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Toward a Student's Curriculum: Learner Perceptions of Studying EFL at University

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Abstract

This paper is based on a questionnaire administered to 290 first year students at Hannan University. The questionnaire was created specifically for students who are enrolled in low-level EFL courses in the Faculties of Business, Economics and Management Information, in hopes of providing EFL educators with a greater understanding of what students desire from English classes, and aid in developing classes which are more relevant and satisfying for their learners. This paper will examine learner perceptions of EFL education and discuss how EFL educators at Hannan University may use the results of the survey to create a more meaningful curriculum.

概要

阪南大学では、学生は卒業するために外国語単位を取得しなければなりません。1回生の多数は英語を選択するが、そのほとんどの生徒は卒業必須単位数を取ると、英語の勉強をすぐに辞める。その理由を理解するため及び英語教育の向上方法をさぐるために学生にアンケートを実施した。流通、経済、経営情報学部の1回生の290人を対象に、日本語でのアンケートを行った。この論文は、そのアンケートの結果を基にしている。論文の最後にアンケート結果がある。

「Introduction」では、外国語カリキュラムを作成するときに学生の意見を考慮する大切さを論じている。学生が英語力向上を望んでも、今の日本の外国語教育は、最低限の努力で目標を達成させようとする傾向にあるので、学生の意見を取り入れる事は特に大事なことです。

「Needs Vs. Wants」ではカリキュラムの作成と発達について論じている。色々と考えすべきことが多いためか、学生の立場より、むしろ講師や事務員の立場でカリキュラムが作られていると思われる。しかし、学生は若くて人生経験が少ないので、カリキュラムを客観的に評価したり、カリキュラムの向上に参加するのは難しい。

アンケートの結果を考慮する。最も顕著なポイントは：

- 学生の35%は英語が好きと答えたが、64%の学生が将来に英語を使えるようになりたい (Fig. 1)。その上、約80%の学生は大学で英語を学びたい (問9)、約90%が英語を学び、英語でコミュニケーションできることが大切と答えた (Fig. 2)。
- 学生は英語を書くことや読むことより、話すこと、聞くことに必要性を感じている。90%以上の学生が、英語の文章を理解するより、英語での会話を理解できることが大事だと思っており、話す事と聞く事をもっと学びたい (Fig. 3)。
- 日常生活で英語を使う学生は18%程度 (問7) で、その殆どが映画や音楽を聞くために使う (Fig. 4)。大学の英語授業で経験したい13項目の中で、映画と音楽を選んだ人数が文法と発音を選んだ人数の3倍になった (Fig. 5)。

最後に「Compromising Curriculum」と「Conclusion」では、このアンケートの結果を阪南大学の英語カリキュラムを改善するために使えると論じている。

Introduction

Most educators would agree that among the main aims of a foreign language course are to improve learner skills in the target language and engender an interest in the language which may motivate students to continue learning, even after completion of the course. There exists in Japan an often noted paradox, in which the demand for EFL education is very high, yet the enthusiasm to actually learn English is low (Benson, 1991). This paradox is apparent to many university EFL educators who see a dissonance in attitude when learners express their hope to communicate well in English, yet appear to make minimal effort in the classroom to achieve that goal. At Hannan University, it can be recognised by the fact that most students discontinue their study of English as soon as they have achieved the minimum number of language class credits required for graduation (typically one year), despite expressing a belief that it is important to learn and be able to communicate in English, and being dissatisfied with their general proficiency. Given that English is a common entrance examination subject for both upper-secondary school and university, students have at least one clear need to study English through their years of secondary schooling. However, beyond secondary schooling, that particular need no longer exists. This raises some questions: Do students have other needs for English language education? Do they develop new needs after they enter university? Are these needs strong enough to motivate students in their learning?

In order to answer these kinds of questions and to understand this paradox, educators ought to first take student perceptions of studying English into consideration, and make ongoing efforts to assess and comprehend learner attitudes toward the language and its study so that curriculum can be evaluated and, if necessary, improved or adapted in order to ensure that learners are provided with the best learning environment possible¹⁾.

To that end, a study was conducted in which first year university students were surveyed by questionnaire to determine their attitudes towards English as a language and to the study of it, and to gain insight into learners' self-perceptions of their proficiency. It should be noted that this survey is an initial step towards understanding a multi-factorial situation. It is planned that further studies of instructor and administrator aims and beliefs will be undertaken to facilitate deeper understanding of the current curriculum.

