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Doing Business in the Global Village: Japanese Professionals on EL Needs in Singapore

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This paper presents an analysis of English language (EL) education from the perspectives of Japanese and non-Japanese professionals in Singapore, based on their experiences of "doing business" in Singapore. As established career business people, the perspectives of Japanese participants offer a retrospective evaluation of their experiences of EL education in Japan over a range of years. The findings resonate with reforms attempted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2002). The study also reveals a discrepancy between skills these Japanese professionals learned in the EL education system in Japan and actual EL skills required for their work in an international business environment.

Introduction

Singapore's longstanding plan to become a regional hub is perhaps most evident in its economic development plans. The Economic Development Board (EDB) was established in 1961 to promote of new industries in Singapore and accelerate development of existing ones (Tan, 1999). Activity in the 1980s established Singapore as a site for regional headquarters where multinational companies (MNCs) located research and development (R&D) facilities, purchasing, marketing and other higher-value-added service oriented activities. The goal of Industry 21 was to consolidate Singapore as a leading centre of knowledge driven

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activities and a location of choice for company headquarters, with responsibilities for product and capability charters.

Japanese businesses similarly had to contend with internationalisation and globalisation in business and industry. As Japanese companies expanded overseas, they had to compete in a global marketplace where English emerged as the lingua franca of international business. This is particularly true of Singapore, where English is the language of business and administration. To succeed in the international business arena, companies require staff who can do business competently in English, in order to help them be competitive and maintain or increase their market share.

Evidence shows Japan's economy losing its competitive edge since the early 1990s. Although Japan was the leader in foreign investment stock in Singapore in 1988, followed by the US and European Union, by 1998, it had been overtaken by the US (Tan, 1999). Japan's loss of national competitiveness has been attributed to various causes. Scholars have argued that the poor English communication skills of Japanese business people has been a major factor in undermining Japan's strengths and appeal to foreign investors and companies.

Mr Lee Kuan Yew, a former Prime Minister of Singapore, expressed this directly when awarded an honorary Doctor of Laws from Waseda University in Japan. He offered advice on economic revitalisation of Japan and, in this context, addressed the English skills of Japanese people:

> That well-educated Japanese can all read and write English is well known. But most are not comfortable speaking English. In this globalised world, to speak only Japanese is to be at a disadvantage when competing against executives from other countries. (Kwan, 2003)

This paper presents an analysis of English language (EL) education from the perspectives of Japanese and non-Japanese professionals in Singapore, based on their experiences of "doing

business" in Singapore. As established career business people, the perspectives of Japanese participants offer a retrospective evaluation of their experiences of EL education in Japan over a range of years. The findings resonate with reforms attempted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2002). The study also reveals a discrepancy between skills these Japanese professionals learned in the EL education system in Japan and actual EL skills required for their work in an international business environment.

Background

In approaching the experiences of Japanese users of English for business purposes, scholars have noted that such individuals may experience communication difficulties as a result of low English language proficiency and their lack of cross-cultural understanding (Kinoshita and Kobayashi, 1993; Takeuchi and Ishikura, 1994). Studies have additionally documented users' lack of negotiation skills and lack of understanding of international business practices and manner (Takeuchi and Ishikura, 1994). Scholars have asserted that Japanese users of English possess inadequate skills related to the translation and presentation of technical information from Japanese to English, and lack of respect from local staff because of poor English (e.g., Furuya, 1996; San Antonio, 1988). Japanese users of English have also struggled with the organization of discourse, including style markers, in negotiations (Yamada, 1997). Local, non-Japanese staff have complained that poor EL skills of Japanese workers impeded the smooth flow of work (Kinoshita & Kobayashi, 1993). Yoshihara et al. (2001) reported that the low EL proficiency of Japanese staff required that content of meetings be kept simple and that staff members could not discuss matters in depth or in great detail. In such an environment, Japanese staff members with high EL proficiency may likely need to translate for Japanese who cannot follow the proceedings and thus, meetings involving Japanese staff often take longer than necessary (Yoshihara et al., 2001; Kinoshita & Kobayashi, 1993). Costs increase as a result of the need for translation and other

additional resources (Yoshihara, et al., 2001). There is evidence that English was not regarded as important for promotion in Japanese companies in the recent past (Terasawa, 1997). There is also evidence that Japanese companies have not striven to utilise fully their Master of Business Administration (MBA) graduates from overseas universities (Yoshihara et al., 2001).

Morrow's (1995) investigation of the Toshiba Corporation EL training program found mismatches between skills the learners wanted to learn and the skills they used most in the workplace. The majority of learners chose speaking as the skill they most needed to improve, but admitted that reading was the skill most used in the office. Morrow concluded that learners' needs are difficult to determine as they change with time and circumstance; according to Saito (2004), reading and writing skills were as important as oral presentation skills for business people in Japan. Saito's findings corresponded with Morrow's (1995) view that Japanese learners tended to rush into learning conversational English despite business people's admission that speaking skills were not the most needed skill in the workplace. Findings from these studies suggest tension between modes of communication "most used" in the workplace and those "most needing improvement".

Between 2004 and 2007, Koike and more than 20 other researchers attempted to determine the level of EL proficiency necessary to conduct business internationally. Survey results suggest a direct correlation between high scores on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and ability to conduct international business negotiations effectively. The survey also revealed the current and desired status of EL proficiency in the Japanese business sector. The researchers recommended that: schools should set goals for EL achievement at each grade level, ensuring students' ability to communicate in a global economy; policies should be enacted to increased Japanese students' EL proficiency both qualitatively and quantitatively; those active in international business should develop strong negotiation skills, not

just EL proficiency; and national policies that prioritised enhanced English proficiency should be enacted.

Studies of these kinds suggest that while some communication difficulties Japanese business people experience in EL may relate to cultural differences, others may be attributable to approaches to EL teaching in Japan.

EL Education in Japan

For years, the Grammar-Translation method served as the foundational approach to English education in Japan, and still persists in many classrooms today. The main goal of the learning a foreign language, from such an approach, is to learn a language "in order to read its literature or in order to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from foreign language study" (Richards & Rodgers, 2014, p. 6). The focus of English study, from the secondary level, has been upon students' success on rote university examinations, for which students have largely been prepared via the grammar-translation approach (Honna, 1999).

