

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS WITH BUSINESS JAPANESE COMPETENCIES? A STUDY BASED ON SURVEYS OF BUSINESS PEOPLE WORKING IN JAPAN-RELATED WORKPLACES

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Abstract

Japanese corporations are accelerating their globalization and opening up more positions for foreign employees. More job recruiters are approaching universities, particularly in ASEAN countries, to search for new graduates with command of the Japanese language. Cultivating students' Business Japanese Competence, therefore, has become a major requirement for Japanese language education. In order to facilitate the acquisition of Business Japanese Competence, it is vital to understand the actual situation these graduates are facing; however little study has been conducted in Singapore. To address this shortfall, the Japanese Language Teachers' Association in Singapore conducted a survey to investigate how Japanese is used in the workplace and what kind of problems are faced in language use. The findings reveal that Japanese is used for limited occasions, namely reading e-mails, casual conversation with colleagues, translation, and greetings, but except for e-mails not writing. The findings also reveal that many respondents have linguistic and socio-cultural difficulties, such as in use of honorifics, reading social cues behind words, hierarchical issues and so on. This paper reports on the details of the findings and discusses what competencies are necessary to be able to work successfully in Japan-related workplaces, and then proposes teaching implications for Japanese language teachers.

1 Background

Since gaining independence in 1963, the Singaporean economy has been growing rapidly and as a result, the country now has one of the highest GDP per capita in the world. Japan has supported such rapid economic growth of Singapore and both countries still enjoy a strong economic partnership. In fact, Singapore was the largest Asian investor in Japan in 2010, and Japan is one of the top 3 investors in Singapore. Strategically located at the crossroads of east-west trading routes, Singapore offers access to fast-growing markets including China and

India. It is also a key base from which Asian companies can internationalise and break into the global market. Recognising this, an increasing number of Japanese companies have established regional offices and key manufacturing plants to bring their most advanced products to the global market. An increasing number of trading houses have also moved their regional headquarters to Singapore. There is also a growing interest from Japanese companies in partnering in Singapore for new business areas and sectors. As a result, a growing number of Japanese companies have moved some of their international headquarters or key functions to Singapore, viewing the city-state as a strategic location from where they can oversee a new wave of investment in Southeast Asia. Contrary to such developments, it has become more and more difficult to employ Japanese workers in Singapore because government policy has tightened foreign employment and the maximum number of foreign workers in foreign companies was reduced to provide more job opportunities to Singaporeans from 2012.

On the other hand as business in Japan declines particularly due to the decreasing and aging population, Japanese companies in Japan are under pressure to make the transformation into globally focused companies. Japanese companies are accelerating their globalization by opening up positions for foreign employees. Because of this, more and more Japanese companies are approaching universities particularly in ASEAN countries to search for excellent new graduates. Cultivating students' Business Japanese Competence has become a major challenge for Japanese language education in Asia including Singapore.

Above all, Singaporeans with Japanese language proficiency are in high demand in Japan-related companies both in Japan and Singapore. However, no studies have been done on how Japanese language is used by Singaporean Business Persons (SBP), what competencies are necessary to work for Japan-related companies, what kind of problems SBP face when they communicate in Japanese, and so on. Thus, the Japanese Language Teachers' Association in Singapore (JALTAS) conducted an on-line survey with non-native speakers of Japanese, mainly graduates from universities in Singapore who are working in Japan related companies.

2 What are business Japanese competencies?

The present study investigates the needs of Japanese language competencies for Singaporean business persons (SBP) to work for Japanese companies and issues faced in achieving Business Japanese Competence (BJC). First of all, it is necessary to discuss what BJC is, and how it is different from communicative competence defined by many linguists such as Canale and Swain (1980).

