

# Student perceptions of their need for English for rehabilitation purposes

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## **1. Introduction**

### 1-1. Overview

Professionals in education, politics and business and other fields are concerned about the increasing need for English language proficiency in medical fields. The interest in globalization in health care is increasing in many nations. In Japan, the government has indicated its interest in creating job opportunities in the lucrative field of medical tourism. In June, 2010, the Japanese government created its New Growth Strategy. Following that, the government endorsed the Tourism Nation Promotion Basic Plan. Medical tourism is explicitly indicated as a primary component of each plan.<sup>(1)</sup>

One of the major obstacles to promoting medical tourism is the limited English language proficiency of medical staff. English is now the primary means of international communication between many professionals, especially professionals in medical fields. To compete with Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, India, and Korea, in the medical tourism market, improving the English proficiency of medical students in Japan is vital. The need for proficiency in English is widely acknowledged, and English is the most commonly used language in the medical field. Because of Japan's acknowledgement of this fact, the demand for English for medical courses in higher education has been growing. Many medical universities have designed and implemented curriculums that foster English-language development for their students. Although the importance of efficient English curriculums has been recognized, it seems a high priority has not been given to English curriculums for allied health education programs, especially programs for physical therapy (PT), occupational therapy (OT), and speech therapy (ST).

Many English language textbooks and materials for medical schools and nursing schools are available, but for students and educators involved with rehabilitation therapy programs, the choices are minimal. In addition, institutional guidelines for English for professionals in rehabilitation therapy have not been developed. Moreover, fundamental research regarding the development of such English curriculums seems scarce. Widespread research and discussion regarding the development of English

education for rehabilitation therapies are crucial. This article discusses the critical need for implementing efficacious English education curriculums for rehabilitation purposes. It also considers the degree to which the students in the field are aware of the necessity for English skills and how they view their need for English in their careers.

## **1-2. Literature Review**

Overview of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Medical Purposes (EMP) and English for Rehabilitation Purposes (ERP)

As the term English for Specific Purposes indicates ESP curriculums focus on very specific fields. ESP courses designed specifically for students' fields of study, in this case physical therapy, help students increase their motivation more than English for General Purposes (EGP) courses.<sup>(2)</sup> English in a meaningful context stimulates the desire of students in a specific field to study English.

EMP is English education specifically designed for students who will work or are already working in medical fields. However, the broad medical field includes various kinds of professions: physicians, nurses, pharmacists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech therapists.

A majority of textbooks and courses that are used to teach EMP have an integrated approach to health care and collaboration across medical professions. This is positive in that students gain an overall perspective. However, the particular characteristics of each clinical field should not be ignored. By not providing students with opportunities to study English that are attuned to each unique field, educators might fail to stimulate students to study English for their distinctive careers. Inoue, Caraker, Takamura, and Horiuchi make their case for the importance of educational materials that help students to improve various English language abilities necessary in rehabilitation fields.<sup>(3)</sup> Although Inoue, Caraker, Takamura, and Horiuchi included physical therapy, occupational therapy and social or psychiatric social work in their study, the fields of rehabilitation that this study is concerned with are physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy.

## **2. Need Analysis and ESP**

Before needs analysis was widely recognized as being vital in the process of designing curriculum and course syllabus for ESP courses, instructors and material

developers depended on research results in which the direct voices of the learners and instructors were not reflected.

However, many researchers and specialists in the ESL field believed in the importance of analyzing students' needs.<sup>(4)-(10)</sup> Hutchinson and Waters categorized learners' needs into three types of needs: *necessities*, *lacks*, and *wants*.<sup>(8)</sup> For the development of an effective ESP curriculum, identifying *necessities*, the skills and knowledge that the language learners must obtain in order to perform successfully in their target fields, is vital.<sup>(11)</sup> Such *necessities* are defined as *objective needs* by Richterich.<sup>(12)</sup> Individual learners often do not have the knowledge of what they really need to learn.<sup>(13)</sup> In that case, determining the objectives of English language courses only based on learners' perceptions of their needs would lead to the fulfillment of the learners' immediate goals, not to the fulfillment of long-term success in their careers.