Business leaders have argued, since the end of World War II, for English education that better equips Japanese users for interaction in the international community (e.g., Imura, 2003). In 1985, MEXT established educational guidelines for the promotion of communicative language teaching (CLT), an approach emphasizes "the significance of language function rather than focusing solely on grammar and vocabulary" (Harmer, 2001, p. 84). The main instruction principles were to develop well-balanced communicative competence, to have a learner-centred class, and to emphasize fluency rather than accuracy. Instructional practices promote use of authentic materials in class, role play to clarify the context, and pair-work, group information transfer activities, and problem-solving activities (Shirahata, Tomita, Muranoi, & Wakabayashi, 2004, p. 66). The Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) was established in 1985, importing native speaking

teachers from abroad to facilitate interactive classrooms and to expose learners to different cultural backgrounds (Riley, 2008).

Again, around the year 2000, lingering business dissatisfaction prompted government discussion of English education (Yoshida, 2003). Such was the intensity of the debate, that a commission established by the prime minister's office went as far as proposing consideration of adopting English as an official language in the country (Funabashi, 2000a; 200b). In this climate, MEXT (2002) again emphasized communicative ability in English, in a 'plan of strategy,' intending to cultivate Japanese citizens able to successfully negotiate interaction in the global community.

Although under the direction of the MEXT, junior high and senior high schools emphasised teaching oral communication in English since 2002, some language experts insist on the traditional approach. Saito (2003), a professor at Tokyo University, argued that as some Japanese people acquired excellent proficiency using traditional approaches, conventional teaching methods focusing on English grammar and reading of English texts were suitable for Japanese learners of English. He criticised the emphasis on spoken English, arguing that if learners acquired only skills to speak English and ignored English grammar, their proficiency would "plateau" at a certain point. "Plateauing" (Flynn & O'Neil, 1988) has been described variously in literature of the second language acquisition, including fossilization, the permanent cessation of second language development (Selinker, 1972). Indeed, the debate surrounding approaches to English education continues.

The Research Study: Perspectives of Japanese professionals in Singapore on their EL education

The aim of this research was to develop an understanding of the EL education of Japanese professionals located in Singapore. The study focused on the perspectives of Japanese professionals in Singapore on the impact of their EL education on their experiences as business people in Singapore, and on the

perspectives of professionals of other nationalities who worked with Japanese professionals in Singapore. Individual interviews were conducted with participants from each of these sources; two focus groups, one of Japanese professionals and one of non-Japanese professionals were recruited in addition to the individual participants.

Sampling strategies

Japanese participants. Purposeful sampling selected participants likely to hold specific information about the phenomenon (Hornby & Symon, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Japanese expatriates typically spend three to five years in an overseas posting. To ensure that the Japanese participants had opportunity to adjust to working life in Singapore and formulate informed views on the nature and levels of English proficiency required to work competently there, only participants with at least six months experience in Singapore were selected for individual interviews. In total, 18 Japanese expatriate workers who had spent an average of 2.9 years in Singapore agreed to participate in individual interviews. Most participants were educated primarily through junior and senior high schools in Japan as the research focused on the EL education that Japanese schools had provided. Further, these people were selected from the full range of businesses represented in Singapore. A cross-section of industries helped provide an in-depth understanding into how English is used to do business successfully in different business contexts. Profiles of participants in individual interviews are presented in Table 1. There were 5 female and 13 male participants in the age range from 20 to 40 years, but no participants above the age of 50, when many employees hold senior positions at managing director level or its equivalent. Two Japanese professionals in their 50s declined to participate in the study; one explained that his English proficiency was not good and that he did not use English in the workplace.

Table 1. Profile of Japanese Participants for Individual Interviews

Participant's Pseudonym	Age	Industry	Company morigin	Occupation	Length of Stay in Singapore
Kimura	Early 40s	Interior design	Japanese	Interior designer	1 year
Sugino	Mid 40s	Clothing	Japanese	General manager	4.5 years
Noda	Mid 30s	Telecommunication	Japanese	General affairs	6 years
Tomita	Early 40s	Electronics	Japanese	General manager	2 years
Nakamura	Late 30s	Telecommunication	Japanese	Sales director	1.5 years
Suzuki	Early 30s	Construction	Japanese	Civil engineer	4.5 years
Yagi	Late 30s	Hotel	Non-J	Counter clerk	1 year
Kondo	Late 30s	Consulting	Non-J	Consultant	5 years
Harada	Early 40s	Airline	Non-J	Customer service	10 years
Takeda	Mid 20s	Automobile	Japanese	Executive officer	2 years
Yamamoto	Early 30s	Banking	Japanese	Deputy manager	2 years
Morita	Late 30s	Control equipment	Japanese	Manager	1.5 years
Chiba	Early 30s	Chemical products	Non-J	Customer support	10 months
Takahashi	Mid 30s	Finance	Japanese	Financial product planner	2 years
Tani	Late 20s	Trading	Japanese	Assistant manager	2 years
Kato	Early 30s	Automobile	Japanese	Executive officer	1.5 years
Kitano	Early 40s	Electronic components	Japanese	Manager	1 year
Ogawa	Early 30s	Hotel	Non-J	Sales executive	4 years

Japanese Professionals: Group Discussion. Seven Japanese professionals, two female and five male, contributed to group discussions. All but one worked in Japanese companies; six were sent from Japan, while one found work after coming to Singapore. These participants shared a common interest and met weekly. They knew each other fairly well, and were comfortable in sharing frank and candid opinions during the discussion (Table 2).

Non-Japanese Participants. Non-Japanese participants provided a different perspective on the language problems Japanese business people face, which enabled the researcher to identify existing and potential problems overlooked by Japanese participants. Non-Japanese interview participants had worked at least six months' with Japanese professionals in Singapore to ensure that they had sufficient experience to make a valuable contribution to the study. Their business relationship with Japanese professionals varied; some were colleagues, superiors or subordinates of Japanese professionals while others were clients, vendors or business partners (Table 3). Twelve non-Japanese people consented to participate in individual interviews.

Non-Japanese Professionals: Group Discussion. A group discussion was also held with non-Japanese business people who have worked or who were working with Japanese business people to get their views on the English usage and proficiency of Japanese people. These people knew each other well so they were quite outspoken during the discussion. The group of four included a Singaporean who had Japanese clients, an Australian with Japanese colleagues, and two Dutchmen who were working in a Japanese company with Japanese colleagues and clients. The latter two worked in the same company; Mr Bouma was an engineer and Mr Jansen was employed in the marketing department. The different backgrounds and experiences of these participants produced interesting and diverse perspectives from international business people on the EL proficiency of Japanese expatriate workers in Singapore (Table 4).

