

Reconciling Illusion and Reality for a More Authentic Needs Analysis

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Abstract – This study reports on a needs analysis conducted at a fashion college in Japan. It offers insight into the ways that social and ideological contexts inform needs analyses and into the illusions that need to be overcome to successfully implement a curriculum based on a needs analysis. Interviews with domain experts, questionnaire data from undergraduate students, online information on job requirements and previously published literature were all used to uncover the tasks that students would need to perform in English in their future careers in the fashion industry. Contradictory findings from different data sources were shown to be the result of underlying social and ideological forces. This was especially true in the case of scores for English proficiency tests. Suggestions about, as well as practical examples of how to reconcile these contradictions are described. Findings contribute toward a better understanding of how ideologies can be explicitly examined and used to inform needs analyses.

Keywords: authenticity, needs analysis, TBLT, EFL, SLA

1. INTRODUCTION

Authenticity has long been one of the cornerstones of task-based needs analysis (Long, 2015). However, the concept of authenticity itself has not been critically examined within the task-based needs analysis framework of second language teaching. In this paper, we hope to show that authenticity should be understood within the social and ideological frameworks surrounding a needs analysis. Ironically it is often these very social and ideological beliefs which hinder the implementation of tasks which a needs analysis has shown to be most necessary and authentic. We examine the contradictions between what a needs analysis reveals to be suitable for the classroom, and the restrictions placed on classroom practices by the surrounding social and ideological systems by looking at data from a needs analysis carried out at a Japanese college. We also offer suggestions for how researchers and teachers can tackle these contradictions and overcome the gap between the illusion presented by over-generalized beliefs, the reality of the classroom and the results of a needs analysis.

2. THE NATURE OF AUTHENTICITY

Authenticity is a characteristic that describes how well an object, belief, activity or trait reflects that which a person views as most representative of that particular object, belief, activity or trait. Traditional kimono-clad women might represent authentic Japanese dress to some, whilst others may view newer Tokyo street fashions as the most authentic representation of Japanese style, while still others may say that both are authentic

representations of different aspects of Japanese fashion. Perceptions of authenticity are therefore greatly dependent on the identity and beliefs of the individual and can vary greatly between individuals and contexts. Authenticity, rather than being dichotomous, should be viewed as a continuum (Pinner, 2014), with things being more or less authentic depending on perceptions and context.

Within the broad field of language learning, authenticity has generally been used to refer to a characteristic of the texts which are used within the classroom. A movie or magazine article is often used as an example of an authentic text, containing authentic language, which is contrasted against the inauthentic textbook, which contains inauthentic language, or language that has been contrived to showcase specific grammatical, semantic or topical points (Gilmore, 2011; Peacock, 1994).

Within the field of TBLT, however, the authenticity of the tasks used in the classroom is foregrounded. Tasks are described as having situational authenticity (being reflective of real life situations) or as having interactional authenticity (reflecting a style of interaction which could be used in real life) (Ellis, 2003). In addition, the authentic tasks used in the classroom should be tasks which students have a current or future need to perform. A needs analysis, conducted prior to syllabus and material creation, is therefore an integral part of TBLT. A needs analysis allows materials developers to analyze data from the specific population for which classroom materials are being designed, in order to reveal which tasks the students themselves are likely to have to perform outside the classroom, and design materials which are custom-made to address those needs.

Although the context in which a needs analysis is carried out will have an impact on findings and on how to implement these findings, within the field of TBLT very little attention has been given to issues of the impact of social and ideological contexts (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). The needs analysis reported in this paper was conducted in the large urban metropolis of Tokyo, Japan. In order to better understand the social and ideological environment in which the needs analysis took place, a brief overview of English language learning within the Japanese context is necessary.

3. THE JAPANESE CONTEXT

The Japanese government, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), has been pursuing policies aimed at strengthening the English proficiency of Japanese primary, secondary and tertiary school learners (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2013). These policies have become increasingly focused on communicative skills over time, in an effort to move educators away from the traditional grammar translation approach. MEXT has made it a priority to increase the English proficiency of learners in order to better prepare them for life in a globalized world (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2014).