Swale included the importance of understanding students' needs in his five enduring conceptions of ESP: authenticity, research-base, language/text, needs, and learning/methodology.<sup>(14)</sup> Dudgeon and St. John also recognized needs analysis as one of the key stages in ESP: needs analysis, course design, materials selection, teaching and learning, and evaluation.<sup>(15)</sup> Belcher expressed that a key element of teaching a language for specific purposes is a provision of lessons carefully prepared to meet the particular needs of the learners.<sup>(16)</sup> Inoue, Caraker, Takamura, and Horiuchi emphasized the crucial role of need analysis for creating materials for an ERP curriculum.<sup>(3)</sup>

In general, when needs analysis in educational purposes is considered, what students need to learn is decided only from the educators' point of view. Students' views are usually not reflected in discussions of theories and teaching practices.<sup>(17)</sup> In ESP, the analysis is usually conducted from the perspectives of educators and professionals. Although such analysis is extremely essential for fostering students to be professionals in specific fields, without integrating students' perspectives into the process of developing effective curriculum and teaching materials, the needs analysis is incomplete. The students' perspectives help teachers obtain insights on how to stimulate students' intrinsic motivation for learning. Ajayi claims that the lack of considering students' perspectives in language teaching leads students to fail in class.<sup>(17)</sup>

Gaining students' perspectives regarding what they need to learn provides educators with some insight into what their students have already learned. By subtracting what the learners already know from targeted linguistic features, we can

identify their lacks. However, because learners might not have an accurate perception of what they lack, and teachers and school administrators might incorrectly assume what students lack, what the students really need to learn might not be accurately assessed.

An analysis to reveal what students want to learn is a vital component of ESP class design. Hutchinson and Waters define *want* as needs which learners are aware of.<sup>(8)</sup> The inclusion of such wants into course planning contributes to creating an optimal environment in which students are more motivated to learn. Hutchinson and Waters suggest that there is a high possibility that learners' views of what they should learn conflict with what schools and teachers believe their students must learn.<sup>(8)</sup> If schools and teachers completely ignore the students' views, the result could be fewer motivated students and less learning.

Moreover, teachers' conclusions regarding what their students should learn might not be correct. Each student has his or her own reasons to learn English and has his or her own unique learning experiences.

Huge gaps exist among the English proficiency levels, international experiences, and learning style preferences of students entering colleges. Regardless of the differences, numerous colleges provide classes based on the same curriculum and achievement standards determined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. Research has shown that there is not enough awareness of the importance of need analysis among school administrators and teachers.<sup>(18)</sup> Burden indicates that Japanese schools rarely systematically examine their students' language learning backgrounds. This study focuses on the learners' perceptions of what they need to learn.<sup>(19)</sup>

### **3. Method**

#### **3-1. Participants**

The subjects included in this study were 133 Japanese students who have enrolled in PT, OT or ST courses. Subjects from three different English language classes were asked to answer the survey questions. The English classes are varied: one of the classes is a freshman class based on both reading and grammar. Another class for first-year students focused on oral English. Although the majority of the students were first-year students, there were some older repeater students. The goal of the

last class is for third-year students to learn how to read various English texts that are used in the medical fields they are studying. The research participants study at a private vocational university. Although the English skills which each class focuses on are different, the broad content of the English classes is the same, health and medical treatment. Moreover, the purpose of the students to enter the university is also the same: to gain the knowledge and the skills necessary in rehabilitation fields.

### **3-2. Instrument**

A questionnaire written in Japanese was designed to collect necessary data. The participants were asked to answer the questions in Japanese so that they could easily and comfortably answer the questions without language difficulties. The questionnaire has two parts: the first one corresponds to the participants' demographic information (name, gender, university name, academic year, major, repeaters or not). The participants were asked to write their names, but they had been informed that their answers would not negatively or positively affect their grades. The second part includes questions to discover the learning needs and expectations of rehabilitation-field students in English classes. Although there are five questions in the second part, only the results of one Likert-scale question, accompanied with a request to explain their reasons for their choice, are analyzed in this paper. The Likert-scale question is "Is English ability necessary in your future medical field?"

