

English Learning Environment Effective for First Year Students

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Background

In Japan, English education is a matter of urgent concern.

The government has issued several white papers, such as :
 “The Action Plan for ‘Cultivating Japanese People Who Can Use English’” in 2003

- “to be able to communicate in English after graduating from a junior high school or a high school”
- “to be able to use English at work after graduating from a university”

“Five proposals and specific measures for developing proficiency in English for international communication” in 2011

- stressing “the importance of continuous consistent English education throughout the elementary school, junior high school, and high school”

However, little progress has been witnessed so far. According to Honjo, “Japanese test-takers ranked 40th of 48 countries in 2013 on their average score on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC),” scoring “an average of 512 points out of a possible 990,” and those aged under 20 “scored the lowest with 492.” As of 2017, Japanese English proficiency is still rated as “Low Proficiency,” ranking 35th out of 72 countries in the sixth edition of the English Proficiency Index.

Method

3 questionnaires were used in this study.

The targeted university was a private university in Kyoto, Japan.

1. Preliminary survey

Period: Jan. 2016, last day of fall semester

Participants: 181 students taking compulsory English class who attended on the last day of the fall semester, 94 freshmen (four classes), 87 sophomores (four classes)

2. Survey A (end of spring semester)

Period: July 2016, last day of spring semester

Participants: 133 students taking compulsory English class who attended on the last day of the spring semester, 42 freshmen (two classes), 91 sophomores (five classes)

3. Survey B (end of fall semester)

Period: Jan. 2017, last day of fall semester

Participants: 104 students taking compulsory English class who attended on the last day of the fall semester, 36 freshmen (two classes), 68 sophomores (five classes)

Various facilities have been created, designed, and implemented to support students’ English learning and to improve their English proficiency at many universities in Japan, such as;



University Library

provides learning spaces focusing on learning support services by using library materials (Reference services, information literacy education, etc.)



Learning Commons

is “co-creation space” where the students can intellectually mature by inspiring each other, facilitating everyday social activities necessary for mutual communication such as discussions and presentations.



Global Commons

is multilingual and multicultural symbiotic space, facilitating a variety of activities such as intercultural events involving speaking foreign languages, especially in English.

Where do the students study English? And do they find the place effective for English learning?

Results

Figure 1

“**University Library**” is a popular place for “working on English exercises or practice tests such as TOEIC,” “Reading Comprehension (extensive & intensive reading)” and “English composition” which all require a long-term continuous concentration. “**Train, bus, car**” is appeared to be effective for “Memorizing English vocabulary/grammars” because the travel time on the public transportation gives the students a short and sharp concentration, according to the comments from the free description section. “**Your own room**” is seen to be overwhelmingly popular for “English listening practice” and “English conversation, pronunciation, or presentation practice.” The biggest possible reason why **Learning Commons**” and “**Global Commons**” were not selected for sound-making types of learning seemed to be the psychological factor of feeling shy about speaking out loud in front of others, according to the comments from the free description section.

Figure 2

“**Being able to concentrate**” was the most selected, followed by “**Quiet**,” “Private spaces,” and “Comfortable air-conditioning.” Among those elements, both “Being able to concentrate” and “Quiet” tend not to occur in “Your own room,” That is one of the reasons why “University Library” beats “Your own room” for the types of learning which require intensive and continuous concentration. “**People studying around**” marks more than 40%. It can be said that the students need a quiet environment with a certain atmosphere in order to maintain their motivation, and to be able to sense other people also studying nearby.