Table 2. Profiles of Japanese Participants for Group Discussion

Participant's Pseudonym	Industry	Age	Company origin	Other information
Tanaka	Equipment company	Late 30s	Japanese	Engineer
Sano	Electronics company	Late 30s	Japanese	Sales and marketing
Murano	Computer company	Mid 20s	Non-J	Accounting
Fujita	Prefecture office	Early 30s	Japanese	
Sakai	Automobile company	Early 30s	Japanese	Took some courses at a university in the USA
Yabuki	Language school	Late 20s	Japanese	Japanese language instructor
Nagao	Electric company	Mid 30s	Japanese	Local recruitment

Table 3. Profiles of Non-Japanese Participants for Individual Interviews

Participant's Pseudonym	Nationality	Industry	Relationship with Japanese	Japanese language	Company origin
Yap	Singaporean	Chemical product company	Subordinates; Colleagues; Clients	Yes	Non-J
Abdul	Singaporean	IT industry	Colleague		Non-J
Ford	British	Business consultancy	Clients		Non-J
Goh	Singaporean	Language school (administrator)	Colleagues		Japanese
Roberts	American	Language school (instructor)	Colleagues		Japanese
Stevens	New Zealander	Software developer	Clients; Colleagues		Non-J
Yeo	Singaporean	Semiconductor industry	Superiors; Colleagues		Japanese
Wee	Malaysian	Real estate	Colleagues; Clients	Yes	Japanese
Quek	Singaporean	Travel agency; Construction company (2 companies)	Superiors; Colleagues	Yes	Japanese (both companies)
Lee	Singaporean	Chemical company	Superiors; Colleagues	Yes	Japanese
Singh	Singaporean	Software vendor	Clients	Yes	Non-J
Chan	Singaporean	Electronics company	Superiors; Colleagues	Yes	Japanese

Table 4. Profiles of Non-Japanese Participants for a Group Discussion

Participant's Pseudonym	**Industry**	**Nationality**	**Relationship with Japanese**	**Company origin**
Bouma	Machine tool industry; (Engineer)	Dutch	Superior; Colleagues; Subordinates	Japanese
Jansen	Machine tool industry; (Administration)	Dutch	Superiors; Colleagues; Subordinates	Japanese
Howard	Airline	Australian	Colleagues	Non-J
Tan	Art institution	Singaporean	Clients	Non-J

Perspectives of Japanese Professionals on EL Education in Japan

The main focus of this study was to clarify the perspectives of Japanese professionals on the EL education they received in Japan. The analysis consists of three sections: perspectives of Japanese professionals on the EL education they have received, both in school and outside school; perspectives of Japanese professionals on what they found useful and not useful in their EL education; perspectives of non-Japanese professionals on the EL proficiency of Japanese colleagues.

EL Education in School

Twenty-five Japanese professionals located in Singapore gave their views on the EL education they received. When these participants were in school, EL education in Japan started in the first grade of junior high school, or seventh grade. Typically, students in Japan had three years of EL education in junior high school and another three years in senior high school. At college or university, students who did not major in English studied EL as a liberal arts course or as a foundation course during their freshmen and sophomore years. If they majored in EL or literature, they studied English for all four years of their university education. If they chose to attend a two-year junior college, they were required to learn English throughout their program. Thus, those who graduated from college or university received at least eight years of EL education.

Of the 25 Japanese participants, five had studied in English-speaking countries, although the degrees they obtained and countries in which they studied differed. Mr Nakamura was sent by his company to a business school in the USA to pursue his Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree, while Mr Sakai took courses at a university in the USA. Ms Takeda completed a diploma course at an Australian university after graduating from college in Japan. Ms Kato and Ms Ogawa attended colleges in the

USA and in the UK respectively, after they graduated from two-year junior colleges in Japan.

All other participants completed their education, from elementary school to college, in Japan. Most participants said that they had no listening or speaking lessons in EL at junior and senior high school. The English classes in junior and senior high schools focused on learning to read English and on English grammar and composition. EL classes were mostly taught by Japanese teachers and many participants observed that the main goal was to pass entrance examinations for university. Mr Noda observed that as these entrance examinations rarely included speaking and listening tests, many people did not think it was necessary to learn to speak or listen in English. Thus, Mr Chiba recalled that he could obtain high grades in the English examinations in senior high school by memorising key English grammar and vocabulary.

Some participants had the advantage of learning English from native English speakers at their schools. Mr Yagi attended a public senior high school where EL education was emphasised and he was taught by a native English speaker there. Ms Yamamoto remembered that at her senior high school, she had fun in her English classes which were team-taught with an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) assigned by the Japanese Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. As she grew up in the countryside and had never seen foreigners before, it was a great opportunity for her to meet and talk with an ALT. Mr Fujita never saw foreigners or native English speakers in his hometown before he was an adult. Thus, when an ALT arrived, many people in the town looked forward to meeting him or her.

EL Education Outside School

Participants were asked whether they had studied English at language schools or any other schools outside the Japanese educational system. They were also asked if they had made further efforts on their own to study English, outside of the classroom. Their responses are summarised in three groups in Table 5.

Table 5. Additional EL education undertaken by participants

Groups	Participants	Attended a language school	Other efforts to study English language
1	Tomita	EL school in Japan for 1 year Company-sponsored English courses in Japan for several years	Studied English independently using materials and programs recommended by the company English lessons with a private tutor for 1 year in Singapore
	Yagi	EL school in Japan for 2 years	Studied at an EL school in the UK for 1 month
	Harada	EL school in Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore for 7 years	Listened to tapes and CDs of English conversation off-the-shelf
	Takahashi	EL school in Japan for 1 year	Listened to English radio programs on NHK education broadcasts
	Ogawa	EL school in Japan for 2 years	Studied at an EL school for 1 year in the UK Graduated with a diploma and degree from a British university
	Tanaka	Took a course on technical report writing in college	Received company training on technical report writing
2	Kimura	EL school in Japan for 3 months English language classes for adults in the USA for 3 years	
	Sugino	Joined the English-Speaking Society (ESS) in senior high school and at university as an extra-curricular activity	