It can be said that communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) is the fundamental Competence for BJC, and other competencies such as intercultural competence, pragmatic competence are also important for BJC. Besides these, business specific knowledge and skills are necessary in order to work successfully for Japanese companies. The "Guidebook of Business Japanese Education for Foreign Students for Japanese educational institutions" (2006) published by the Ministry of Economics, Trade and Industry (METI) and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT) presents a comprehensive framework for BJC. According to this guidebook, BJC cover the following three areas:

- 1) Business Japanese proficiency required for working in Japan: Advanced communication skills for smooth communication and advanced discussion skills.

2) Knowledge and understanding about Japanese corporate culture: How to work in Japan, Japanese business culture, knowledge about business field, professional development.

3) Fundamental competencies for working people: cooperation, teamwork, ability to be fit into Japanese organization.

The definition from the "Advanced Education Program for Career Development of Foreign Students from Asia" (2007), which specializes in educating foreign students from Asia, with support from a consortium of global Japanese corporations and universities, provides a similar framework to the above:

- 1) Highly-specialized education to meet corporate needs,
- 2) Business Japanese proficiency required for working in Japan,
- 3) Japanese business education,
- 4) Fundamental competencies for working people

The fundamental competencies for working persons are defined by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in 2006 as follows: This consist of the following three competencies with 12 Competence factors.

< 3 Competencies / 12 Competency Factors >

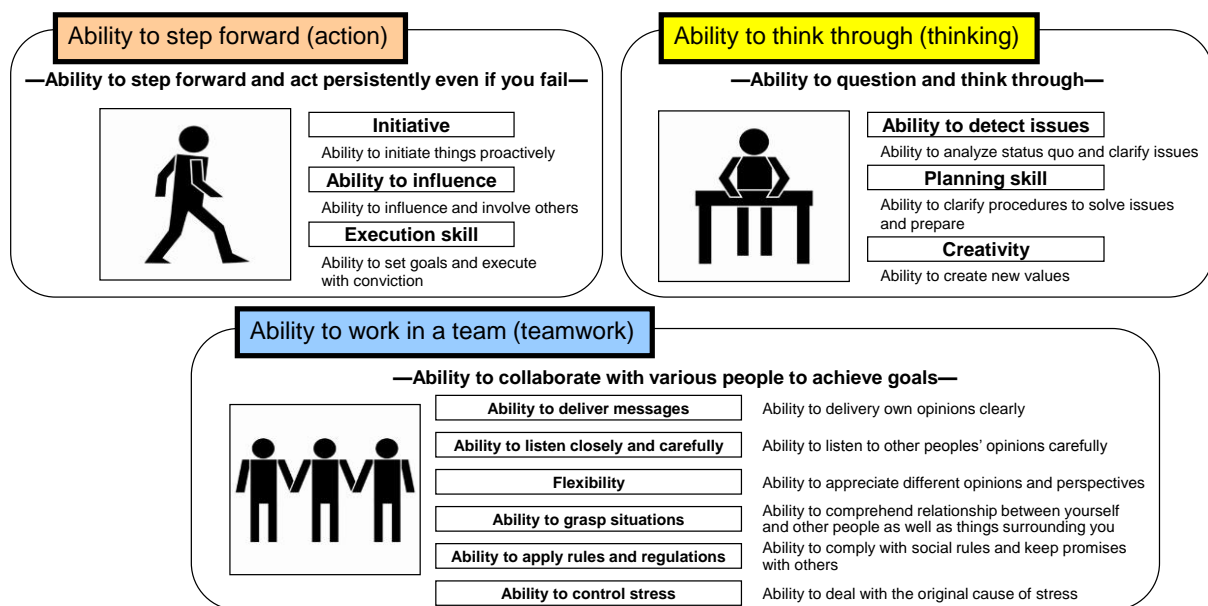


Fig. 1. Fundamental competencies for working persons

These references suggest that not only the high proficiency level of the Japanese language but also various other knowledge and skills which enable foreign employees to work in the Japanese environment are required. However, these seem to be too demanding for SBP or perspective SBP in Singapore because they don't have opportunities to learn Japanese up to advanced level at universities in Singapore, and also, all of these may not be simply applied

to the workplace in Singapore because the main language used in business can be English and business culture might be adapted to the local culture although it depends on the industry and the role of each employee. Nevertheless, there must be some tendencies among all SBP in terms of use of Japanese language at workplace, and finding such tendencies would be useful resources for Japanese language education in Singapore.

