

Motivation, Needs, and Improvement of First-Year Students of English

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英語学習の動機と英語力向上度について

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1. Introduction

English is taught as a general education course in many universities and colleges, and the focus of the class can vary from teacher to teacher. Some English classes focus on more specific topics according to students' majors, some classes practice general colloquial English conversation, and other classes are more focused on a specific country or culture. Therefore, when developing a curriculum it is always of concern to teachers what the needs of students are and how they can be met.

It is important to consider the subjective needs of students, as well as the objective needs that teachers perceive the students as having, when developing or improving on a curriculum, in order to increase pedagogical efficiency as well as positively motivate students (Matsuzawa 1991 : 161). The perceived value of an activity affects motivation to do that activity (Williams & Burden 1997 : 125). If the students' perceived needs are being addressed in a curriculum then they will be more interested in applying themselves.

This research survey was undertaken in order to receive some insight on the English language needs of our students in order to better adapt English classes to those needs. Four questions were postulated:

1. What are students' motivations for studying English?
2. What English skills do they feel are the most important to improve upon?
3. How do students rate their own English ability in terms of how satisfactory it is in fulfilling their needs, and how much does this change in a year?
4. What is the relationship between this and their English ability as measured objectively?

2. Method and Materials

Needs Assessment and Motivation Questionnaire

First-year students taking English Conversation I in the Department of International Cultural Studies at Niigata Seiryō Women's Junior College, and English II in the Department of Social Welfare and Psychology and the Department of Nursing at Niigata Seiryō University, were included in this study. Both of these courses are one-year general education courses.

Students were asked to complete a need assessment and motivation questionnaire in the spring of 2000. The part of the questionnaire that asked students to self-assess their language skills was given again in the winter of 2001 to check for changes. Although all the students taking these classes were given the questionnaire, only 211 questionnaires could be included in this research due to absences, incomplete replies, and similar factors.

The needs assessment questionnaire was adapted from the questionnaire used by Matsuzawa (1991). The first section of the questionnaire asked students' reasons for taking English classes. The students were asked to indicate either yes or no to possible reasons for taking English classes. The motivation questionnaire was adapted from Rivers' list of twelve possible motivations for students to learn a foreign language (Rivers, 1983), also used by Matsuzawa (1991).

The second section of the questionnaire was a self-assessment scale where students indicated how close they believe their current language skills are to fulfilling their language needs. The students were asked to rate on a scale from 5 to 1, with 5 as "unsatisfactory" and 1 as "satisfactorily proficient," the six language skills of vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In the third section, students were asked to prioritize the importance of improving the six language skills. Vocabulary, grammar, listening, speaking, reading, and writing were rated from 6 to 1 in order of perceived importance, with 1 being "most important to improve." The questionnaire is shown in Appendix 1.

The second section of the questionnaire was conducted again in the winter of 2001 to measure how students assessed their improvement in each skill at the end of the year. The first and third sections were administered only once at the beginning of the year.

English Proficiency Test

An English proficiency test was administered once at the beginning and once at the end of the year to measure students' improvement in English skills. The English test consisted of a combined grammar and reading section and a listening section. The maximum score for the grammar and reading section was 45 points, and the maximum for the listening section was 40 points. The test took one ninety-minute class period to administer.

3. Results

1. Department of International Cultural Studies, Niigata Seiryō Women's Junior College

a. Motivation for Studying English

Sixty-seven students completed the questionnaire. The most popular motivation for studying English was to enhance a professional career; 91% of the students indicated this motivation. Other highly rated motivations were personal enrichment and broadening of educational experience (88% of the students chose this), and for travel (pleasure or business), which was chosen by 84% of the students. The list of motivations and their rankings are shown in Table 1.

b. Self-Assessment

Students self-assessed six language skills. In the beginning of the year, the skill students assessed themselves as most proficient in was reading, with an average rating of 3.59, with 1 being best. The respective ratings for the other skills were grammar 3.81, vocabulary 3.90, writing and listening 4.07, and speaking 4.26. The average rating for the six skills was 4.0.