Needs Vs. Wants

In developing a curriculum, most educational institutions will need to consider a number of criteria which are not necessarily purely educational. Available facilities, budgetary issues and perceptions of the requirements of potential employees may conflict with desirable educational aspirations, such as smaller class sizes, access to up-to-date technology and resources, and in-service training for educators. In practice, administrators and educators must make compromises between what they believe to be in the best interest of their students, or what would best fulfil their perception of students needs, and what can realistically be achieved in a particular institution or educational environment. This process may result in a curriculum ostensibly designed *for* students, but without direct student input, and therefore not take account of what students themselves actually consider important, necessary or desirable.

When discussing curriculum and learner perceptions of their education, it is perhaps useful to first distinguish between needs and wants, with respect to both the learner point of view and the educational institution perspective. That is, what both the learner and the school perceive to be a necessity for future English use, and what the student currently wants from the course. Most learners may know that they need to study English for the future, but appear to not want to prepare for that need before it arises. However, many students have may not have been informed specifically about in which ways English may be useful to them in their future after they actually graduate (Sargent, 1992), and given their limited life experience, it might be unreasonable of educators to expect learners to be able to fully participate in developing an English needs analysis for either the present or the future. That is, what students need may be unclear even to themselves, because they haven't had enough opportunities to formulate or articulate their needs. Conversely, as wants relate to what learners determine is relevant to their present lives, students most likely will be able to give opinions on what they feel is applicable to their lives or what aspects of English they actually enjoy learning during the time the English course is being taken.

Perhaps as a consequence of this, needs are often determined not by the students who actually undertake the course of study, but by administrators and educators who decide what is necessary or most important for students to learn. Yet, as noted above, because of the difficulty in understanding just what students would like to gain from English language education, these institution determined needs may not match what students actually want to study. It is possible, then, that the lack motivation displayed in the classroom may result from a resentment at being served what they are told they need, rather than what they actually want.

It is also possible that what students are perceived to need and what they want may be incompatible. It may also be that learner attitudes towards, experiences of and expectations for a course are not taken well enough into consideration when planning a curriculum (Sakui and Gaies, 2002). Perhaps by comparing what students say they want from an English course with what an existing curriculum offers them, reasons can be found for the paradox of why students who place high importance on language learning also appear to have low interest in actually studying it.

Two further questions arise for those involved in curriculum design and instruction: "What does this distinction between *wants* and *needs* mean for universities? Should curriculum cater to what students prefer, or prepare them for what they will be required to do in the future?" (Sargent, 1992). It is hoped that this study, and subsequent studies, will go some way to answering these questions at Hannan University.

Method

This study is based on the responses of 290 first-year students in the Faculties of Business, Economics and Management Information at Hannan University to an 11 item questionnaire (see appendix). All students are enrolled in two 90 minute classes in English per week: one class with a Japanese teacher of English and one class with a native speaker of English. The questionnaire was administered in Japanese (an English translation of the questionnaire is provided in the appendix) at the beginning of the school year in April in an initial attempt to assess the attitudes of students before their transition from high school to university English classes had become entrenched. The questionnaire aimed to understand learner perspectives of their English experiences so far, as well as to collect data on what learners want or expect

from their university English classes.

Results and Analysis of Questionnaire

Figure 1 shows that in response to Question 1 on the questionnaire, only 35% of students say they like English, while 64% answered Question 8 saying they want to use English in the future, predominately at work or for travel. The relatively small number of students who say they like English was an interesting result in itself. Future research should include an attempt to elucidate the reasons why students like or dislike English. It is conceivable, for example, that some students may have a dislike for English as a school subject, but not necessarily as a language or as a means of communication, because of their experiences in secondary school in which they may have felt overcorrected in a teacher-centred class and felt they had no control over their own learning (Asato, 2003). Many learners' negative experiences in secondary school EFL classes may have caused them to internalize a state of "demotivation," whereby learners complete a program of study with a lower rate of self-confidence than they began with (Falout and Maruyama, 2004). It would also be informative to understand why students who claim they do not like English want to use it in the future.