Table 5 (Continued). Additional EL education undertaken by participants

Groups	Participants	Attended a language school	Other efforts to study English language
2	Nakamura	EL school in Japan for 2 years	
	Yamamoto	EL school in Japan for 1 year	
	Morita	60 hours of EL lessons at a language school in Singapore for 2 months	
	Chiba	Intensive, two-week course in English organised by his company in Japan	
	Tani	Intensive, 3-month course in English organised by the company for new employees	
	Kitano	EL school in Singapore for 3 months	
3	Suzuki		Listened to English conversation programs on the radio
	Kondo		Watched TV programs such as CNN and the BBC Practiced English using the "shadowing" method
	Sakai		Studied on courses in English at an American university
	Noda		Sent to the USA office as a trainee for 1 year
	Takeda		Graduated with a diploma from an Australian university
	Kato		Graduated with a degree from an American university

Group 1: attended an EL school AND made additional efforts; Group 2: attended an EL school only; and Group 3: made their own efforts only. Five participants did not offer any information.

Nearly half of the participants (12) attended EL schools, although the length of their attendance varied. Almost all who attended the language schools learned spoken or conversational English in either group or private lessons. Four participants attended EL classes in Singapore; two took English lessons before they arrived, while the other two took English lessons for the first time after they came to Singapore. Mr Morita's company paid for 10 hours of group lessons and 50 hours of private lessons for him in his first two months in Singapore. The other participant who took English lessons for the first time in Singapore stated that he felt the necessity of learning English, but he was not able to continue with the lessons beyond three months.

When asked about their efforts to study English on their own, two participants mentioned that they listened to cassette tapes and CDs of English conversation, storytelling or newscasts, which are easily available from bookstores in Singapore and Japan. Other participants said that they listened to EL radio programs broadcast by Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK, or Japan Broadcasting Association). NHK has an educational television and radio channel that broadcast not only in English but in other languages as well. A few participants also watched EL programs on NHK while one participant said that she watched news programs on the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and on CNN (Cable News Network) to improve her English.

What Japanese Professionals Found Useful in their EL Education

The 18 participants in individual interviews responded to three major areas of inquiry: what they found useful in their EL education in school, from junior high school to university; the usefulness of learning English at other institutions or by other methods such as self-study or listening to English media; and

which EL skills they considered most essential for working in the international business arena, based on their own experiences in Singapore.

What Was Useful in their EL Education in School

In Japan, there has been much criticism of the EL education in junior and senior high schools because of the focus on English grammar. More than half of the participants (11) believed that the English grammar they learned at junior and senior high schools was useful, although they differed on the extent. Mr Kimura replied, "I guess the English grammar that I learned is useful for understanding the structure of English sentences". Mr Tani also agreed, saying that he found English grammar very useful when he has business dealings in English.

Mr Takahashi agreed that his own EL education had a strong emphasis on grammar but insisted that learning grammar was very important for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students. Mr Suzuki held a similar view and spoke positively of the English grammar and reading skills he learned in junior and senior high schools. He even commented favourably on the focus of studying English in order to qualify for university, which many other participants criticised. Mr Suzuki was the only person who believed that the reading skills taught in school were useful, while Mr Morita was the only participant who considered the English writing skills he learned in school useful.

Five participants felt that the English vocabulary they learned in school was useful. Mr Nakamura still uses English words and idioms memorised for exams by copying them repeatedly. Even Mr Chiba, who initially said he did not think what he learned in school was useful, admitted that although he had forgotten most of the English words he memorised in school, what little he remembered was of some use and it was "better than if he did not memorise them at all".

One reason that participants may not have found many of the things they learned in English class at school useful is because these English lessons were limited in scope, dealing with mainly grammar and reading. Mr Morita put it this way, "After all, there were only English grammar and reading classes, and English composition class which was not conducted as frequently as the other two in my school days". Several other participants echoed his sentiments. Unless they went to schools which had a special focus on EL education, most participants were taught only three skills in English – grammar, reading and composition. Some schools included composition in the grammar class, so participants might not have been aware that they learned English composition at school.

Thus, the majority of participants thought that the English grammar and vocabulary they learned in school were useful for conducting business in English. However, some participants expressed contradictory opinions. These are explored in the next section.

What Was Not Useful in their EL Education in School

Six participants claimed that the English grammar that they learned in school was not very useful. Interestingly, two participants, Mr Sugino and Ms Kato expressed ambivalent views. Mr Sugino explained that:

> Some people think that students are given a very good foundation in the EL, with a strong emphasis on grammar, in the EL education in Japan. It is very useful when they read and write. However, because grammar is stressed so much, Japanese people always think that they won't be understood unless they speak in grammatically correct sentences… People tend to hesitate to speak. ... As you know, people here and in other Asian countries often say "he don't know" and it is understood. But in Japan, people would say it is wrong. This difference is an example of the acceptance in Asia for less than perfect grammar. But for Japanese, when they are speaking, they have

> to constantly worry about grammar rules, and this is a burden for them.

The other participants who felt that the English grammar taught in schools was not useful gave similar opinions. Ms Kato said: "Paying too much attention to grammar crushes my willingness to speak". Mr Yagi expressed scepticism about studying for the university entrance examinations, stating that "the EL we learned at senior high school was for the entrance examinations, and a lot of the words and phrases were rarely used and there was a lot of nit-picking".

Similarly, two participants mentioned that the English vocabulary that they learned at senior high schools was not useful, although other participants disagreed. Both Mr Harada and Ms Takeda memorised an enormous number of English words when they studied for the university entrance examination, but Ms Takeda said that she had hardly seen these words since then. When he came to Singapore, Mr Harada realised that he had missed out on learning some simple English words used in everyday life and which Singaporeans learn in primary school. He did not know simple words such as "puppy" or "paw", or more difficult but common words like "photosynthesis" and "equation", that are basic to science and math classes.

Three participants contended that the way they learned how to pronounce English words was not useful. Mr Morita explained that he attended an EL school after he came to Singapore, and there his pronunciation was repeatedly corrected by a strict, unrelenting British teacher. He blamed the katakana way that he learned to pronounce English words in junior and senior high schools in Japan is for his pronunciation problems.