### **3-3. Procedure**

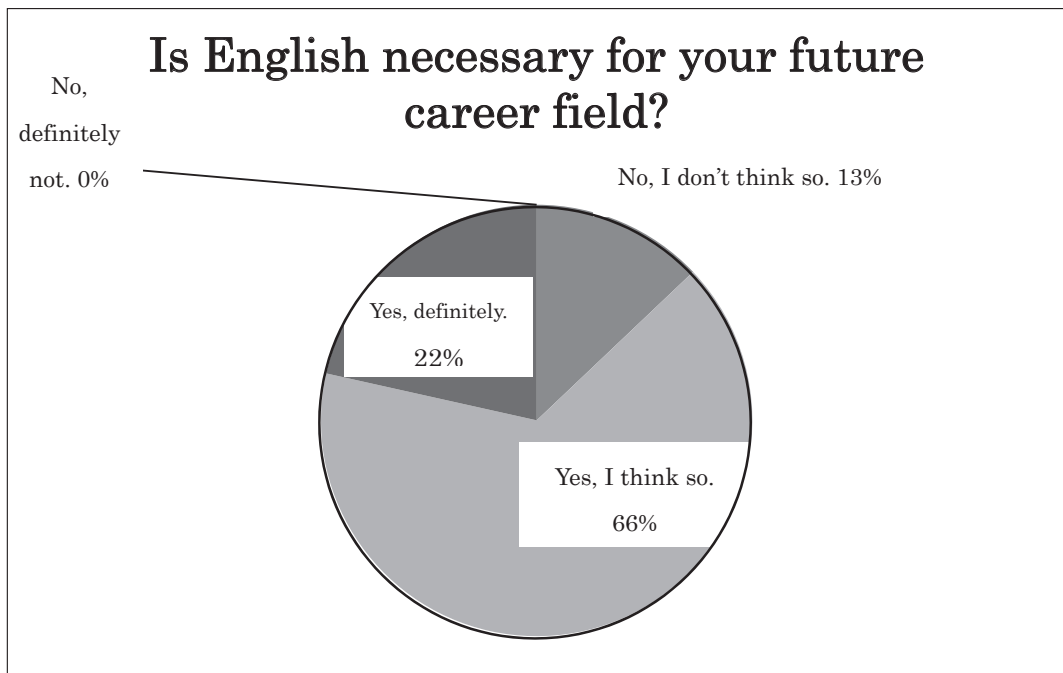
To analyze the needs of Japanese university students concentrating on rehabilitation studies, but who are also taking English compulsory classes, an online survey was carried out in April 2013 and April 2014. The students were informed that a study of their English educational needs was being conducted. The purpose of the survey was to obtain accurate information from learners themselves about their perception of needs relating to being successful in their colleges and careers. The participants were asked to complete the questionnaire in their free time in environments other than their classrooms, for example, their homes or the school media center, because their classes were not equipped with computers. Students were requested to complete the survey within the first two weeks of the first semester.

## **4. Discussion**

### **4-1. Participants**

The number of the students in this survey was 133: 42 female students and 91 male students. Approximately 69% of the students major in physical therapy, 24% of the students major in speech therapy, and 7% of the students are occupational therapy students. Almost half of the respondents were first-year students; approximately 46 % of the participants were in their third year. Only six of the 133 students were retaking an English class as second-year students, due to failing the same class in the previous year.

