

The importance of the English language in a cross-cultural working environment: views from English speakers who have Japanese business associates

Mitaka Yoneda

Chiba University

m-yoneda@da2.so-net.ne.jp

Abstract

This research explores the perspectives of professionals living in Singapore on the importance of having a command of English for conducting business. Individual interviews were conducted with 12 business people living in Singapore who have worked with Japanese people located in Singapore. The interviews revealed that all the participants believed that there was no room to doubt the importance for business people to have a command of English when they do business not only in Singapore but in all Asian countries and even in the international business context. However, the participants pointed out that this recognition is not fully shared by the Japanese business people with whom they have worked. Because of this lack of recognition of the Japanese business people, the participants reported some disadvantages and even losses in businesses.

Keywords: English for business, importance of having a command of English, expatriate workers, cross-cultural working environment

Introduction

The use of English is especially widespread in the international business world, so much so that English has become the standard language of world business. The preference for the English language in international business means that enterprises in non-native English-speaking countries in both Asia and Europe are enthusiastic about English language education. Many Japanese companies understand that their employees realize they require high English proficiency in order to survive in today's competitive business world. They encourage their employees to improve their English communication skills in many different ways, and establish official English tests such as TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), and the STEP (Society for Testing English Proficiency) test as a requirement for promotion or overseas assignments. However, to their disappointment, most Japanese people seem not to have been able to acquire high levels of English proficiency.

A range of evidence shows that Japan's economy has been losing its competitive edge since the early 1990s. Economists, politicians and other specialists in Japan as well as outside Japan suggest many possible causes for Japan's loss of international competitiveness. Some argue that the lack of English communication skills among Japanese people is causing the stagnation of the economy and undermining Japan's strength and appeal to foreign investors and companies. One of the people who asserts this is Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, a renowned politician and founding father of Singapore who is

now Minister Mentor of Singapore. Mr. Lee delivered a speech about how to remake Japan, and he indicated that with the rapid growth of the Chinese economy, Japan would have to keep thinking of unique items that sell (Kwan, 2003). After he suggested ways in which Japan could keep ahead of the other countries, he finally mentioned the English skills of Japanese people. He stated:

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

Mr. Lee emphasized the importance of having English proficiency in the globalized world, and especially urged the Japanese to hone their English speaking skills.

Background and Context

In European countries where English is not a native language, such as Germany and France, English use for business continues to increase. For example, Peugeot in France and Siemens in Germany use English within their companies (Yoshihara, Okabe, & Sawaki 2001, p. 50). English is the major language of trade and commerce – the language of business.

Japan is no exception. More and more Japanese companies are realizing that in business, a much higher level of English proficiency is required than in society in general. Some companies, not just the multi-nationals but even domestic Japanese companies, have established English as the in-house official language. It may not be a surprise that the Japanese offices of foreign-owned companies such as Citibank Japan and Proctor and Gamble Co. Japan have been using English as their official language for a long time. However, English also became the official language at Nissan Motor Co. Ltd in 1999 when the company was taken over by the French automobile company, Renault SA, and Carlos Ghosn became the CEO (Adachi, 2004, pp. 38-39). Furthermore, Sumida Corporation, a manufacturer of coils, wires and wound electronic products, implemented an English policy in 2002 and has used English as its official language since then (Yoshihara, et al., 2001, p. 177; Rogers, 2003, p. 64); Shimano, a manufacturer of bicycle and fishing products, and SMK Corporation, a manufacturer of electronics devices have been using English as the official language for some time as well.

In a situation like this, where English is recognized as essential within companies, how is English recognized at the individual level when it comes to the cross-cultural working environment? This paper explores the perspectives of professionals living in Singapore on the importance of having a command of English for conducting business.

Research Question

The research question is: what are the perspectives of professionals in Singapore on the importance of having a command of the English language for doing business in Singapore? Under this research question, the following interview questions were asked to the participants: (1) how important do the participants feel English is in cross-cultural working environments and (2) do the participants feel their Japanese co-workers share their concept of the importance of English in the workplace?

Methodology

Method

In this research, individual interviews were used for data collection. Individual interviews were conducted with twelve business people living in Singapore who have worked with Japanese people located in Singapore. Interviewing is a productive tool to collect data in qualitative research and it provides a good opportunity to access “people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality” (Punch, 1998, pp. 174-175).

Participants

The interview participants were selected based on their ability to give informed opinion and represent a wide range of viewpoints. They had to have at least six months’ experience working with Japanese professionals in Singapore to ensure that they had sufficient experience to make a valuable contribution to this research. The nature of their business relationship with Japanese professionals varied. Some were colleagues, superiors or subordinates of Japanese professionals while others were clients, vendors or business partners. A total of twelve non-Japanese people were invited to participate in the individual interviews. The profiles of these participants are presented in Appendix 1.