Government has not been alone in its pursuit of greater English proficiency. The business sector has increasingly linked opportunities for promotion and employment with scores on the Test Of English for International Communication (TOEIC). According to a website designed to inform university students about how high of a TOEIC score they will

need to be able to work in various fields, large fashion retailers and apparel companies such as Fast Retailing, which oversees the Uniqlo clothing brand, and Rakuten, a large Japanese online retailer, require a score of over 700 for promotion to managerial positions (Toeicmaster, 2017). However, statistics published by the Institute of International Business Communication, which oversees the TOEIC tests, show that Japanese university students received an average score of only 561 in 2016 (Educational Testing Service TOEIC, 2017, p. 6). In addition, people working in the merchandizing field on average received a score of only 390 (Educational Testing Service TOEIC, 2017, p.8) There is therefore a large gap between government and business policy and the real levels of English proficiency among the Japanese population.

Entrenched beliefs about the difficulty of reaching high levels of English proficiency are widespread in Japan. These beliefs, coupled with a view of English as only being necessary in a “culturally exotic environment and... [in] encounters with native speakers” (Sergeant, 2005, p. 341), have led many Japanese people to view proficiency in English as a goal only attainable by an elite few. Some researchers have gone so far as to argue that “Japanese people may define their continued weakness in English as part of a cultural narrative of Japaneseness” (Toh, 2015, p. 127). The previously discussed wide-spread belief, held by both policy makers and the general public, that Japanese people need to master English in order to be truly successful, coupled with this belief that English fluency is in some way beyond the grasp of the average Japanese person, has led to a tension in both public and private discourse on English education in Japan.

The conflicting messages from government, business and broader society all serve to inform the ideologies and belief systems of individuals living in Japan. Some of these individuals provided data for the needs analysis carried out at a Japanese fashion college in Tokyo. These data and results are presented next, and they should be read in light of the social and ideological context surrounding English language learning in Japan.

4. METHODOLOGY OF THE NEEDS ANALYSIS

A needs analysis was conducted at a fashion college located in central Tokyo, in Japan. The college offers a 4-year undergraduate program in fashion design or fashion business. A fashion junior college, which confers associate degrees, and a fashion vocational school, which confers certificates, are affiliated with the main college and share the same campus, while offering shorter courses. To provide a balanced and well-rounded perspective on the needs of the students at this university, data from a variety of stakeholders was collected through semi-structured interviews (professors, university staff and alumni) and questionnaires (first-year undergraduate students). In addition, records of the employment paths of graduates of the college, data from popular websites that advertise full and part-time positions in the fashion industry, and literature from previously published studies on the needs of Japanese workers and fashion workers were used to provide insight into the context in which students will need to work, as well as provide additional information about the more general language needs of the Japanese workforce.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the head of the college's English program, the president of the vocational school affiliated with the college, the head of the career center at the college, and an alumnus of the college who runs her own clothing store. These informants were chosen due to the fact that they could offer information on the language needs of the students, as well as the type of tasks which the students would need to perform in the future. The president of the vocational school had had a long career in the fashion industry as a writer and colorist, before being recruited to be president of the vocational school. She was therefore able to offer first-hand information about what types of tasks require English proficiency in the world of fashion. The head of the English program had been teaching at the college for over 10 years and had many experiences of trying to prepare students for both part-time and full-time work. The English head was therefore able to provide insight into what students explicitly requested in terms of English proficiency, as well as offer glimpses into the mindset and beliefs of students. The alumnus had started her own clothing store and fashion design business after graduating from the college. She was therefore familiar both with the English syllabus offered at the college and with the types of tasks which require English proficiency in the world of fashion business. All three of these informants are Japanese nationals whose first language is Japanese. All three are also highly proficient in English.

Although these three informants could provide “reliable task-based descriptions of what... [fashion] work involves” (Long, 2015, p. 111) and insight into “traditional local patterns of participation and learning” (Long, 2015, p. 114), we felt it was imperative to also include perspectives from the undergraduate students themselves, especially as it was this group for which language materials would eventually be designed based on the results of the needs analysis. Questionnaire data from 155 first-year undergraduate students was therefore also included in this needs analysis. The questionnaire consisted of two open-ended questions. The first question was, ‘Do you think studying English is necessary?’, and the second question was, ‘Why do you think so?’. This questionnaire was distributed to first-year undergraduate students following attendance of a mandatory once-off lecture by the head of the English program on the topic of globalization and English.