After a one-year course, the same questionnaire was again given to the students. The average proficiency evaluation for the six skills increased to 3.52. The results show that the students assessed themselves as improving after one year by 0.48 points toward their goal, which is a movement upward of 12% on a scale of 5 to 1.

A t-test for dependent samples was performed to determine if there was a significant difference in the mean scores. The t-test value was 4.48, and indicated that there was a significant difference in the two test score means ($p < 0.05$). All skills were evaluated as having improved. It was notable that the self-assessed improvement of speaking surpassed the other skills. In the beginning of the year, students had ranked their speaking proficiency as least proficient, but at the end, it was ranked best.

The most highly prioritized skill for further development was speaking ability. It was rated 1.95 on average. The averaged order of the other five skills was listening (2.35), vocabulary (3.37), grammar (3.85), reading (4.39) and writing (5.06). The rankings are shown in Table 2.

c. English Proficiency Test

After one year, the results of the English proficiency test showed an improvement of 16.6%. The reading and grammar part improved by an average of 10.3%, and the listening part improved by an average of 27.8%. The students' self-assessed improvement (12%) appeared to be similar to their improvement in English test results (16.6%). A t-test for dependent samples was performed to determine if there was a significant difference between the mean test scores at the beginning and the end of the year. The t-test value was 6.74, which indicated that there was a significant difference in the two test score means ($p < 0.05$).

d. The relationship between the English proficiency test and self-assessment

The correlation between students' performance on the English proficiency test and their self-assessment was 0.023. The test indicated that there is no significant correlation between them ($p < 0.05$).

Table 1 Motivation Responses (n = 67)

As an additional skill to enhance a professional career.	61	91%
For personal enrichment and broadening of educational experience.	59	88%
For travel (pleasure or business).	56	84%
In order to understand and interact with foreigners in the community.	51	76%
For reasons of ethnic curiosity or attachment.	50	75%
To fulfill curriculum requirements.	45	67%
To fulfill job requirements.	42	63%
For curiosity or love of language.	42	63%
For use in daily life.	27	40%
As a tool for study purposes (particularly through listening or reading materials).	7	10%
Because of a personal relationship.	6	9%
As a necessity for research.	4	6%
Other (to understand movies in English: 2, to understand songs in English: 1).	3	4%

Table 2 Self-Assessment and Priorities (n = 67, numbers are averages)

Skill	Beginning of Year Assessment	End of Year Assessment	Priority
Reading	3.59 (1 st)	3.32 (2 nd)	4.39 (5 th)
Grammar	3.81 (2 nd)	3.42 (3 rd)	3.85 (4 th)
Vocabulary	3.90 (3 rd)	3.64 (5 th)	3.37 (3 rd)
Listening	4.07 (4 th)	3.69 (6 th)	2.35 (2 nd)
Writing	4.07 (4 th)	3.45 (4 th)	5.06 (6 th)
Speaking	4.26 (6 th)	3.26 (1 st)	1.95 (1 st)
Overall	4.0	3.52	N/A

2. Department of Nursing, Niigata Seiryō University

a. Motivation for Studying English

Sixty-five students completed the questionnaire. The most expressed motivation for studying English was to fulfill the curriculum requirements; 88% of the students chose this motivation. The second highly indicated motivation was to enhance a professional career; 82% of the students chose this. Other highly ranked motivations were personal enrichment and broadening of educational experience (chosen by 74% of the students), and for travel (pleasure or business), which was chosen by 69% of the students. The list of motivations and their rankings are shown in Table 3.

b. Self-Assessment

Six language skills were self-assessed. The skill assessed as most satisfactory was grammar, which was rated as 3.73 on average. The respective ratings for the other skills were reading, 3.80, vocabulary 3.92, speaking and listening 4.16, and writing

4.2. The average of these six skills was 3.9.

After one year, the same questionnaire was given to the students again. The average evaluation of the six skills was 4.04. This result shows that the students self-assessed themselves as 0.14 point (3.5% of the scale) farther away from their goal (on a 5 to 1 scale) than they were in the beginning of the year. Perhaps the students set higher standards for themselves at the end of the year than at the beginning, or perhaps they felt that their English proficiency had actually worsened. The evaluation of all the skills lowered or stayed the same except for listening. After one year, students' reading skills were ranked first, exchanging places with grammar. A t-test for dependent samples was performed to determine if there was a significant difference in the means of evaluation scores at the beginning and the end of the year. The t-test value was 0.21, which indicates that there was no significant difference in the two score means ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the decrease in self-assessed proficiency rating was unimportant.