### **4-2. Analysis**

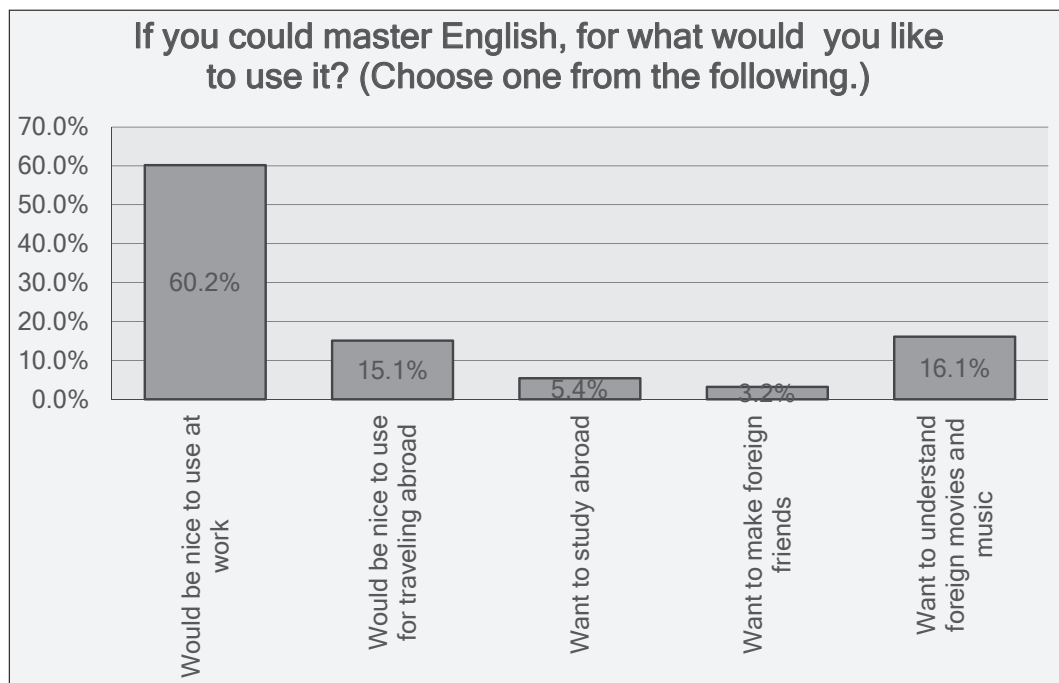


(Graph 1)

### **Is English necessary for your future career field?**

The survey results indicate that most respondents (88%) feel very or somewhat strongly about the necessity of English in their future career (Graph 1). Their responses to other questions also show they are more motivated to study English for rehabilitation purposes than to study English unrelated to their major.

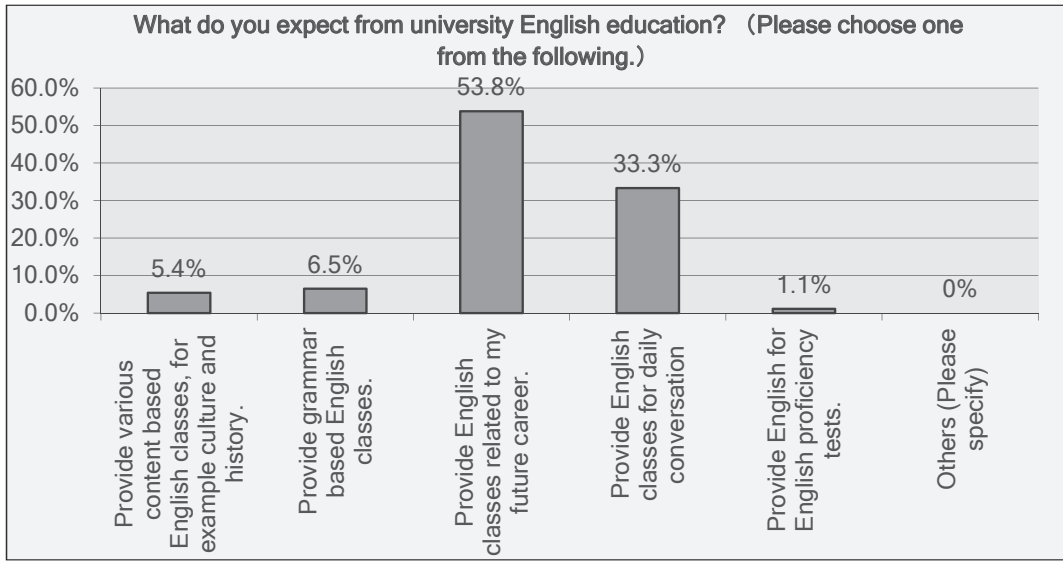
Approximately 60% of the respondents chose “at work” as the location where they mostly wanted to use English. They showed much less interest in using English for private reasons: studying and traveling abroad, making foreign friends, and understanding English movies and music (Graph 2).



