games in college is a waste of time. I enjoyed games in high school, but I'm now in college. I want to use my class time to practice activities that will improve my English communicative skills. I'm sure they will be useful in my job and private life.
- c. The teacher used one full semester explaining how to write an essay in English. I am in junior college and I don't think I will ever need to write an essay at work or privately. I want to learn more practical aspects of English writing.
- d. Sometimes I can't understand what the teacher is trying to teach.
- e. I think it is very instructive to learn about customs and the people in the United States, England and other English-speaking countries through the teachers. But I don't think they should speak very long.
- f. Some foreign teachers bring teaching materials like games and discussion topics that they think are interesting. The problem is that students in their native countries may enjoy these materials, but they do not appeal to the majority of Japanese students. These teachers are not aware of what Japanese students are culturally interested in.
- g. Some reading passages are very boring. I enjoy reading short articles on current events and news.

2. *On Classroom Practice*

- a. In some oral classes the teacher speaks too much. I want more time to practice.
- b. I like to work in pairs and with small groups.
- c. I think short choral repetition helps, especially when we are practicing pronunciation.
- d. I would like to have more time to practice short dialogs in class.
- e. I would like to have more time to practice and make short presentations in class—something like a short speech.
- f. I would like to practice in class the correct pronunciation of some difficult sounds. Some teachers never take their time to correct our bad or wrong pronunciation and intonation.
- g. The free conversation time forced and encouraged me to formulate questions in English. I feel more confident to start a conversation in English.

3. *On the Teacher and the Class*

- a. Some teachers use very unusual methods to practice new material and this confuses everyone, including me.
- b. Sometimes class discipline is too lax, the teacher lets the students talk, and it bothers me because I want to hear the teacher.
- c. Sometimes the general mood of a class taught by a foreign teacher is too lighthearted and becomes trivial. I don't think it is proper.
- d. I like it when the teacher comes up and talks to us individually.

4. *On Homework*

- a. Some teachers give us too much homework.

Note: There were no other comments.

5. *On Tests and Examinations*

- a. Sometimes the examination is not fair because it is not based only on what we studied in class.
- b. Sometimes I don't think my final mark is fair.

6. *On the Teacher's Oral Communication in Class*

- a. Almost all foreign teachers are very careful in their English articulation. It is very clear.
- b. Some teachers, both foreign and Japanese, speak too fast.
- c. I think it is great that a foreign teacher can understand and speak Japanese. Sometimes a brief explanation or translation in Japanese avoids misunderstanding and saves time.

7. *On the Teacher's Qualities and Attributes*

- a. Some foreign teachers are very funny. But sometimes they overact and this seems very artificial to me.
- b. Some teachers show favoritism. I don't think it is fair.
- c. Foreign teachers seem to be better at entertaining than Japanese teachers.
- d. Some teachers don't seem to like teaching. They shouldn't be teachers.

3. FAMILY, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY ATTITUDES

Generally, the presence or lack of parents and family encouragement determines how and how fast a desirable level of language competence is achieved once a student is motivated and has definite purposes to learn the language. Whether financial support is present or not may quicken and facilitate the learning process. Studies show that psychological backup plays a very important role. The answers obtained in the interviews conducted with the subject students and teachers of this survey, confirmed that a large number of students can count on their parents' financial support. This is explained by the stable socioeconomic life of a great majority of the Japanese population. Emotional support varies from family to family as more parents, both mother and father, are engaged in work and commitments in this busy society. Lack of psychological support, however, does not seem to bother much today's students. Have Japanese students become less emotional, more emotionally independent or are their emotional values changing? Further investigation in this area is needed.

The educational philosophy of program administrators, supervisory staff and school administrators often influences the feeling of dedicated teachers and their attitude toward the students. A supportive attitude from the school management that carefully listens to the teachers hopes and requests as well as the students wishes and needs often results in successful instruction. On the other hand, the imposition of unrealistic ideas only leads to the teachers' feeling of frustration and possibly unsuccessful teaching. Japanese ministerial restrictions still impede Japanese high school teachers especially in the design of English programs that would meet the students immediate and future needs. Some interviewed teachers described their past personal experiences and added complaints about these bureaucratic attitudes. Critical comments on the obsolete philosophy of some schools were also voiced during the survey.