The most highly prioritized skill for further development was speaking ability. It was rated 2.18 on average. The order of the average ratings of the other five skills was listening (2.21), vocabulary (3.07), reading (3.98), grammar (4.29), and writing (5.23). The rankings are shown in Table 4.

c. English Proficiency Test

At the end of the year, the average score on the English proficiency test was 4.1% higher. The reading and grammar part improved by 0.5%, and the listening part improved by 9.9%. It is somewhat notable that although students' subjective self-assessment worsened slightly (but insignificantly) after a year, an objective measurement of their English showed a 4.1% improvement. A t-test for dependent samples was performed to determine if there was a significant difference in the means of test scores at the beginning and the end of the year. The t-test value was 3.37, which indicated that there was a significant difference in the two test score means ($p < 0.05$). Although this was the smallest average improvement in English test scores among the three departments, the Department of Nursing students had the highest average English test score at the beginning of the year.

d. The relationship between the English proficiency test and self-assessment

The correlation between students' performance on the English proficiency test and their self-assessment was -0.01 . The test indicated that there was no significant correlation between them ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3 Motivation Responses (n = 65)

To fulfill curriculum requirements.	57	88%
As an additional skill to enhance a professional career.	53	82%
For personal enrichment and broadening of educational experience.	48	74%
For travel (pleasure or business).	45	69%
In order to understand and interact with foreigners in the community.	43	66%
For reasons of ethnic curiosity or attachment.	36	55%
To fulfill job requirements.	36	55%
For use in daily life.	25	38%
For curiosity or love of language.	21	32%
As a tool for study purposes (particularly through listening or reading materials).	16	25%
As a necessity for research.	9	14%
Because of a personal relationship.	6	9%
Other (to understand songs in English: 2).	2	3%

Table 4 Self-Assessment and Priorities (n = 65, numbers are averages)

Skill	Beginning of Year Assessment	End of Year Assessment	Priority
Grammar	3.73 (1 st)	3.92 (2 nd)	4.29 (5 th)
Reading	3.80 (2 nd)	3.88 (1 st)	3.98 (4 th)
Vocabulary	3.92 (3 rd)	3.98 (3 rd)	3.07 (3 rd)
Listening	4.16 (4 th)	4.07 (4 th)	2.21 (2 nd)
Writing	4.16 (4 th)	4.16 (5 th)	5.23 (6 th)
Speaking	4.20 (5 th)	4.25 (6 th)	2.18 (1 st)
Overall	3.90	4.04	N/A

3. Department of Social Welfare and Psychology, Niigata Seiryō University

a. Motivation for Studying English

Seventy-nine students completed the questionnaire. The motivation for studying English chosen most often was to fulfill curriculum requirements; 91% of the students chose this reason. The next most often chosen was personal enrichment and broadening of educational experience; 86 students chose this. The third ranked motivation was for travel, which 80% chose. The list of motivations and their rankings are shown in Table 5.

b. Self-Assessment

The skill students' evaluated themselves as most proficient in out of the six language skills was reading; it was rated 3.64 on average. Their self-assessed vocabulary level was 3.74, grammar level 3.81, listening level 3.82, speaking level 4.02, and writing 4.16. The average evaluation of all the skills was 3.78. One possible interpretation of this is that students felt they were slightly closer than halfway toward their goal.

After a one-year course, the average self-assessed level was 3.65; a 0.13 point or 3.3% (of the 5 to 1 scale) improvement. A t-test for dependent samples was performed to determine if there was a significant difference in the means of

evaluation scores at the beginning and the end of the year. The t-test value was 2.02, which indicated that there was no significant difference in the two evaluation score means ($p < 0.05$).

After one year, the average proficiency ranking of these six skills had changed slightly. Students' average self-assessed grammar level was ranked second instead of third, their vocabulary level was ranked third instead of second, and their speaking level was ranked sixth, exchanging places with their writing level. All the skills except for speaking were evaluated more highly after one year.