In fact studies have been conducted in many other countries. Shimada and Shibukawa (1999) investigated the needs of Japanese language by Japanese companies in 5 Asian nations, namely Seoul, Dalian, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, and Bangkok and reported gaps between expectations by Japanese companies and foreign employees working for Japanese companies and concluded that Japanese companies have too high expectations on the use of Japanese language. Harada (2004) analyzed the needs of Japanese language in Japanese companies in Bangkok. The common findings from the needs analysis suggests that the major issue is due to cultural differences. In addition to the needs analysis, an increasing number of studies about intercultural issues or communication conflicts between native Japanese business people (NBP) and non-native Japanese business people (NNBP) have been conducted. Sei (1995 and 1998) reported that NBP with advanced level Japanese Competence face problems with the speech styles they use for 'stating opinions' and 'refusing'. Kondo (1998) concluded that the four major problems NBP have at work are 1) unreasonable treatment, 2) inefficiency of work, 3) business custom differences, and 4) cultural differences. Kondo (2007) further studied communication conflicts between NBP and NNBP and concluded that the conflict NBP from Asian countries have is stronger than those from the western countries, and it becomes even stronger after 5 years of working. Son, etc. (2009) who investigated the Chinese business persons in China claim that Chinese Business Persons (CBP) tend to have problems with the salary and decision making system of Japanese companies. Aibara (2009) reported based on her interviews with both HBP and JBP in Hong Kong that there are four areas with problems JBP have when communicating with HBP: 1) contact situations enlarged the psychological distances between HBP and JBP, 2) gaps of understanding about job responsibilities, 3) differences of communicative behavior due to pragmatic differences, and 4) lack of communication ability. Aibara (2012) further examined the perceptions between HBP and JBP who are working in Hong Kong and suggests that in order to define the scope of Business Japanese Education, it is important to exclude general business skills from Japanese language competencies, or carefully judge what kind of business skills should be included. Tachikawa (2013) investigated how CBP employed by Japanese companies in Japan deal with intercultural conflicts that arose in the workplace. Based on the findings, Tachikawa concluded that the active use of avoidance and accommodation among some of the CBP suggested its effectiveness in conflict management.

As be seen above, a number of studies have been conducted from various perspectives, and recent studies tend to focus on communication conflict or intercultural problems. Based on these previous studies, the present study aimed at getting the entire picture of the use of Japanese language at workplaces where SBP are employed, and how they perceive the Japanese corporate culture. To achieve these objectives, Shimada and Shibuya (1999) and Aibara (2009) were applied as the framework of the survey questions, so that the characteristics of communication in the workplace in Singapore can be found compared to other Asian countries.

3 The study

3.1 Objectives

The current study aims to explore the following three questions:

- 1) How much Japanese language is used by Singaporean Business Persons (SBP) at workplace?
- 2) What are the major occasions for SBP to use the Japanese language at work?
- 3) What are the problems SBP perceives in terms of communication in Japanese?

3.2 Procedure

The present study was conducted by The Japanese Language Teachers' Association. First of all, the survey questions were developed by the Executive Committee of the Association which the three authors belong to, based on the previous studies conducted in other Asian nations. After completion of the survey questions, it was re-designed as on-line questionnaire and distributed to business people, mainly graduates, from universities in Singapore. The Association received 49 responses, mainly from business persons currently working for Japan-related companies in Singapore.