It is also noteworthy that 65% of students say they don't like English, but that almost 80% of students say that they want to study English at university (Question 9). It might have been expected that a larger number of students would prefer to study a language other than English or not to study a foreign language at all. Coupled with the responses to Questions 3 and 4 (Figure 2), in which approximately 90% say they consider it important to both learn and to be able to communicate in English, it is perhaps reasonable to

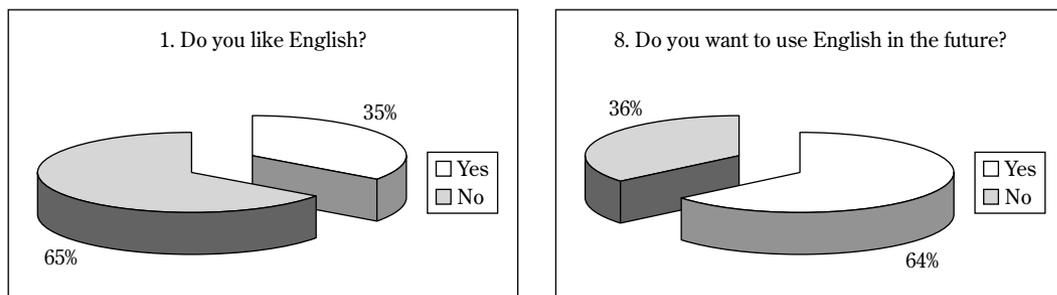


Figure 1

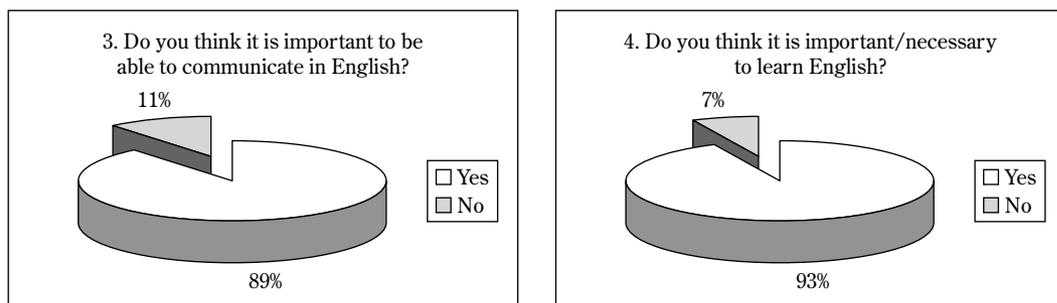


Figure 2

speculate that although students may not particularly like English, they do have some perception that in an age of increasing globalisation, in which English is the international lingua franca (Crystal, 2003), it is increasingly necessary to be able to communicate effectively in a broader domain than the Japanese speaking world.

Remembering that most students in the Faculties of Business, Economics and Management Information at Hannan University discontinue English language study after one year, this again appears to demonstrate the paradox of a high demand for EFL education versus a lack of desire to learn. However, could it be that students do not lack a desire to learn, but feel their needs/wants/learning opportunities are not being fulfilled?

Responses to several questions show that students place a higher value upon oral/aural English language skills than on reading or writing. In response to Question 5, over 90% of students say they consider being able to understand spoken English to be more important than being able to understand written English. To Question 10, students indicated that speaking and listening were the areas they would most like to study more (Figure 3).

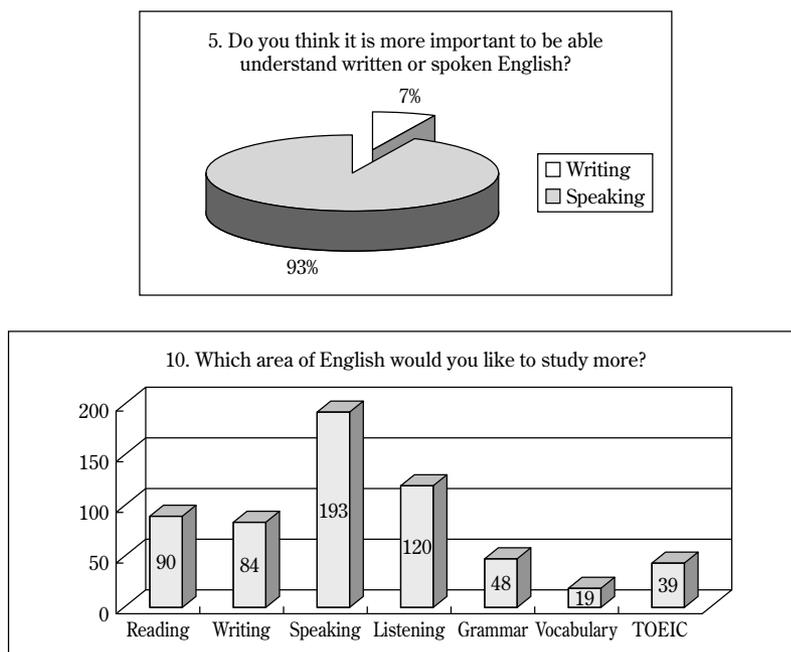


Figure 3

Although only 18% of students use English in their daily life (Question 7), the most common way of using English was to watch movies and listen to music (Figure 4). In answering Question 11, "What kind of activities would you like to experience in university English language classes?" (Figure 5) learners ranked movies and music the highest out of a total of thirteen areas, approximately three times higher than grammar and pronunciation which ranked third and fourth. Also of note in this particular question, reading newspapers and magazines ranked fifth, and it could perhaps be concluded that learners are motivated by