Katakana is one of the three different types of Japanese characters. Katakanas are phonograms used mostly for writing words borrowed from languages other than Chinese (Nippon Steel Human Resources Development, 1993, p. 269). Some English words borrowed into Japanese have been adapted to the Japanese

phonology which allows fewer possibilities in its syllable structure (consonant-vowel-consonant is permitted only if the last consonant is an 'n', so predominantly, the pattern is consonant-vowel, or vowel only). As a result, the initial or final syllables of many English words that contain multiple consonants (consonants clusters) are changed when borrowed into Japanese by having vowels inserted between the consonants in the clusters (e.g. 'Australia' becomes 'o-su-to-ra-ria').

Having been taught English in katakana style, Mr Tomita found that his pronunciation was incorrect and difficult for non-Japanese speakers to understand, and subsequently he found it an obstacle to learn correct pronunciation of English words. Mr Nakamura expressed the same concern. He believed that the Japanese teachers at his school, well-known for high success rates in university entry examinations, could not pronounce English properly; he attributes their failure to teach him proper English pronunciation to his continued problems with English pronunciation. In contrast, his wife has relatively good English pronunciation; in his wife's school, students were forced to practice pronunciation assiduously and were taught important details like where to put the tongue when pronouncing 'r' and 'l' sounds, and to practice speaking while looking in a mirror. Mr Nakamura wished he had received that kind of training in school.

As Mr Nakamura pointed out, 'r' and 'l' are considered difficult sounds to pronounce for Japanese speakers. Because they are simply variants of each other in Japanese, and considered to be the same sound, they cannot make a difference in meaning. In contrast, in English substitution of one sound by the other does result in a change in meaning in many cases: 'fries/flies, rice/lice; correct/collect'. Thus, the fact that 'r' and 'l' are distinct phonemes in English but not in Japanese means that Japanese speakers do not always hear the difference between the two sounds in English, which leads to comprehension problems. Moreover, Japanese speakers do not know when one rather than the other should be used, which leads to a production problem. The katakana style of pronunciation and the confusion between 'l'

and 'r', characteristic of Japanese speakers of English were brought up by some of the non-Japanese participants as well. Such a feature of the pronunciation described by the participants is an indication of result of learning English through the grammar-translation method.

What Was Useful in Learning English Outside School

EL Schools. Twelve participants attended EL classes either in Japan or in Singapore for periods between three months and two years. The exception was Mr Harada who attended English classes for seven years – six months in a school in Japan, two years in Hong Kong when he was working there, and four and a half years in Singapore – and he continued to attend lessons in Singapore. He talked about his frustration when he first started these classes:

> Once a teacher asked me if I am satisfied with that. I knew what I wanted to say, but it would not come out… it just didn't come out. Then the teacher said, 'oh, you don't understand'. I wanted to tell her 'I do understand' or 'I have an opinion but cannot express it' but I could not even say that.

He identified some of the benefits of learning English at a language school:

> There are some learning methods in the language schools such as role-play, discussion and so on. But what is best there is that students are put in a circumstance where they have to get words out. Sometimes the role-play looks silly but it provides a platform for the students to speak to one another.

Six other participants agreed that they found learning English in language schools useful, as it provided opportunities to speak English which they did not have in school. However, on the basis of his experience, Mr Nakamura felt that just attending EL classes would not make one proficient in speaking English. Before he went to the US for his MBA degree, He found that the textbook based English lessons that he took before going to the US for his MBA were ineffective. Later, in private, one-on-one English

lessons, together with the instructor, he decided on a topic for each class and they talked about it in English, which he found to be very effective.

Not all participants who attended EL schools found the experience useful. Mr Morita's company-sponsored English classes included 10 hours of group lessons and 50 hours of private lessons. In group lessons, he was enrolled in the basic class, where the other students were all children from Thailand, India, and China. When he was promoted to the business English class, as mentioned earlier, his pronunciation was corrected relentlessly by a British teacher, but he felt it was not useful at all because nobody in his workplace spoke British English. Once he started work in Singapore, he was very busy and it became difficult for him to attend the classes regularly. He sometimes took an hour-long lesson during lunchtime but because he attended only sporadically, by the time of his next lesson, he would have forgotten all that he had learned in the previous lesson. He pointed out that attending English classes would not bring satisfactory results unless one was able to commit to attending the classes for a few hours every day.

Mr Chiba had negative experiences because the level and the timing of the EL course were unsuitable. Soon after he started working he was sent on a company-sponsored, intensive English course for the full-day course for two weeks. There were only three students and a teacher who used role-plays and skits to simulate common business situations. One of the students would act as the facilitator of a business meeting and lead the discussion. Mr Chiba said:

> It was pain and suffering. The level of English required was so high. I was exhausted for those two weeks. At that time, my English level was not very high and also, I was new to the company so I did not realise how helpful it would be at that time. If I had the opportunity to attend the same course again now, it would be meaningful for sure.

Mr Kitano also found lessons at an English school ineffective. He signed up for two hours of private English lessons a week with a British instructor at a language school on arrival in Singapore. When asked, he specified business English as his particular learning preference, but he did not find the classes helpful. He stated that there was no curriculum for the class at all. In every class, he was asked to read a short written text before being questioned about the text. This question-and-answer style did not suit him as he found the content of the text too difficult to understand; even when he understood the teacher, he was not able to express himself. He also doubted her competence as a teacher of business English as she did not seem to have had much experience teaching the subject. He eventually quit the school after a few months. He felt that "the class would have been easier to understand if the instructor had understood Japanese and I could have used Japanese during the class". Mr Kitano was still undecided about whether he should find another school and try to take English lessons again.

What the Participants Found Useful in Other Methods of Learning English. Some participants found that listening to English conversation programs on NHK radio and television useful in improving their English. Mr Suzuki thought that the program on business English was especially beneficial. Ms Kondo watched English TV programs and listened to English radio and found these media particularly effective in improving her listening skills. She also practiced her English using the "shadowing" method, commonly used to train interpreters and teach advanced learners (Yajima, 1998). In this method, also called "repeating", "follow-up", or "reproduction" (Yajima, 1998, p. 36), learners try to reproduce exactly what they hear - someone speaking or a taped speech - immediately on hearing it. This method is expected to help learners to develop listening and speaking skills and also to master the timing for interpretation (Yajima, 1998, p. 30).