3.3 Instruments

The on-line questionnaire was designed with the framework used by Shimada and Shibuya (1999) and Aibara (2006). The questionnaire consists of both close-ended and open-ended questions. The close-ended questions were to grasp the overview of the use of the Japanese language. The open-ended questions were to collect SBP's perceptions about Japanese business culture. (Appendix A)

3.4 Data analysis

Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using the Adobe Forms Central. On the other hand, the qualitative data from the questionnaire was analyzed by two groups; members of Teachers' Association in Singapore at the Japanese Language Education Seminar held on November 21, 2013 and by the authors. During the former stage, 30 participants of the seminar were formed into several groups and each group analyzed the data distributed by the facilitator. After the analysis, leaders of each group presented their findings. The findings from the seminar were re-analyzed by the authors of the present study.

4 Results

4.1 Participants details

The participants of the survey were 49 working adults who are working for Japanese

companies or those who are using Japanese language for business purposes. The population consisted of graduates from universities in Singapore. 41 participants (93%) were below 30 years old. The nationality of 34 participants (69%) was Singaporean. The present study calls all the participants SBP (Singaporean Business Persons) although other nationalities are included. 37 (76%) participants have passed Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N1 and N2. 37 (76%) participants are working in Singapore and 10 (20 %) are working in Japan. The industries the companies belongs to are Banking & Financial Services, Computer & IT Products & Services, Education & Training, Human Resources & Personal Recruitment, Hospitals, Manufacturing, Printing & Publishing, Schools, Travel & Tourism and others.

4.2 Major occasions of using Japanese

Figures 1 to 4 summarizes the major occasions to use Japanese. Figure 2 shows the major occasions to use Japanese when SBP speak or listen to Japanese. The first purpose was ‘casual conversation with Japanese colleagues (77%)’, the second was ‘Greetings (69%)’, the third was ‘Interpretations for simple casual conversations (65%)’ while the fourth was ‘Work conversation with Japanese colleagues (63 %)’. These results shows that use of Japanese by SBP is aimed more at communication with internal parties rather than external parties such as clients or business partners. ‘Interpretation for simple casual conversations’ indicates that participants work as a bridge between Japanese speakers and local staff who have no or less Japanese proficiency.