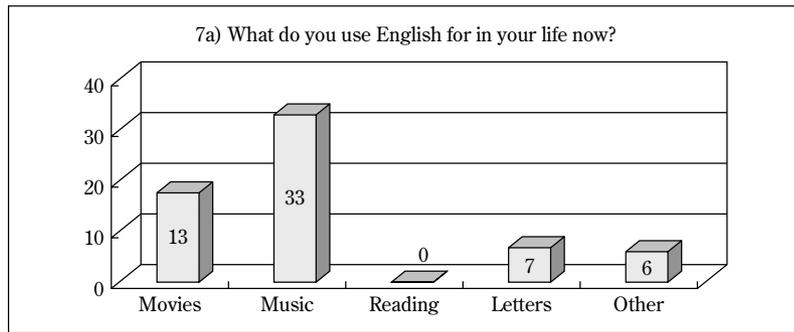


Figure 4

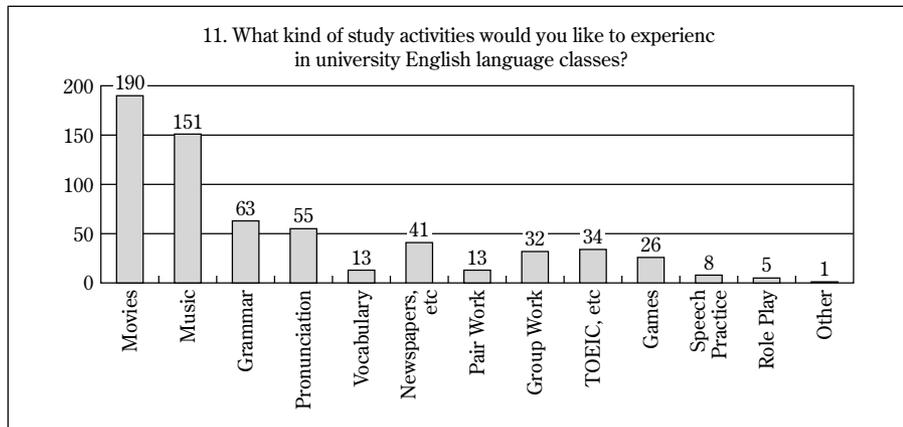


Figure 5

authentic materials, such as English movies, music, newspapers and magazines. If educators could find ways to adapt and use authentic materials and facilitate speaking practice from them, learners may feel as if their wants are being met.

Compromising Curriculum

Some educators or institutions may feel it best to keep learners on a rigid course that rarely deviates from a standard set curriculum, and hesitate to employ alternative methods or materials like multi-media because they feel it conflicts with the regular curriculum. In some instances, this may mean that a single textbook dictates what learners are exposed to in each lesson throughout the year. If educators fail to evaluate and exploit content from textbooks critically, however, lessons may be irrelevant and/or uninteresting to learners. In fact, a substantial number of studies have shown that “there is a great divide, a lack of fit, between grammar and textbook descriptions of the target language and real language use... textbooks neglect important and frequent features of the language spoken by real language users” (Barbieri and Eckhardt, 2007). While following a single commercial textbook may be “safe”, with the added benefit of reducing preparation work, it may not be the method most motivating for students. If one of the main goals of the educator is to create genuine interest and motivation in learners, student wants will