Like Mr Nakamura, Mr Tomita worked with his private tutor to re-enact business situations in which he had to speak English. They practiced dealing with the problematic situations he

encountered in his workplace, usually with the local staff. He would explain the situation to his tutor who would advise him on what he could say to convince the local staff. The method that these two participants employed for learning English is the Situational Approach, which focuses teaching on situations learners might encounter in their lives or in their workplace (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In this approach, many different situations can be created according to the needs of learners. However, the approach has serious limitations: lack of systematic teaching of grammar; an established method for selection and arrangement of appropriate situations into a coherent syllabus; and transfer of language skills beyond the context of the selected situations, even if learners are able to master the apposite expressions and vocabulary (Wilkins, 1976).

Mr Tomita made many efforts to improve his English proficiency, attending company-sponsored English courses, English classes in language schools, English correspondence courses and an intensive course in business English. As head of employee training at his workplace, he introduced courses on making effective presentations which he attended himself. He took pride in working hard on his English, saying that "I have worked very hard to learn English, a lot harder than the other Japanese staff". As the result, his TOEIC score of less than 500 when he first joined the company increased to 830 just before he was sent to Singapore.

Mr Tanaka, an engineer in an equipment company, identified the writing style he learned at university and at the company as very useful. He explained that:

> In the standard of writing style taught at university and used in the company, the key finding of the report have to come at the beginning. And then, the results of the experiments follow. As I am an engineer, I am required to write a lot of technical reports. Although I learned this style writing in the Japanese language, it applies to writing in English.

In Mr Tanaka's department, a standard report-writing format in which the main finding appears at the beginning made technical reports easy to understand. The narrative style usually used his subordinates, he believed, was inappropriate for technical reports; therefore, he had to ask them to use the department format in their technical reports. Mr Sano experienced similar problems with his subordinates at his workplace, an industrial equipment company. His subordinates tended to write the minutes of conferences and meetings in a long-winded narrative style while he required them to summarise and write the information concisely. Mr Sakai, employed in an automobile company, agreed on the usefulness of the writing techniques, and like Mr Sano and Mr Tanaka, emphasised the importance of using the writing style appropriate for the purpose, in their case, for the purpose of technical reports.

Suggestions for EL Education in Japan

Almost all suggestions related to improving Japanese students' English-speaking abilities. Many participants suggested introducing English-speaking classes while others favoured teaching more advanced skills such as presentation skills (Table 6).

Table 6. Suggestions of Japanese participants for EL education in Japan

Category	**Examples**
Speaking	Practice speaking in English in class from junior high school Give students the opportunities to speak English (outside class) Teach students correct pronunciation at an early age
Listening	Practice listening in English class
Grammar	Teach solid grammar in elementary school Relax the grammatical rules on spoken English in school
Resources	Speeches of famous people eg. Kofi Annan Popular songs Japanese history and culture
Teaching Methods	Teach more practical English Encourage students to discuss freely in class Have students make presentation in class

	Develop students' public-speaking ability Conduct drama classes in English Hold debates in English Develop logical thinking and coherent argument Have students work on projects in groups
Other Strategies	Home stay programs Boost the motivation of students to learn English Give students opportunities to attend international event Increase the number of English classes at school Accept Japanese-style English in the classroom Have native English speakers as teachers in class Teach some of the other subjects in English

It is clear from Table 6 that suggestions focused on improving the English-speaking proficiency of Japanese students. Mr Chiba approved of giving students opportunities to learn conversational English in school, especially the opportunity to interact with native English speakers at an early age. He thought that these classes should be compulsory, so that all the students would have a chance to learn to listen and speak in English. Several participants agreed, stressing the importance of speaking or conversation classes in school and offering suggestions for instructional approaches to conversation classes at school. Those who had studied in universities in the USA, UK or Australia, based their suggestions on these experiences. Ms Takeda who majored in linguistic psychology in Japan and studied Japanese language education for her diploma in Australia described her experiences at an Australian university:

> I was so impressed and also surprised when I first saw a drama class in university. It was not so much the theatrical performance, but the fact that the students expressed themselves so openly. Japanese people tend to be poor at showing their emotions. I thought it would be good for Japanese students to practice expressing their opinions in English in public. In my schooldays, there were many students in a class in junior and senior high schools in Japan, but now I hear that the number of students in a class has decreased quite drastically so I think now is a good time to encourage students to express themselves publicly, which works well in smaller classes.

Ms Ogawa studied tourism management at a university in the UK after studying EL and literature at a two-year junior college in Japan. Based on her experience of studying English for practical purposes, she recommended the teaching methods used at her university:

> We would practice writing a paper on an assigned article from the newspaper, which we later have to present to an imaginary boss. We would have to present our arguments persuasively. This practice was very useful to me once I started working in a hotel. We also had group projects where we had to work in groups of six. We had to do research and write a report on our completed project. We also had to present our findings in class. This practice turned into reality when I started work and was assigned the exact same project I worked on in university. I found these classes very useful in preparing me for work and at the same time, they helped me improve my English proficiency. In fact, many students from non-native English speaking countries, like me, have improved their English through these classes.

Some participants based their suggestions on their experience of sending their children to international schools, instead of the Japanese school in Singapore. Mr Kimura explained that:

> This may not be related to the issue of EL education in Japan but I feel Japanese students lack the ability to express their opinions clearly in public. The educational system in Japan does not facilitate or encourage people to do so. What surprised me most was when my children started to go to the international school, there were presentation classes in elementary school. Students are required to explain logically how they went about the assignment. I was so impressed when I saw my children making presentations in class.

Similarly, Mr Sugino commented that his daughter never hesitated to speak publicly to anyone. Both parents pointed out that students in Japan are not taught to express their opinions in public, and therefore they are not able to do so when they enter the workforce. Both Mr Sugino and Mr Kimura felt that that being able to speak

up in public was an important skill in the workplace and students should be encouraged to express themselves in class.

Many participants felt that EL classes should be fun and should boost the students' motivation to learn. Only Mr Takahashi was of the opinion that fun was not necessary in class; he was convinced of the necessity for students to have a solid knowledge of English grammar. He said that "focusing on grammar at school is good" and recommended that the grammar should be introduced to students in elementary school; he believed that it would be easier for them to learn grammar at a younger age as they were more open to new ideas.