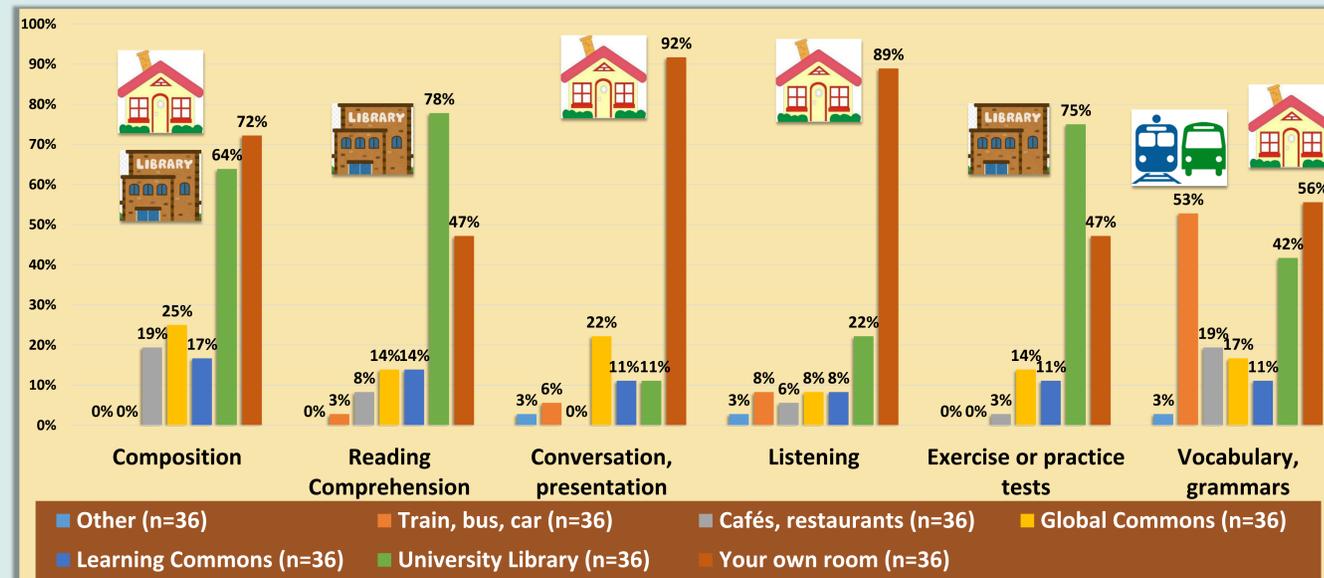


Fig 1. Places Effective for Each English Learning (Freshmen)

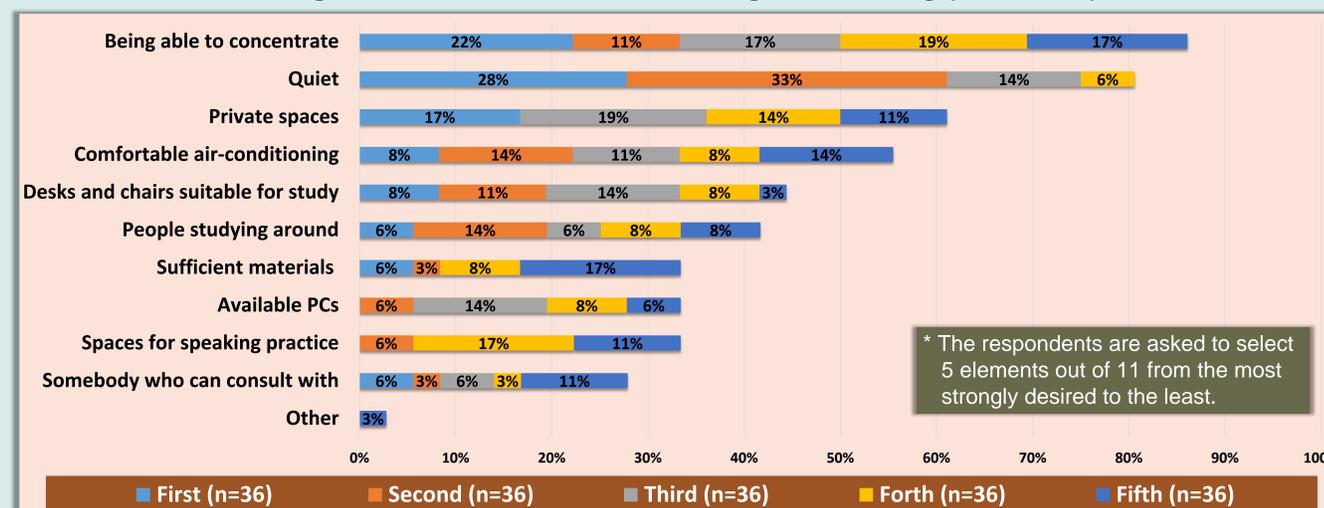


Fig 2. Elements Desired by the Students for English Learning Environment (Freshmen)

Conclusion

1. Students distinguish the places they use for several types of English study, considering not only practical but also **psychological effect**.
2. The ways that students distinguish places for different types of study do **not necessarily match the university’s intended uses** and roles for these facilities.
3. The environment that the freshmen find effective for each type of English study is **not likely to change as they go from being freshmen to sophomores**.

We should make the freshmen’s English learning more effective by facilitating English learning environment with a careful consideration on the students’ learning styles and psychological system of learning behavior.