also need to be recognised. Incorporating authentic materials that students are interested in may help to bridge the divide between unauthentic textbook English and real English. Using movies, music, newspapers and other authentic materials in the classroom is one way to heighten interest and excitement in the target language. As noted above most learners at Hannan University who use English in their daily life do so for movies and music. If learners feel that the English they use in the classroom is relevant to their own lives, they may begin to relate more positively to the L2.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many teachers of English at Hannan University feel that their classes consist of students of varying degrees of English proficiency. Authentic materials, such as music videos, movie clips or comics, may work well in these kinds of multi-level classes. Despite what might be considerable "up-front" preparation time, teachers may also find that with minimal adaptation, authentic materials can be re-used for a number of years. Using a non-teacher centred medium of learning, such as a DVD, may make the classroom a more comfortable and less judgemental environment for learning (Walker, 1994). Teachers and students alike may find this lower pressured classroom more effective to function in. One of the challenges facing educators in providing authentic, stimulating multi-media content is dealing with resources which were designed for native speakers, and which may also be too advanced for learners. However, with creative lesson planning, educators can experiment with various ways to make English movies and English music level-appropriate and relevant for their classes. Using movies and music will also make lessons more interesting and memorable while lowering learning inhibition level and raising motivation (Lems, 1996). Songs can provide a break from the regular curriculum, helping to develop a less threatening classroom atmosphere where learners will be more likely to participate (Schoepp, 2001). Reducing anxiety and creating a better classroom atmosphere can also motivate students to speak more in the target language. Speaking is ranked highest as the area that learners would like to focus on (Figure 3), and is also the area that students feel to be their weakest area of proficiency. If educators can find a way to incorporate movies and music based activities to stimulate speaking, learners may be more willing to participate and gain confidence and interest in classroom learning. Students may be more willing to speak out, make a comment, or express an opinion if they are genuinely interested in the content of the lesson. Movie and music based lessons still need the strong presence of the teacher to help students understand and enjoy the authentic language, so educators should be proactive when preparing and administering these multi-media materials (Seferoglu, 2008).

Educators may find success with a combination of their own teaching style and introducing authentic materials into the classroom while still staying focused on a commercial textbook (Drakos, 2005). Attempting to find the right balance between the standardised curriculum and what the educator finds will motivate learners could aid improvement in language proficiency and lead to a better outlook by students on their L2 abilities. If planned and balanced correctly, curriculum needs and student wants do not have to be in opposition. The compromise, or the "peace" involves negotiations between teachers and learners which aim to re-focus the scope of the class, which attempt to align tasks compatible with the level of the group and the needs of the curriculum" (Ryan, 1998).

In the questionnaire, approximately 1/3rd of learners self-assessed their language proficiency in the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking to be poor, and another 1/3rd of learners self-assessed their proficiency to be very poor. Despite having spent six years at secondary school learning English for several hours per week, approximately 90% answered that they were not satisfied with their level of

proficiency. This overwhelming high negative perception by individuals of their abilities, perhaps indicates a negative impression of their learning experiences to date, yet 75% believed that the English they studied in high school will be useful in the future. This result could be interpreted in several ways. It may be that while students feel their English language skills are not as good as they would like them to be, they still feel that the English language instruction they had received was of a high quality and would prove useful in the future. On the other hand, it may equally reflect a perception that the English language instruction they received was not of a particularly high standard, but that it was better than no English study at all. It may also merely be a cultural manifestation of humility. Therefore further research ought to attempt to clarify which of these interpretations, or others, is accurate.

Conclusion

The data used in this research is a reminder for educators that the development of curriculum and the teaching materials used in it is an on-going and natural process that can be achieved from staying focused on what learners regard as necessary and desirable (Davies, 2006). This does not mean that educators should simply conform to students' wishes, but it does mean that students should be consulted on their wants and expectations for a course (Sargent, 1992). In addition to the suggestions made in this paper to introduce movie and music based lessons into the classroom, both educators and learners will find it beneficial to continue to search for new ideas, resources and authentic materials, such as those available on the internet, to expand their curriculum and create interest and a more positive attitude towards EFL learning (Aydin, 2007). As most learners have been subjected to 6 years of the *yakudoku* method, it may be beneficial for them to experience new forms of learning, to give them new perspectives on the language, how they can learn it and perhaps why they should study it.

One of the biggest challenges of educators is to mediate the contradiction between high expectations of curriculum and low motivation (Ryan, 1998). The question is how educators can fulfil curriculum goals as well as student wants while simultaneously raising motivation levels. Each educator should try to take into account their own particular learners' wants when preparing lessons, while not losing sight of the common curriculum. What learner English needs actually are will continue to remain a debatable topic. But for the current time being, EFL educators can work towards creating a curriculum that is more student-friendly. Perhaps, when students feel that their EFL wants are being fulfilled, they will think more about why they actually need to study it. Further research could be made to gain insight on what educators believe to be beneficial at raising motivation and confidence levels in their learners. Continuing research on learner perceptions of English, its study as well as self-assessment of ability may be conducted to measure improvement of attitude. In order to affirm that learners are satisfied with having their language wants fulfilled during classroom time, follow-up research is needed. This would allow instructors to take part in teacher self-development, and also allow them to evaluate the effectiveness of the curriculum being implemented.