5. RESULTS OF THE NEEDS ANALYSIS

Qualitative analysis of the interview data showed that TOEIC scores were viewed as very important for finding a good job in the fashion industry. The head of the career center explained that all job application forms have a section for filling in TOEIC scores and described high TOEIC scores as a powerful weapon during a job search. This view of the importance of TOEIC scores was shared by the head of the vocational school, and also appeared frequently in the previous literature on English use in business in Japan (Aikawa, 2014; Nakamura, 2003).

However, analysis of actual online advertisements for positions in the fashion industry showed a somewhat unexpected result. Positions advertised online in March of 2018 at Uniqlo and GU, two Japanese apparel retailers, were analyzed according to the requirements listed for each job (Job openings for Designers and Pattern makers, 2018, March). Surprisingly, TOEIC scores were not mentioned in any of the job postings. Even more

surprising was the fact that of the 18 postings for designers and pattern makers, 17 stated that English was *not* required, but that a conversational English ability was preferred. Only one post listed English beyond a conversational ability as a requirement for the position, and this was for a graphic design position. This presented the researchers with two somewhat contradictory findings that would need to be reconciled before decisions about curriculum design were taken.

TOEIC scores were only one small aspect of the needs analysis, the main focus of the analysis being on uncovering which tasks would be necessary for students to perform in English when working in the fashion industry. Several tasks were highlighted by the interviewees as necessary when working in the fashion industry. These included: explaining things to customers, negotiating with customers, writing up spec sheets, sending and receiving business emails, collecting information online about fashion trends, and negotiating and communicating with overseas business colleagues. The head of the English program and the alumnus also mentioned being able to have casual conversations to improve rapport as a necessary task.

In terms of the undergraduate students themselves, in response to the questionnaire, they listed several tasks which they would like to be able to perform in English. These tasks included: serving customers at part-time jobs at restaurants, negotiating sales with customers at part-time jobs, giving directions to lost tourists, expressing opinions and feelings to tourists visiting Japan, having casual conversations with foreigners and using English to do shopping when travelling abroad. The students also answered questions about whether they believed studying English was necessary.

In response to the question, 'Do you think that it is necessary for you to study English?', 86% of students answered yes. Of the remainder, 6% thought English was only necessary for some people, 3% thought it was unnecessary to study English and 5% did not respond to the question (see Figure 1, Appendix A). The reasons given by the students who felt that English study was necessary are summarized in Figure 2 (Appendix B). Twenty three percent of students thought it was necessary to study English for work, either full or part-time. Another 23% mentioned the global spread of English and its use as a lingua franca as the reason for viewing English study as necessary. The general usefulness of English was the reason given by 22% of students, and the increasing numbers of foreign visitors to Japan was listed by 8% of students. Six percent of students felt it was necessary to study English in order to travel internationally. The remaining 11% of students gave a variety of reasons which did not easily fall into any of the larger categories. Seven percent of students did not provide a reason for feeling that English study was necessary.

The final data source used in the needs analysis was previously published literature on English use in the Japanese workplace. Three studies, Aikawa (2014), Lambert (2010), and Nakamura (2014), provided perspectives from both people working in the business industry as well as companies looking to hire graduates with English proficiency. The results of an analysis of these studies can be seen in Table 1 (Appendix C). In general, written tasks such as emailing in English and filling in forms were frequently found to be necessary in business. One task which had not been mentioned by our other informants so far was translating English into Japanese and vice versa.

How the results of this needs analysis can be interpreted in light of the social and ideological realities of Japan, is discussed in the next section.

6. DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS IN LIGHT OF THE JAPANESE CONTEXT

While the needs analysis provided an interesting list of tasks which could be used as the basis of an English language learning curriculum, there were a few unexpected issues concerning reality, beliefs and actual needs. The most obvious of these was the somewhat contradictory evidence about the necessity of TOEIC scores provided by the interviewees and as revealed by an analysis of job advertisements. As mentioned previously, TOEIC scores do seem to be widely used in the business world as a requirement for hiring and promotion. However, this needs analysis also points toward the reality that the majority of Japanese people do not meet the rather stringent requirement of a score of 700 or more. Faced with this reality, it seems that fashion businesses themselves have been forced to accept that less stringent English requirements are the only realistic way of approaching the labor market. This can be seen in the absence of English as a requirement in online job postings, and the use of conversational English ability as the benchmark when English is mentioned in job advertisements.