The most highly prioritized skill for further learning was speaking ability. It was ranked 2.02 on average. The averaged order of other five skills was listening (2.30), vocabulary (3.20), reading (3.89), grammar (4.37), and writing (5.11). The rankings are shown in Table 6.

c. English Proficiency Test

The average English proficiency test score improved by 10.5%. The reading and grammar part improved by 8.2% and the listening part improved by 14%. Improvement on the objectively measured English test was much higher than students' subjective measurements shown in their self-assessment questionnaires (3.3%). A t-test for dependent samples was performed to determine if there was a significant difference in the test score means at the beginning and the end of the year. The t-test value was 9.03, which indicated that there was a significant difference ($p < 0.05$).

d. The relationship between the English proficiency test and self-assessment

The correlation between students' performance on the English proficiency test and their self-assessment was 0.199. The test indicated that there is no significant correlation between them ($p < 0.05$).

Table 5 Motivation Responses (n = 79)

To fulfill curriculum requirements.	72	91%
For personal enrichment and broadening of educational experience.	68	86%
For travel (pleasure or business).	63	80%
As an additional skill to enhance a professional career.	58	73%
In order to understand and interact with foreigners in the community.	57	72%
For reasons of ethnic curiosity or attachment.	52	66%
For curiosity or love of language.	36	46%
For use in daily life.	28	35%
To fulfill job requirements.	18	23%
Because of a personal relationship.	8	10%
As a tool for study purposes (particularly through listening or reading materials).	7	9%
Other (interest in English phonology: 1, to understand movies in English: 1).	2	3%
As a necessity for research.	1	1%

Table 6 Self-Assessment and Priorities (n =79, numbers are averages)

Skill	Beginning of Year Assessment	End of Year Assessment	Priority
Reading	3.64 (1 st)	3.45 (1 st)	3.89 (4 th)
Vocabulary	3.74 (2 nd)	3.60 (3 rd)	3.20 (3 rd)
Grammar	3.81 (3 rd)	3.47 (2 nd)	4.37 (5 th)
Listening	3.82 (4 th)	3.77 (4 th)	2.30 (2 nd)
Speaking	4.02 (5 th)	4.07 (6 th)	2.02 (1 st)
Writing	4.16 (6 th)	3.77 (4 th)	5.11 (6 th)
Overall	3.78	3.65	N/A

4 . Discussion

Although it was hypothesized that students in different departments might have differing motivations for studying English, there seemed to be no major differences, other than the fact that the university students stated that they mainly studied English because of curriculum requirements. This is not surprising considering the focus of the departments. The Dept. of International Cultural Studies is mainly concerned with English language and world culture, whereas at the university all English classes are general education courses.

Other than for the fulfillment of curriculum requirements, the three most popular reasons were to enhance a professional career, for personal enrichment and to broaden educational experience, and for travel (pleasure or business). This suggests that students did not expect to learn English for specific purposes, such as medical English for Department of Nursing students, in these classes. The reason “to fulfill job requirements” was ranked seventh by the International Cultural Studies students and Nursing students, and ninth by the Social Welfare and Psychology students. However, it is possible that students did not express a need for English for specific purposes because they are still freshmen; as their studies advance, their needs may shift. Thus, a continued assessment may be needed.

As far as priorities for skill improvement are concerned, the results were similar across all departments. All the students rated speaking as the skill most important to improve upon, followed by listening and vocabulary. This suggests that students would appreciate a curriculum focused on speaking and listening.

The correlation test results suggested that there was no significant correlation between performance on the English proficiency test and self-assessment. This may have resulted from the fact that some students have high standards and did not acknowledge their progress when rating themselves, or that the English proficiency test does not measure improvements in speaking and writing skills, creating a discrepancy between the two test results. Since students’ subjective needs and the fulfillment of those needs are important to consider, and it seems these cannot be determined from objective tests, it is reasonable to assume that self-assessment surveys are important in further developing a curriculum.