Notes

- 1) For the purpose of this paper, the term "curriculum" will be used in a broad sense to refer to both the contents of a particular class and the overall EFL programme at Hannan University.

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Appendix

阪南大学の英語教育についてのアンケート

1. あなたは、英語が好きですか？ はい / いいえ

2. 以下の4つの分野についてどのくらい好きですか？

	きらい				とても好き
読む	1	2	3	4	5
書く	1	2	3	4	5
聞く	1	2	3	4	5
話す	1	2	3	4	5

3. 英語で意思のコミュニケーションができることは必要だと思いますか？ はい / いいえ

3a) また、なぜそう思いますか？

4. 英語を勉強する必要があると思いますか？ はい / いいえ

4a) また、なぜそう思いますか？

5. 英語を書くことと、話すことではどちらがより重要だと思いますか？ 書く / 話す

6. あなたの英語の能力は？

	すごく低い			すごく優秀	
読む	1	2	3	4	5
書く	1	2	3	4	5
聞く	1	2	3	4	5
話す	1	2	3	4	5

6a) 自分のレベルに満足していますか？

読む はい / いいえ

書く はい / いいえ

聞く はい / いいえ

話す はい / いいえ

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7. 日常生活で英語を使っていますか？ はい / いいえ

7a) 「はい」と答えた方：どんな時に使っていますか。 複数回答可

映画を見る / 音楽を聞く / 洋書や新聞や雑誌を読む /
手紙や e-メールを書く / 他 _____

8. 大学を卒業後、英語を使いたいと思いますか？ はい / いいえ

8a) 「はい」と答えた方：何のため？

旅行 / 勉強 / 仕事 / 他 _____

8b) 今まで勉強してきた英語は、将来役立つと思いますか？ はい / いいえ

9. 大学でこの次の中にどちらが勉強したいですか。

英語 / 英語以外の外国語 / 外国語を勉強したくない

10. あなたは、大学でどの分野の英語をもっと勉強したいですか？ 複数回答可

読む / 書く / 話す / 聞く / 文法 / 新しい言葉 (新語彙) / TOEIC や TOEFL
他 _____

11. 大学の英語の授業で、どのような教材やアクティビティーを勉強したいですか？ 複数回答可

映画を見る / 音楽を聞く / 文法の練習 / 発音の練習 / 新しい言葉 (新語彙) /
新聞や雑誌などを読む / 2人の生徒で勉強 / グループの生徒で勉強 /
TOEIC や TOEFL の準備 / 言語ゲーム / スピーチの発表 / ロールプレー / 他 _____

1. Do you like English? Yes / No

2. How much do you enjoy:

	Not at all				Very much
Reading	1	2	3	4	5
Writing	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5
Listening	1	2	3	4	5

3. Do you think it is important to be able to communicate in English? Yes / No

3a) Why?

4. Do you think it is important/necessary to learn English? Yes / No

4a) Why?

5. Do you think it is more important to be able understand written or spoken English?

Written / Spoken

6. What is your English language proficiency in:

	Very Poor				Fluent
Reading	1	2	3	4	5
Writing	1	2	3	4	5
Speaking	1	2	3	4	5
Listening	1	2	3	4	5

6a) Are you satisfied with this level of proficiency?

Reading	Yes / No	Writing	Yes / No
Speaking	Yes / No	Listening	Yes / No

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7. Do you use English in your life now? Yes / No

7a) What for? Please circle (you may choose more than one).

Watching films, listening to music, reading books, newspapers, magazines, writing
letters, e-mail, other (please specify).

8. Do you want to use English in the future? Yes / No

8a) What for? Travel, study, work, other (please specify).

8b) Do you think the English you have studied at high school will be useful in the future?
Yes / No

9. At university would you like to learn:

English / A language other than English / No foreign language

10. Which area of English would you like to study more: (you may choose more than one)

reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary, TOEIC preparation, other

11. What kind of study activities/materials would you like to experience in university English language
classes? (you may choose more than one)

Watching films Listening to music Grammar drills

Pronunciation practice TOEIC/TOEFL preparation Vocabulary Development

Reading newspapers and magazines, etc Pair work Group Work

Language Games Role Play Other- please specify

(2008年7月11日掲載決定)