(Graph 2)

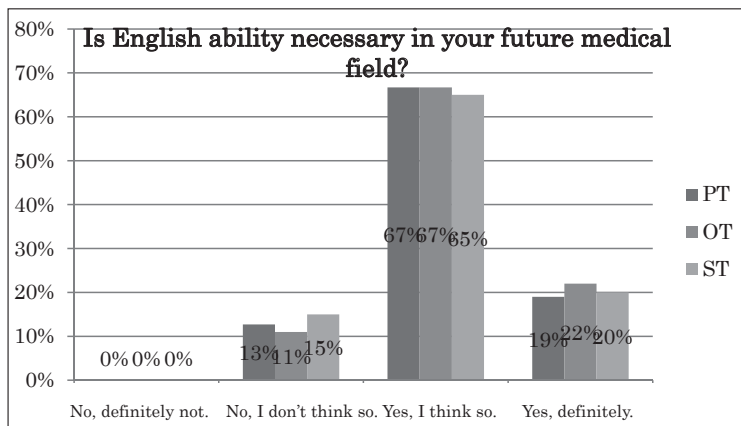
The students’ clear focus on their future careers is also reflected in what they expect of English education in higher education. Although, there are many approaches for teaching English, such as content based, grammar translation, language proficiency test based, and communicative approaches, the respondents who are studying at vocational rehabilitation universities expect the focus of their English class to be ERP, learning English closely related to their future careers (Graph 3). These results indicate they enter the university with a clear career focus and a plan to achieve their career goals.

Universities must develop curriculum and plan classes that satisfy their students’ interests. If they fail, their students might lose their motivation to study, and they will attend English classes just to get credits, not because they are motivated to study the class content.



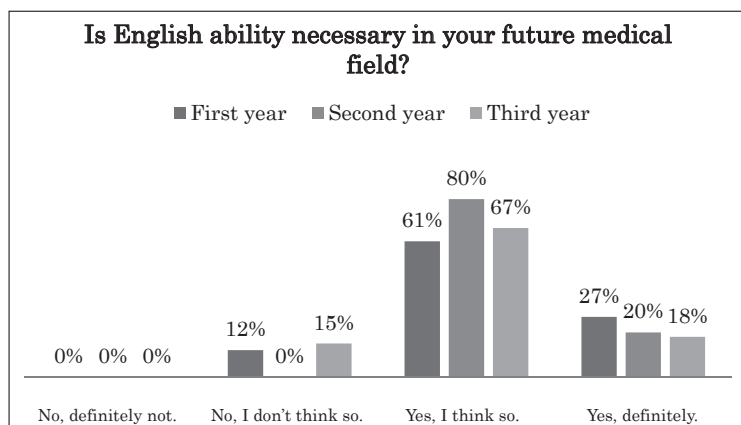
(Graph 3)

Although the answers to questions in the survey indicate that a majority of the subjects have a positive attitude toward English for their future career development, the fact that 13% of the respondents consider that proficiency in English will not be necessary in their future work should not be ignored.



(Graph 4)





(Graph 5)

Simple cross-tabulation analyses were conducted to determine which factors influence the attitudes of the survey respondents towards the importance of English skills for their future careers. The results of the cross tabulations show that both the year of the students and the major of the students are not the factors of the negative responses (Graph 4 and Graph 5). The respondents were asked to explain the reason for their answers. In order to understand why some of the students do not recognize the importance of English for their future careers, the comments were analyzed.

The most frequently used word in the comments is “unnecessary.” Why do they feel English is not necessary in their career? Students frequently mentioned two reasons. One of the reasons is that they have never seen rehabilitation therapists using English at clinical sites. The other reasons are having no interest in working overseas or reading articles in English.

## **5. Conclusion**

Some professionals who work at rehabilitation hospitals and clinics in Japan may never have to use English. In fact, some practicing therapists have no intention to learn cutting edge therapy theories and techniques that are discussed in English texts or conferences. Improving their English proficiency level might not be a high priority in their career development plans.

However, the objectives of higher education should not be teaching students so that they will be satisfied with the status quo of today. Higher education must do more than merely preparing students for managing routine work. Colleges should be fostering students capable of effectively coping with fast social changes, staying up-to-date with

the rapid progress of medical technology, and becoming future leaders in their career fields. For these reasons, English education in universities offering rehabilitation science courses must include English for Rehabilitation Purposes.

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