Some participants thought that discussion on Japanese culture and history in English would be important and useful. One participant explained that when he was sent to the US and later to Singapore, he regretted his ignorance about Japan. When asked about his country, he was not able to explain its culture and history properly to non-Japanese acquaintances. This was partly because he was not very knowledgeable about his own country but he found that even when he knew what he wanted to say, he was unable to express himself clearly in English. Thus, he realised that the importance of knowing one's own country, its culture and history, and of being able to discuss them in English. Therefore, he thought it very useful to teach this to students in schools.
Some participants suggested that students should be motivated to study English for its own sake, rather than just to pass the university entrance examinations. Based on their experiences, some had not expected that they would need English after school. For example, Mr Fujita thought that once he started working, he would not need to use English. Ms Yabuki said that when she was studying English, she did not think about how she would use the English that she was learning:

> EL was just one of the courses that we had to take. I studied it in the same way as I studied mathematics and history. I did not even imagine that there were actually people who used English in this world when I was studying English at school.

She added that if she had known that she would need to use English as she does now, she would have had a different attitude and studied harder. Ms. Yabuki's remarks highlight her lack of envisioning the future needs of English in her career, resulting in her lack of motivation for study. With the current globalised world, which is expected even more globalised in future, it is considered necessary to show the picture of future needs of English to Japanese students and motivate them in their early stage of learning (Gardner and Lambert, 1972).

Non-Japanese Counterparts Perspectives on EL Proficiency of Japanese Professionals

This section is concerned the perspectives of non-Japanese professionals on the EL workplace proficiency of Japanese professionals located in Singapore. The first part focuses on perspectives on EL proficiency in five situations in the workplaces of Japanese professionals located in Singapore. The second part reports how non-Japanese grade the EL proficiency of the Japanese professionals across the four key EL skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing as they are utilised in the workplace.

Japanese Professionals' EL Proficiency in the Workplace

The non-Japanese participants all had business relationships with Japanese professionals, either as superiors, colleagues, subordinates or clients. They were asked how well Japanese professionals managed the following situations in English:

1) understanding the proceedings of business meetings with non-Japanese people;
2) participating actively in business discussions with non-Japanese people;
3) handling tough business negotiations with non-Japanese people;

4) handling routine daily communications (excluding meetings) with non-Japanese colleagues in the workplace; and
5) to assess whether Japanese professionals have sufficient English proficiency overall to do business successfully in Singapore.

Perspectives on the EL competence of Japanese professionals were categorised into one of five groups: a) no problems managing the situation; b) could cope if the situation was fairly simple or limited in scope, or if they had help; c) only some were able to handle the situation; d) had difficulty managing the situation, and e) no capacity to handle the situation in question.

Six of 13 participants believed that their Japanese co-workers had no problems understanding the proceedings of meetings in English whereas two noticed that Japanese staff encountered problems during meetings. Four participants stated that some Japanese workers were able to understand the discussion at meetings while others were not.

Five participants thought that their Japanese co-workers participated actively in business discussions with non-Japanese people, whereas three felt that their Japanese colleagues struggled with this. Ms Quek noted that only some of her Japanese co-workers at the construction company could take part in discussions, while another participant pointed out that his clients were comfortable discussing in English, but the engineers at his company were not able to discuss actively in English. Two participants thought that their Japanese colleagues were able to discuss actively only under certain conditions, such as if there was a Japanese person with high English proficiency present who was able to help by translating parts of the discussion.

Four participants were of the opinion that their Japanese colleagues had no problems handling tough business negotiations with non-Japanese in English, while four felt that their Japanese co-workers were not able to negotiate in English. Two believed

that their Japanese clients were able to negotiate in English, but in a limited way and not as aggressively as when they negotiated in Japanese.

Overall, two non-Japanese participants were of the opinion that the Japanese staff who worked with them or had business relationships with them had sufficient skills to handle all five business areas: business meetings, business discussions, business negotiations, and routine daily communications in the office and to do business competently. Mr Abdul, who worked in a software development company, had only one Japanese colleague, who worked on the localisation of software, a job that required high proficiency in both Japanese and English. Mr Abdul thought that his Japanese colleague was sufficiently competent in English to handle all five areas without any problems. Most other interviewees worked for Japanese companies where there were many Japanese staff and a wider range of English proficiency.

Assessment of English Skills by Non-Japanese Professionals

Non-Japanese professionals assessed the proficiency of the Japanese people they worked with in the four key EL skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They were asked to assign their Japanese colleagues' EL abilities one of four grades – Excellent, Good, Fair and Poor.

Three non-Japanese participants felt that it would be inaccurate to assess all their Japanese colleagues as a group, as there were major differences in their individual levels of EL proficiency. Therefore, they divided the Japanese staff in their workplace into two groups: staff with high English proficiency and staff with low English proficiency, and assessed each group separately on the four English skills. Therefore, although there are 12 non-Japanese participants surveyed on this topic, 16 groups of Japanese professionals in 13 workplaces (Ms Quek had two workplaces) were assessed.

In this entire exercise, only three 'Excellent' grades were given, all by Ms Quek. Two were given to the Japanese staff with high English proficiency in her current workplace, in the areas of listening and speaking respectively. She gave the other 'Excellent' grade to her former Japanese colleagues at a travel agency for their speaking skills.

Non-Japanese participants rated their Japanese co-workers highest in reading proficiency, with 12 out of 16 grades being 'Good'; only one person assessed reading skills of Japanese people in her workplace 'Poor'. Writing competence received high grades with eight grades of 'Good', and only two 'Poor' grades.

The speaking and listening proficiencies were judged to be weaker areas of Japanese professionals. Although two 'Excellent' grades were awarded for speaking proficiency, this skill was probably considered the weakest, receiving four 'Poor' grades and the highest number of grades of 'Fair' or worse (10 out of 16). The non-Japanese participants seemed to have conflicting views on the listening proficiency of Japanese professionals. This skill received the highest number of 'Poor' grades (5 out of 16) yet there were also nine grades of 'Good' or better in this area, perhaps indicating that there were differing levels of proficiency in this skill among Japanese professionals.

Thus, this assessment showed that non-Japanese professionals believed that Japanese professionals were generally good in reading and writing but weak in spoken English. As for the listening proficiency of Japanese professionals, there seems to be a variation in the skill level of different people and this is reflected in the wide range of grades awarded.