Eight of the twelve participants were Singaporeans while the other four were Malaysians, British, New Zealander and American. There were seven female participants and five male participants. Seven of the participants worked in Japanese companies, and they had Japanese superiors and colleagues in their workplace. The other five participants worked in non-Japanese companies and worked with Japanese colleagues, clients or suppliers. For example, Mr. Ford, who worked in a consulting firm, stated that his clients included Japanese companies.

Half of the participants also knew the Japanese language. After the interviews, the researcher chatted with two such participants, Mr. Singh and Ms. Lee, in Japanese and found that they were highly proficient. Mr. Singh also revealed that he had lived in Japan for many years. As for other Japanese-speaking participants, their level of Japanese proficiency is not known. Ms. Yap and Ms. Wee both learned the language in school while Ms. Quek studied it on her own. Ms. Chan learned Japanese when she spent over a year in Japan receiving training at her company’s laboratory and said that she communicated with her Japanese superiors and colleagues at her current workplace in Japanese.

Results 1

Participants’ perspectives on the importance of English

The twelve participants in the individual interviews were asked whether they considered that having a command of the English language was important for conducting business in Singapore. All the professionals considered it important to have a command of the English language in order to do business.

Some participants brought up the point that English is important because it is widely used as the language of business in the region. Ms. Chan pointed out that “a lot of countries are using it as a first language” (Chan, intv., p. 5) while Ms. Roberts described a recent experience to illustrate her point:

I was involved in a meeting and the people were from probably five or six nations. Japanese, Mandarin, Korean –

many languages are spoken by those people but the language spoken in the meeting was English. If you don't have a proficient level of English, the meeting was in English, everything was in English, so you would not have been able to contribute, participate or understand what was going on if you didn't speak or understand English. (Roberts, intv., p.4)

Thus Ms. Roberts believed that it is important to have a command of English because it is a common language for the people of Asia. This view was echoed by Mr. Stevens who has worked in the Asian region for several years. When asked if English is important for business, his reply was:

I think it is. If you'd asked me the question five years ago, I'd probably have said that it was probably more important for anyone, say, based here in Singapore to know how to speak Japanese, Chinese, Mandarin, something like that. . . The incidence of English and just the importance of English around the region, I've certainly noticed, has grown over the last five years. (Stevens, intv., p.4)

The participants thus stated that they felt that English was the official language of business in Asia and therefore essential for dealing with other nationalities in Asia.

Results 2

Their co-workers' beliefs of the importance of English

The participants commented on whether the Japanese business people they work with share their concept of the importance of English in the workplace. Many of the participants believed that Japanese business people are not aware of the importance of English and they should recognize it. Mr. Yeo stated that "only a small minority, very few of my Japanese colleagues realize the importance of English language. The majority does not think English is important" (Yeo, intv., p.10). Ms. Yap said that "frankly, I don't think that Japanese think the English language is important, because if they did, they would be much more proactive in promoting the language" (Yap, intv., p. 28). She also advised that "Japanese slowly must recognize that they can't function in Japan and in Japanese alone. . . It is not good for them. It is not good for the rest of the world, I think" (Yap, intv., p.22).

The participants also expressed their views on the kinds of problematic situations that arise as a result of their Japanese co-workers not being fully aware of the importance of English. These are summarized into four categories: first is negative credibility of Japanese and second is negative effects on working relationships leading to disunity in the company and a less than ideal working environment. Third is high business costs, and fourth is reduced or lost business opportunities.

First, as for the negative credibility of Japanese, Mr. Ford recalled a recent experience as an example of Japanese professionals not recognizing the importance of having a command of English. In this instance, he met with a senior manager in a Japanese organization whom he knew ultimately spoke English. However, this senior manager spoke in Japanese and had a junior Japanese colleague translate for him. Mr. Ford has noticed that this practice is common in Japanese companies, with senior managers far more reluctant to use English than their junior colleagues. However, he felt that by insisting on communicating in Japanese, the senior manager actually made a worse impression on him. He asserted that "senior managers of Japanese entities actually lose more credibility by insisting on having a colleague there to do the translation than they do by not speaking well in English to their colleagues elsewhere" (Ford, intv., pp.7-8). His closing comment on the importance of having a good

command of English was, “I think that still in today’s world, anybody that doesn’t have good English anyway is going to be at a disadvantage” (Ford, intv., p. 11)

Second, several participants stated negative effects on working relationships because their Japanese colleagues are reluctant to recognize the importance of English in a cross-cultural working place. Ms. Lee argued that having a command of the English language is important for building relationships with other staff in the workplace. She felt that only some of the Japanese staff in her workplace realize the importance of English and, as a result, miscommunications occur, creating a less than ideal atmosphere in the workplace. She described such a situation at her workplace:

Small miscommunications can add up and result in a gap so I think this is one reason that the local staff and the Japanese staff do not get along very well. . . some of the Japanese feel shy to speak and in the end, this just builds a barrier. . . even when there is a company dinner or lunch, Japanese staff will speak Japanese among themselves and then the local people feel left out. (Lee, intv., p. 11)

Thus, Ms. Lee believed that the reluctance of Japanese staff to communicate in English in her office has created a barrier between Japanese and non-Japanese staff and hindered the building of good working relationships and a harmonious environment in the workplace. She stressed that not all the Japanese staff are responsible for creating this atmosphere although she noted that some particularly seem to make the situation worse.