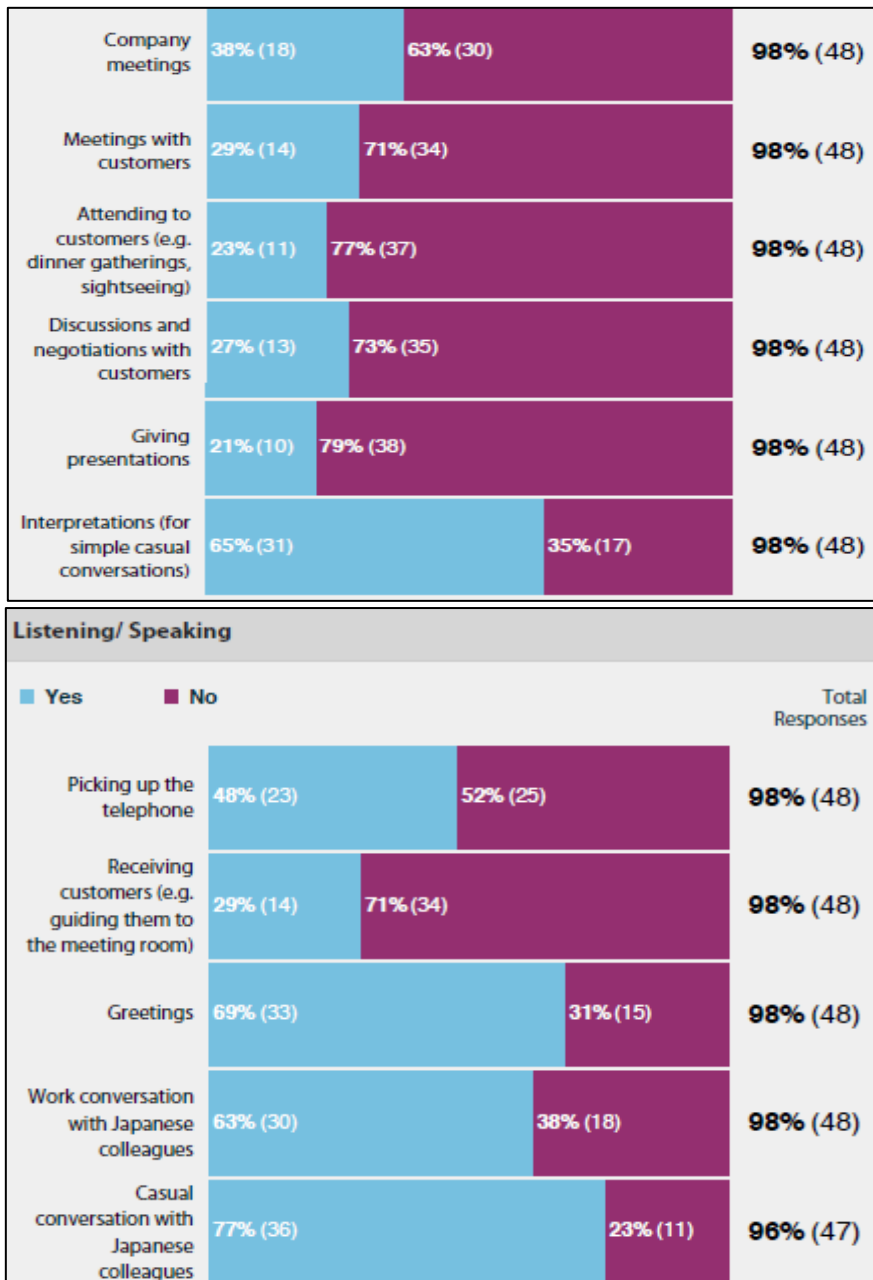


Fig. 2. Occasions to use Japanese when listening or speaking

Figure 3 shows the major occasions behind using Japanese for ‘reading’. The most popular purpose was ‘reading e-mails (77%)’, followed by ‘reading memos (60%)’, and ‘reading business reports and letters (57%)’.

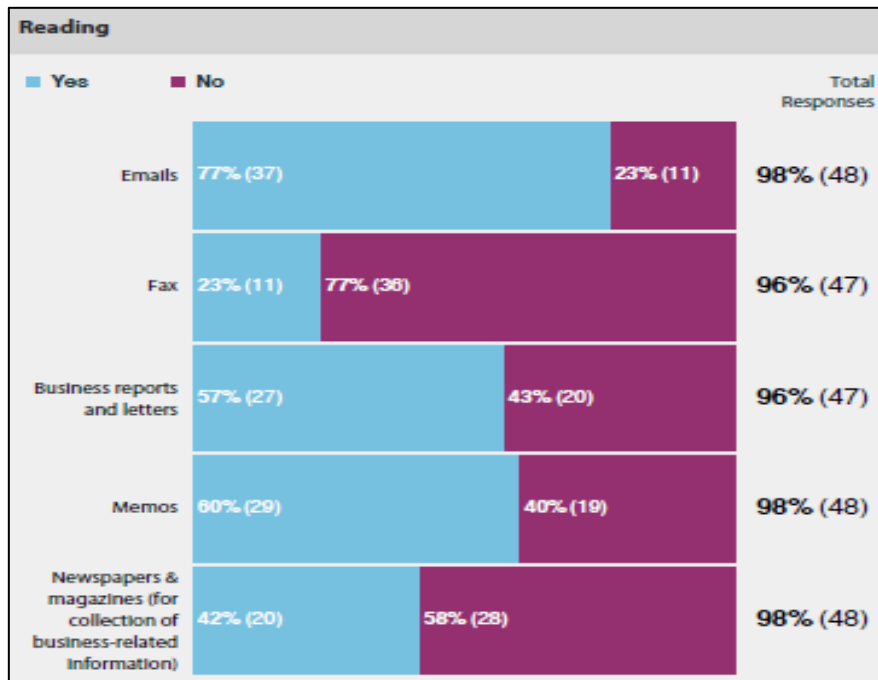


Fig. 3. Occasions to use Japanese when reading

Figure 4 shows the major occasions behind using Japanese for ‘writing’. The most frequent response was ‘writing E-mails (58 %)', followed by ‘writing memos (31%)’ and ‘Business reports and letters (31%)’ .