The Japanese community is slowly and definitely changing. Several factors can be cited. The stable and relatively high socioeconomic level of the Japanese community influences people's aspirations. Social interaction with foreign cultures has definitely increased. Economically, human and material resources in the community are abundant now. These changes are forming new values and new attitudes in the community. They all play an important role, influencing the aspirations of students and parents. The students assessed in this survey reflect this change in community attitudes. They expressed their hopes for a more comfortable life with overseas trips where they can use their English skills.

AN OVERVIEW OF STUDENT AND TEACHER ATTITUDES, CONSIDERING THE PRESENT SURVEY

The first day students walk through the door of an English class, they arrive with a set of attitudes: positives and negatives. These attitudes stimulate motivation to continue language study in a productive way, or conversely, to create a condition of stagnation or deterioration, or leads to a future dropout. Attitudes of students may remain unchanged or alter in the course of the time, as they rub off or interact with teachers', parents', school and community attitudes.

Analyzing the results obtained in this survey, 88% of the 430 subject students answered that they were enrolled in English classes to meet graduation pre-requisites. But differences between attitudes of junior college students and co-educational university students were clear.

The responses of co-educational university students were mostly neutral or students showed little commitment. As freshman students, they seemed to be still in their stage of college life adaption. The fact that they are not English majors may explain the reason for their relative apathy toward English learning. There were, however, a considerable number of students who expressed their interest in the study of English. These students stated the need and wish to learn more practical aspects of the language for future professional and personal use. Many voiced their regret at not being able to speak English better, in spite of six years of study in high school.

The junior college students, on the other hand, anticipating their eventual need to use English immediately when employed or for private purposes right after school, clearly expressed their expectations and needs in the learning of English. Rejection of anything highly academic seemed to be clear. Their open impressions of their English classes as well as what they thought are important as qualities and attributes in English teachers were very informative.

Let me briefly consider the other inseparable element in the learning process—the teachers.

The first day English teachers walk in a classroom, they also bring along a host of attitudes. These attitudes are the results of education, travel, professional preparation, and so on. Most or all these experiences were probably successful ones for the teachers. That is the reason why, for them, teaching English is an enjoyable job and learning English is assumed to be interesting and relatively easy. Once in the classroom, the teachers find students who share their feelings. This makes the teachers satisfied and they feel rewarded in their efforts, their work and the time spent with the students. But there are also students with opposite attitudes who disagree with the teachers in their teaching approach or with the selection of materials used in the class. These attitudes are a visible rejection of traditional and academic values. A clash occurs and the result is a group of bored and frustrated students with poor learning and little achievement.

The conclusion I reached is that both the student and teacher attitudes interact. The

explanation for this growing lack of motivation observed among today's Japanese students in English classes must be directly caused by this conflict of attitudes.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The entire English teaching staff, teachers and program directors, are left with the responsibility to reconsider the present curriculum content and modify it, as they ascertain the students weak and strong abilities as well as their interests and aspirations. Teachers should select and prepare materials that are worth the time spent in class. Materials that will realistically help the students improve their communicative skills when English becomes a linguistic tool on the job or in their private lives. Program directors should revise existing programs, responding to the present attitudes of the students.

I realize I have not said anything new. I merely tried to point out present attitudes of Japanese college students and review present perceptions of English teachers. I have my own beliefs and attitudes. They may be judged fair or not. Whatever the case is, I try to keep my own level of aspirations high. The results of this study seem to support my original supposition about Japanese college students' attitudes toward the study of English. The complete validity of my findings is limited, though, since the subjects of this study are in its majority women and most of them future junior college graduates. I learned through this survey that the real needs and interests of the learners should be assessed periodically when designing curricula that better fit the new values and changes of the society.

REFERENCES

1. Brown, D.H. 1994 *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Prentice Hall Regents.
2. Gardner, R and W Lambert. 1972 *Attitudes and Motivation in Second-Language Learning*. Rowley, Mass.. Newbury House.
3. Richards, J.C. and C. Lockhart. 1994. *Reflective Teaching in Second Language Classrooms*. Cambridge University Press. pp. 52-56
4. Spolsky, B. (3rd ed.) 1992. *Conditions for Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
5. Tumposky, N. 1991. Student beliefs about language learning. *Carleton Papers in Applied Language Studies*. 8 50-65.
6. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*. 1986. Merriam-Webster Inc. pp. 141,200.