Discussion

The outcomes of this study show that Japanese professionals considered that optimal learning occurred in EL classes tailored to needs of the learners. Ideal settings include trained instructors, customised materials and students with appropriate proficiency

levels and learning goals. Japanese participants suggested improvements to EL education in Japan to ensure that future professionals would be sufficiently proficient in EL to do business successfully in the international business world. Almost all suggestions promoted improved conversational skills, while some went further and advocated more advanced skills like public speaking and persuasive speaking. Participants recommended more interactive lessons featuring discussions, presentations, debates and even drama. They thought it important to know about Japanese culture and history and discuss these subjects in English, and that students should be encouraged to express themselves and be taught to think logically and present their ideas clearly and coherently.

From the perspective of pedagogical methods of EL, the Japanese participants argued that the shortfalls in their English proficiency to meet the level of working on the equal footing with their co-workers, could be attributed to the Grammar-Translation method, and a de-emphasis of education for interaction. This notion is nothing new as it is well-known that this method leads to weaknesses in learners' speaking and listening skills. However, that this notion was confirmed by people, both Japanese and non-Japanese, who work at the very front line of international business, gives greater weight to instructional suggestions to the EL educational circles and teachers in Japan. This is not a denial of the necessity or importance of learning English grammar, but rather a call to reconsider the focus of education in light of practical English use.

Increasingly, Japanese companies have realised that business requires a much higher level of English proficiency than society in general. Some companies have established English as the in-house official language. Japanese offices of foreign-owned companies such as Citibank Japan, and Proctor and Gamble Co. Japan have used English as their official language for a long time. English became the official language at Nissan Motor Co. Ltd in 1999 after the take-over by the French automobile company, Renault SA (Adachi, 2004). Recently, some domestic Japanese companies

announced adoption of English as the official language in the workplace. Rakuten, a Tokyo-based e-commerce company dealing in online shopping, travel, banking, securities, credit cards, media portal and professional sports made English its official language in July 2012 (Rakuten website, 2013). Uniqlo, a division of Fast Retailing Co., Ltd., considered the most successful fast fashion company in Japan, with 852 stores throughout Japan and 410 stores overseas, adopted English as the official workplace language (Uniqlo website, 2013). These decisions attracted considerable attention from the media and the Japanese public; as two of the most popular companies in which college graduates aspire to work, the influence of their decisions on other Japanese companies cannot be overestimated.

Logically, official recognition of the pressures for EL proficiency created by internationalisation and globalisation, together with the pragmatic policies of Japanese businesses would be sufficient to overcome resistance at various levels of Japanese society and to drive change in acquisition of EL expertise in Japan. The study reported in this paper suggested that business people operating in international settings such as Singapore appreciated the potential negative impact of poor EL proficiency on their enterprises; modifying their employment and training strategies might reinforce changes set out in MEXT policies. Such optimism was short-lived. The Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development (Interim Report, 2011) identified unexpected changes:

- decreased numbers of Japanese students studying abroad since 2004, particularly in the US; contrary to this trend in Japan, other Asian nations such as China, India, and South Korea experienced an increase in the number of the students studying abroad; and
- decreased numbers of new Japanese employees who wish to work overseas.

Thus, in an increasingly globalised world, "inwardly looking attitudes" (Interim Report, 2011) of young Japanese people raised

grave concerns that Japan, like the Galápagos Islands, might become isolated from the rest of the world.

The Council of Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development (jointly established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT); the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW)) was founded to continue the MEXT initiative (2002), promoting human resources to enable globalisation and development as part of a national strategy to strengthen Japan over the long haul (Announcement of Cabinet Office, 2011).

Development of global human resources characterised by a "broad and well cultivated mind and profound expertise, willingness to find and solve problems, team-work and leadership skills (to bring together persons of various backgrounds), public-mindedness, moral sensibilities, and media-literacy" (Interim Report, 2011, p. 7) is considered vital to the future of Japan. As domestic industries have weakened, economic sustainability will require the efforts of workers beyond the nation's borders. The Council delineated five levels of global human resources qualification standards: communication skills for travels abroad; communication skills for daily life abroad interactions; communication skills for business conversation and paperwork; linguistic skills for bilateral negotiations; linguistic skills for multilateral negotiations.

The report acknowledges increases in the number of individuals with the first three levels of communicative competence, but a talent pool with appropriate linguistic skills for bilateral and multilateral negotiations is required to secure Japanese economic and social advancement in the international community. To meet an estimated demand for approximately 4.11 million workers with these skills by 2017, the Council identified two strategies: targeting approximately 10% of people between their teens and their 30s for study or work overseas (roughly 110,000 individuals); and strengthening English-language education in all levels of education. The Council recognised the importance of

enhancing opportunities for students to encounter foreign cultures and to develop communication skills in English and other languages and promoted overseas study for secondary school students, with the target of increasing the number of students who study overseas by the age of 18 years old to 30,000. The Council recommended drastic reform of the Japanese university entrance examination, so that secondary students would not be discouraged from overseas study.

Moreover, the Council promoted greater internationalisation of university education through two funding strategies: whole of university; and specific faculties or schools within a university. The aim is to "overcome the Japanese younger generation's 'inward tendency' and to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field" (Selection for the FY2012 Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development). The strategy targeted 80,000 students for overseas experience; added to the 30,000 people expected to experience overseas study by the age of 18 years, the projection is that 110,000 Japanese students will join the global human resources pool.

Thus, new action has been taking place in Japan. The big difference between this action and the MEXT initiative (MEXT, 2002) to cultivate 'Japanese with English Abilities' is that the initiative has been conducted not only by MEXT, but also by MITI, MOFA, MHLW, and industry circles. The strategies, widely deployed in Japan, connect English-language education in schools explicitly with the business world, constituting a true academic-industrial alliance. The focus on encouraging Japanese people to experience overseas study or work abroad is evident throughout these initiatives. Clearly, the Japanese expatriate business people stationed in Singapore whom the researcher interviewed embody this ideal and, as such, they have given eloquent evidence to bolster the importance of overseas experience.

Conclusion

This study investigated the reflections of Japanese professionals on the EL education they had received and their ability to use EL in their professional positions. From the study, it is clear that Japanese professionals should have sufficient English proficiency to handle common business situations in English on their own. They need to go beyond the minimum level of English required in their job and seek to improve to the point where they can express themselves appropriately and relate well to their non-Japanese colleagues. Only with this high level of English proficiency can Japanese professionals truly succeed in doing business in the globalised economy. This finding should be considered in planning the education and training of future business professionals and encourage more discussion on how English language education in Japan can be improved to prepare Japanese people to compete successfully in today's dynamic and challenging global business arena.

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