The English test results showed differences among the departments. Department of International Cultural Studies students started with the lowest average score, but showed the most improvement. Department of Nursing students had the highest average score but showed the least significant change at the end of the year. Social Welfare and Psychology students were in between. International Cultural Studies first-year students must take five English classes in the first semester, and between two and five in the second. However, the university first-year students may choose to take between zero and two English classes during the first two semesters. It therefore seems natural that the largest improvement would be in the average score of the Department of International Cultural Studies, where students are required to take the most English classes.

There are many English classes offered to students in the first year in both the university and the junior college, and this research does not attempt to single out the effects of any one class on students' self-assessments or English ability. However, as a hint of what may be revealed by further investigation, it might be informative to consider some of the students' informal comments. About one third of the Nursing students and one half of the Social Welfare and Psychology students were asked to write their opinion of the class in which this research was conducted. Although no content analysis could be done on this informal follow-up survey, the overall impression was that students had a positive opinion of the class and their experience in it. Many of them specifically mentioned that they were glad to have had an opportunity to take a class focused on speaking and listening, and that they had had no classes of this type in high school. Their enthusiasm for a syllabus centered on speaking and listening seems to correlate with the priorities for study they indicated at the beginning of the year.

Students who are the most motivated to study English might have the highest expectations for themselves, and this might show in a low self-assessment. However, that does not necessarily mean they are unsatisfied with their progress in English. If follow-up interviews were to be conducted to assess whether the students are happy with their experience in their first-year English classes, that information could be used to find how their satisfaction relates to their self-assessment ratings.

References

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- Williams, M. & Burden, R. (1997), *Psychology for Language Teachers*. Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge.

Appendix 1 英語学習の必要性と英語力向上度に関するアンケート

短大や大学で、あなたは教養科目、または専門科目として英語の授業を受けています。皆さんは英語学習が必要だと思いますか。また、どんな場合に、どのような能力や技術が必要だと思いますか。次の質問に教えてください。このアンケートの回答内容は、成績には一切関係ありません。正直に教えてください。

1. あなたが「英語を学習する理由」はどれですか。それぞれに「はい」または「いいえ」に○をつけてください。

英語を学習する理由	
1. 日常生活に必要なだから	はい・いいえ
2. 将来の仕事に必要なだから	はい・いいえ
3. 自分の教養を広め、より豊かな人間性を育むため	はい・いいえ
4. 英語を話す人々や文化に興味があるから	はい・いいえ
5. 外国の人々と共存するために必要な交流と理解をはかるため	はい・いいえ
6. 短大又は大学を卒業するために必要な単位をとるため	はい・いいえ
7. 語学以外の学問で英語を使わなければならないから。 (英語の文献を読む、海外の学会に行くなど)	はい・いいえ
8. 将来の職業生活をより豊かにするため (英語将来の仕事にどうしても必要ではないが、英語が話せればより広い可能性が得られる)	はい・いいえ
9. ただ言語が好き、または興味がある。	はい・いいえ
10. 個人的な人間関係で英語が必要だから。	はい・いいえ
11. 仕事または楽しみとして海外旅行をしたいから。	はい・いいえ
12. 研究に必要なだから。	はい・いいえ
13. その他 (具体的に書いてください。)	はい・いいえ

2. あなたが感じている必要性を満たすために、あなたのそれぞれの能力(技術)は十分ですか。自分必要としていることを達成するには、十分である(1)、まったく十分でない(5)として判断すると、それぞれ1～5のどの程度に当てはまりますか。

(例) 私は海外旅行をしたいので英語の会話力、聴解力を必要としているが、今の時点で私の会話力、聴解力はかなり低いので、4くらいだと思う。→4に○をつける。

注意：(1)の質問で、2つ以上の必要性を感じていると答えた人は、それらすべての必要性を総合的に満たすことを考えて、それについての自分の達成度を教えてください。

語彙力	文法	聴解力	会話力	読解力	作文
1	1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5	5	5

3. それぞれの能力(技術)について、自分にとって学ぶ必要性が高い順に1～6の番号を付けてください。

能力(技術)	必要性(1～6)
語彙力(単語の知識)	
文法	
聴解力	
会話力	
読解力	
作文力	

ありがとうございました。

このアンケートについて、感想、意見などありましたら、書いてください。