In the case of the college at which the needs analysis was carried out, the authors were somewhat surprised to consistently hear that TOEIC scores were necessary for working in the fashion industry in Japan. This was because the college had for many years offered students the opportunity to take the TOEIC test at the college at a slightly discounted rate. However, in the past few years, so few students signed up for the test, that it had to be cancelled. This shows that while all evidence may seem to point towards one conclusion, it is only by examining the broader social context of situations that we can fully understand the reality on the ground. While almost everyone seems to agree that TOEIC scores are important, the reality is that very few people are able to achieve the required scores. In this environment, college students should not be unrealistically expected to perform at a level far beyond their current proficiency, but rather should be allowed to improve at a realistic pace, and be made aware that achievement of a TOEIC score of over 700 is likely to require independent study well after graduation from university.

The second somewhat unexpected result from the needs analysis was the need for translation skills in the business industry that was revealed through a review of previously published literature. Currently, as shown by the interviews with our informants as well as students' comments on the questionnaire, spoken communicative English tends to be foregrounded in education. The fact that translation and interpretation may be an important part of students' working lives would suggest that there is a place for translation and interpretation activities in the university English classroom. The implementation of these activities would nevertheless need to take into account the current climate in which both students and teachers tend to favor communicative activities, and implementation would need to be done sensitively and without resorting to rote drill-type translation exercises. Offering English classes focused solely on spoken communicative English may offer the illusion of providing students with sufficient opportunities to acquire authentic English, but the reality is

that translation is arguably just as authentic a task as conversation in terms of how students will use English in the future.

The needs analysis also revealed that while the teachers and heads of the college tended to place emphasis on tasks which students would need to perform in English in their future workplaces, students themselves focused just as much on current needs, such as the need to give directions to tourists, as they did on future needs. We can infer from this that students themselves already feel a need to use English in a variety of situations in their daily lives. Their current need for more casual, conversational English, or the need for English that can be used in part-time jobs, should not be overlooked by teachers in favor of teaching solely to the more distant need for English in the workplace. The casual, conversational type of English, and the simpler customer service English, for which students feel a need now, could serve as a link to acquiring the more formal business English they will need in future.

7. OVERCOMING THE GAP BETWEEN ILLUSION AND REALITY

After careful consideration of the results of the needs analysis, it was decided that implementation of a curriculum which successfully addressed students' needs would only be possible if the illusions presented by certain ideologies and certain datasets could be reconciled with the realities of English proficiency and English use in Japan.

As a first step we realized that setting unrealistic goals in the form of excessively high TOEIC scores would be counter-productive. In addition, at this college, simply offering the TOEIC test would not have succeeded in fulfilling the students' need for high TOEIC scores for promotion in their future jobs. Consequently, a course aimed at allowing students to study the content of the TOEIC test at a suitable level of difficulty, without requiring students to actually take the test, was introduced into the college offerings. In this way we were able to acknowledge the necessity of TOEIC scores in Japan while also acknowledging the current levels of proficiency of the students.

In addition, a task-based syllabus which included tasks aimed at students' current need for English in their part-time work as well as their future need for English in the workplace was introduced into an existing English course. While this syllabus has only recently been introduced, indications from feedback questionnaires are that students find the tasks relating to their current English needs to be especially motivating. This is an example of how acknowledging a wide variety of perspectives, beyond only those of domain experts, can lead to the creation of a more balanced syllabus which students are more likely to be motivated by. It also shows how important it is to understand that a general belief does not automatically translate into practical action, such as students' actually making an effort to learn English, or feeling motivated about lessons. In this particular college, students overwhelmingly agreed on the importance and necessity of English, but it was only after students were given the opportunity to learn English which was practically and authentically useful in their daily lives, that changes in students' motivation and effort toward learning English could be seen.

8. CONCLUSION

We hope that this study has revealed the importance of fully understanding the social and ideological forces at work when conducting a needs analysis. Whilst certain tasks may on the surface appear to be highly necessary or highly irrelevant, digging deeper into the ideologies which inform these beliefs can lead to a greater understanding of the realities of the context in which a curriculum will be implemented, as well as offer insight into the best manner of implementation. By doing this the authenticity of the curriculum which is developed based on the needs analysis can be increased, while at the same time increasing the chances that the curriculum will be successfully adopted and implemented by teachers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would like to thank the various college stakeholders who participated in the needs analysis study and offered valuable information about the English language needs of those working in the fashion industry.