Thirdly, many of the participants raised the issue of the costs incurred by Japanese companies. Ms. Yap explained that in all the company offices throughout Asia, with the exception of Japan, the company computers are all installed with English software. However, the Japanese office insists on an entirely Japanese environment and their Japanese staff require Japanese software and computers, even when they are sent to Singapore. Therefore, Ms. Yap has to arrange for computers and software written in Japanese, even though these are costly. Thus, she said that the Japanese office has one of the highest costs in the region.

Mr. Ford also commented on the high costs that his Japanese clients incur because of their unwillingness to speak English. He observed that Japanese companies who commission a project always set two conditions. One is that Mr. Ford’s project team has at least some Japanese speakers. This is true even for projects outside Japan, which is unique compared to his other clients from non-English speaking countries in the region. He said:

I mean there are always language issues so you know, if you look at projects in Korea, we’ll have Koreans on the team, whatever. What is kind of specific to Japanese companies is when it’s a Japanese company but the project is somewhere else like in Singapore or Thailand, there is an insistence at that time to have Japanese speakers. I mean we are doing some work here with a big Chinese company as an example. They do not insist that we have Chinese nationals on the project team. . . What we do find is with two Japanese companies we are working with in Thailand and Singapore is that they insist that part of our teams should be made up of Japanese speakers so that’s kind of unique to Japanese companies, this insistence outside of Japan that we have Japanese speakers. (Ford, intv., p. 4)

The second request that Japanese companies make is that some of the project materials at least be in Japanese. Mr. Ford stated that his clients from other countries do not necessarily insist on materials being in their native language, be it French, German, Chinese or Thai. In the end, these conditions set by Japanese companies increase their business costs. Mr. Ford remarked that:

It costs more but that cost isn't borne by us. I mean, we just pass that onto the client so when we come to put our project team together, we just calculate what it's going to cost to have that project team on that. If we have to have a Japanese senior manager on that project team, the cost of a Japanese senior manager is more than the cost of a Thai senior manager and therefore, that just gets costed into the project. (Ford, intv., p. 5)

Thus these two participants, Mr. Ford and Ms. Yap, both of whom hold senior management positions, believed that the low English proficiency of Japanese professionals has resulted in increased business costs to their companies.

Mr. Ford also talked about how the Japanese market is, to some extent, becoming marginalized by many multinational companies, partly because of the insistence by Japanese professionals on using Japanese as the language of business communication. He observed:

Even if you live in France or Germany, it's done in English but in Japan, there's an insistence on Japanese and I don't know if that's a cultural thing... certainly at the project management level, these people speak English but insist on everything being done in Japanese. . . The Japanese market has always been an important market. . . However, what's tending to happen is that the Japanese operation is being marginalized by this attitude. They'll always end up having it hived off but it's a restricted market. . . and whilst Japan is still an important economy within the Asian business area, its importance is diminishing by the day and thus China is becoming more and more an important market for many companies. Other nations like Thailand, Malaysia, India and even the Philippines are becoming more important in terms of where is the money for us. . . the number of companies investing in China is going up all the time and you know, that kind of means that the importance of the Japanese market to many companies is diminishing. (Ford, intv., p. 9)

Thus, according to Mr. Ford, the value of the Japanese market to multinational companies is diminishing as they seek out larger, more lucrative markets in Asia. This trend is partly the result of the rise of China and India but it is also partly fuelled by the unwillingness of Japanese professionals to use the English language for business communication.

Lastly, participants expressed their views on the correlation between business opportunities and having a good command of the English language. Some participants thought that Japanese companies lose out on business opportunities because of the language barrier. They believed that if Japanese professionals realize the importance of English and improve their English language proficiency, there would be more business opportunities for Japanese companies.