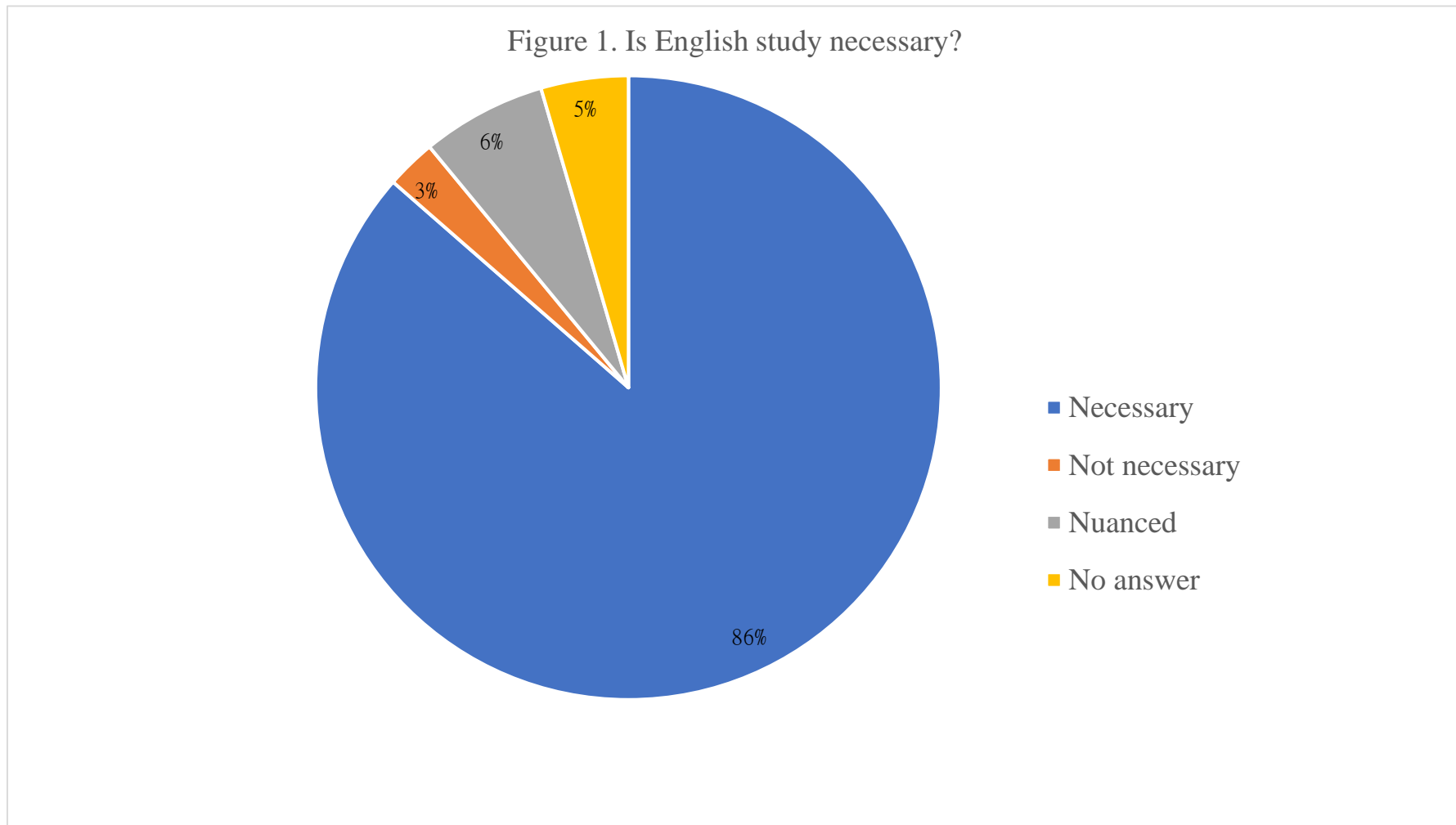
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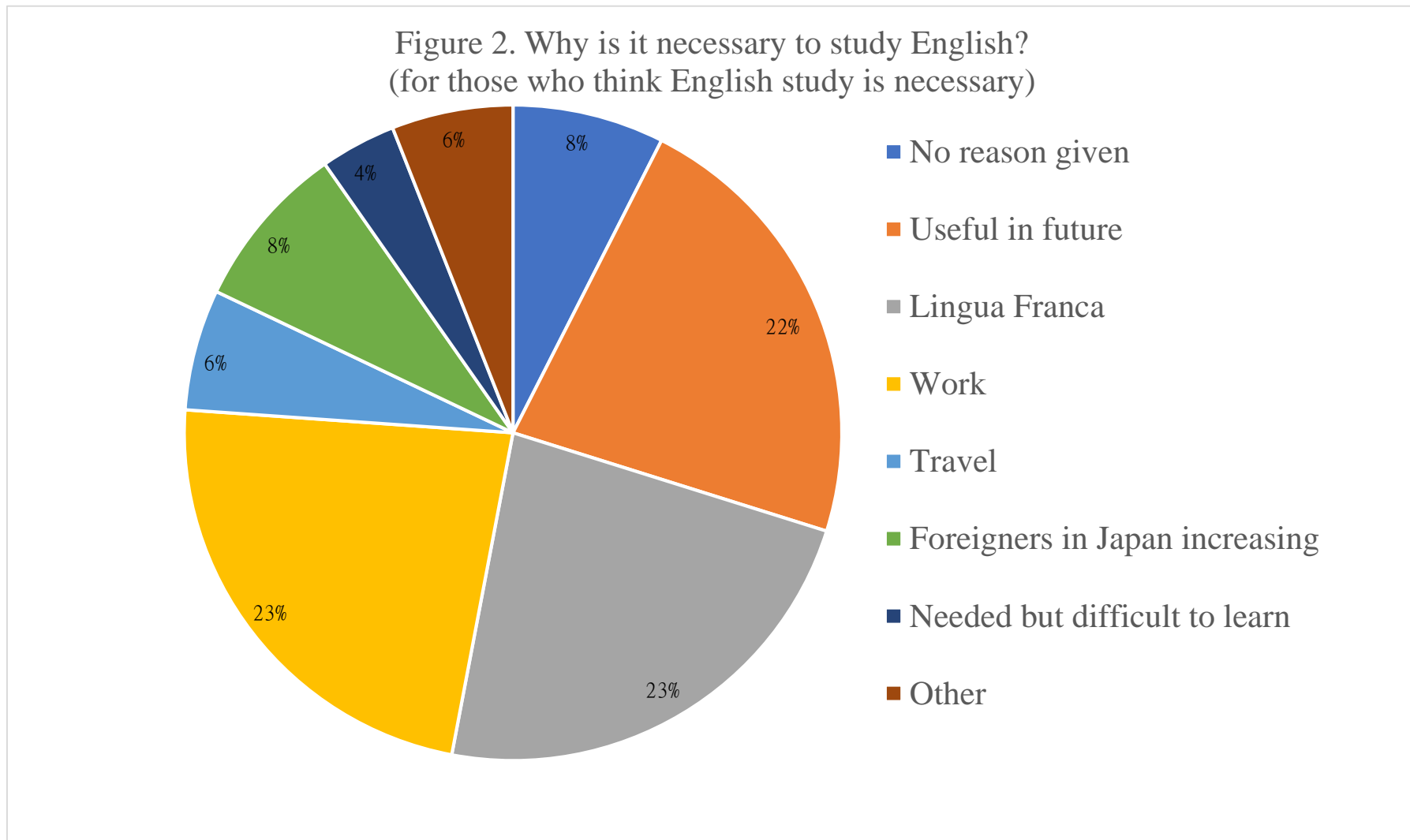
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APPENDIXES

Appendix A. Figure 1



Appendix B. Figure 2.



Appendix C Table 1. Published needs analyses: English of business people in Japan

	Participants	Instruments	Tasks done in English
<u>Aikawa</u> <u>2014</u>	6 business professionals aged 20s to 50s	Interviews	Emailing (Daily) Compiling reports Making documents for meetings Making presentation slides Communication on chat and message boards Attending meetings & writing minutes Teleconferences Symposiums & Business trips Telephone calls Business lunches or dinners
<u>Lambert</u> <u>2010</u>	Graduates Business & Education experts	Questionnaires Interviews Employment records	Locating information from English sources Translating documents from English to Japanese Summarizing English information in Japanese Creating and editing official English documents Interpreting between Japanese and English speakers Sending and receiving official emails. Making telephone inquiries
<u>Nakamura</u> <u>2014</u>	Major employers of business graduates. Subject lecturers.	Questionnaires Interviews	Introducing the company and products Making & answering phone calls Answering complaints & Rejecting suggestions Filling out forms Emailing Translating documents