Ms. Yap pointed out that while Japanese companies were very strong in technology, they were sometimes limited to the Japanese market because of the language barrier and thus lose the opportunity to market their products to the rest of the world. She shared her own experiences as an example:

Two years ago, I visited the laboratory of a Japanese electronics company, and they were showing me all these new gadgets, fantastic, so I said, "why don't you sell to the world?" and they go, "we have a big market in Japan. We don't really have to worry about the world." And I said, "OK but I'm interested and my corporate center would be interested too. Can I have a brochure to show them? Maybe, at least, not the world, but deal with us." They gave me everything in Japanese and I said, "do you have anything in English?" They said, "no". So it is to me, very limiting. There are plenty of good ideas in Japan, especially in the technology area, in my area, and they can't share it with the world. . . I go to Japan often and I see their mobile phones and their electronic equipment – state-of-the-art, light weight, all the functionality, not expensive – and yet you can only find it in Japan. . . This is not good for

them. It is not good for the rest of the world either, I think (Yap, intv., pp. 14-15)

She believed that if Japanese companies paid more attention to English, the market for Japanese companies would definitely grow.

Some participants thought that their company would have more business opportunities if their Japanese staff improved their English. Ms. Wee thought that her company would have a bigger market:

When Caucasians make inquiries about renting apartments, Japanese staff in my office cannot help them. So we sometimes lose the chance to do business with them. In my company, there are no Japanese staff who can handle non-Japanese clients. All the Japanese staff take care of only Japanese customers. (Wee, intv., p. 12)

Therefore, if the Japanese staff in her workplace were proficient in English, they would be able to serve non-Japanese English-speaking customers as well and potentially win more customers.

Mr. Singh also was of the opinion that improving their English proficiency would benefit Japanese companies, taking their edge in the market to a whole new level. He thought that Japanese companies were doing well, especially the larger ones such as Toyota. Yet, he observed that if Japanese professionals improved their English proficiency, "I think it would definitely contribute to better business" (Singh, intv., p. 15). Using Toyota as an example of a Japanese business that has succeeded in the USA, Mr. Singh praised "their willingness to succeed, their desire to succeed overseas" and added that "English, I think, would put them at another level" (Singh, intv., p. 15).

Summary

All the participants believed that there was no room to doubt the importance for business people to have a command of English when they do business not only in Singapore but in all Asian countries and even in the international business context. English is the language for business. However, the participants pointed out that this recognition is not fully shared by the Japanese business people with whom they have worked. Because of this lack of recognition of the Japanese business people, the participants reported some disadvantages and even losses in business. They stated that their reluctance to recognize the importance of English adversely affected their working relationships with staff of other nationalities, leading to disunity in the company and a poor working environment for all. As a result of that, high staff turnover occurred, which caused a loss in productivity in the workplaces in the long run. Some also mentioned that higher business costs were created because of insufficient English proficiency. More importantly, Japanese business people's insistence on using Japanese and reluctance to recognize the importance of English in the workplace lead to losing credibility.

English language education has been the focus of much attention in Japan. A lot of debates on matters related to English have been taking place; Torikai (2002) describes the current situation in Japan as national soul-searching amid much public discussion and debate. Further, many students and business people take English tests such as TOEIC, TOEFL and STEP. Companies encourage their employees to work to improve their English communication skills as mentioned earlier. It seems that Japanese people have accepted the importance of English, yet in the eyes of non-Japanese business people working with Japanese counterparts, Japanese business people and companies are not fully aware of it. Consequently, Japanese are placed at a disadvantage.

References

- Adachi, H. (2004). *Nissan wo yomigaerasete eigo [How to use English, the Nissan Way]*. Tokyo: Kobunsha.
- Kwan, W. K. (2003, June 5). Pointy chopsticks are nice, but what's next?. *The Straits Times*.
- Punch, K. F. (1998). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches*. London: Sage.
- Rogers, J. (2003). A case study: Sumida Corporation's use of English as a common language. *The Journal of International Business Communication*, 62, 64 - 66.
- Torikai, K. (2002). *TOEFL, TOEIC to nihonjin no eigoryoku [TOEFL, TOEIC and English proficiency of Japanese people]*. Tokyo: Kodansha.
- Yoshihara, H., Okabe, Y., and Sawaki, S. (2001). *Eigo de keiei suru jidai: Nihon kigyō no chōsen [International management in English: Challenge of Japanese companies]*. Tokyo: Yuhikaku.

Appendix

Profiles of the Participants for Individual Interviews

Participant's Name (Pseudonym)	Nationality	Industry	Relation- ship with Japanese	Japanese language skills	Japanese or Non-J company
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		J
Roberts	American	Language school (instructor)	Colleagues		J
Stevens	New Zealander	Software developer	Clients Colleagues		Non-J
Yeo	Singaporean	Semiconductor industry	Superiors Colleagues		J
Wee	Malaysian	Real estate	Colleagues Clients	Yes	J
Quek	Singaporean	Construction company	Superiors Colleagues	Yes	J
Lee	Singaporean	Chemical company	Superiors Colleagues	Yes	J
Singh	Singaporean	Software vendor	Clients	Yes	Non-J
Chan	Singaporean	Electronics company	Superiors Colleagues	Yes	J