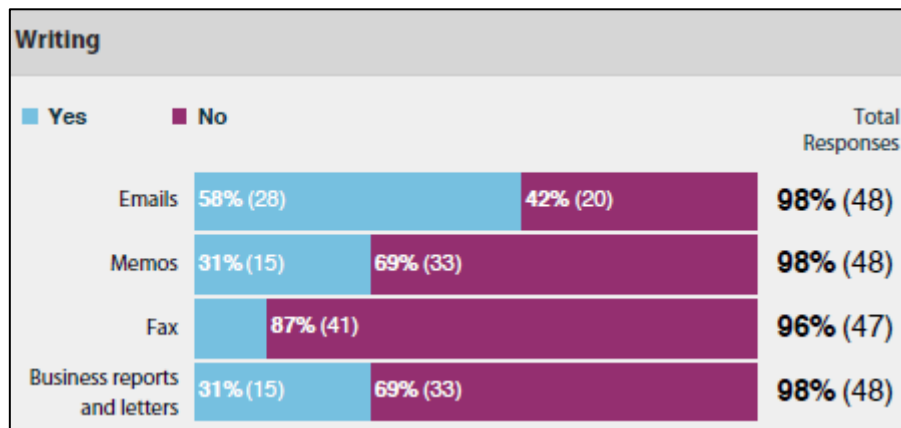


Fig. 4. Occasions to use Japanese when writing

Figures 3 and 4 indicate that communication through e-mail is highly ranked as the major occasion to use Japanese. Furthermore, 77% of participants read e-mails in Japanese while only 58% of participants write e-mails in Japanese. This may imply that reading ability is more important than writing ability.

Finally, Figure 5 is the summary of using Japanese for other occasions. It is remarkable that 34 (71%) participants responded they engage in translation. This implies that participants play active roles to connect Japanese speakers and non-Japanese speakers in their workplace.

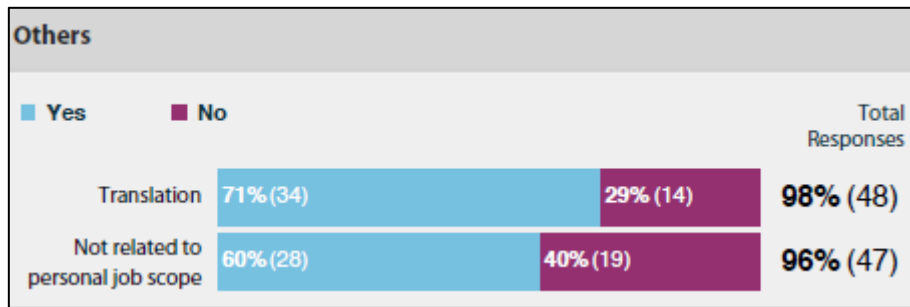


Fig. 5. Other occasions

4.3 Problems with using Japanese at work

The next questions in the questionnaire relate to problems SBP perceive they face when they use Japanese in the workplace. 32 (68%) of the participants responded “Yes”, to the question “Did you encounter any problem(s) in using Japanese language at work?” They were also requested to write detailed descriptions about what kind of problem(s) they had in using Japanese at work. The comments are coded and summarized in Figures 5 to 9.

4.3.1 Problems with knowledge about Japanese

Figure 6 shows what kind of problems SBP have over their knowledge of Japanese followed by sample comments. “#” indicates the numbers for each category. The most frequently occurring response was ‘vocabulary’. Nearly half of the respondents commented that they find difficulties with technical terms. The next problem faced was with "Honorific Expression". Comments like #23 indicates that honorific expression, or *keigo*, can cause serious communication problems.

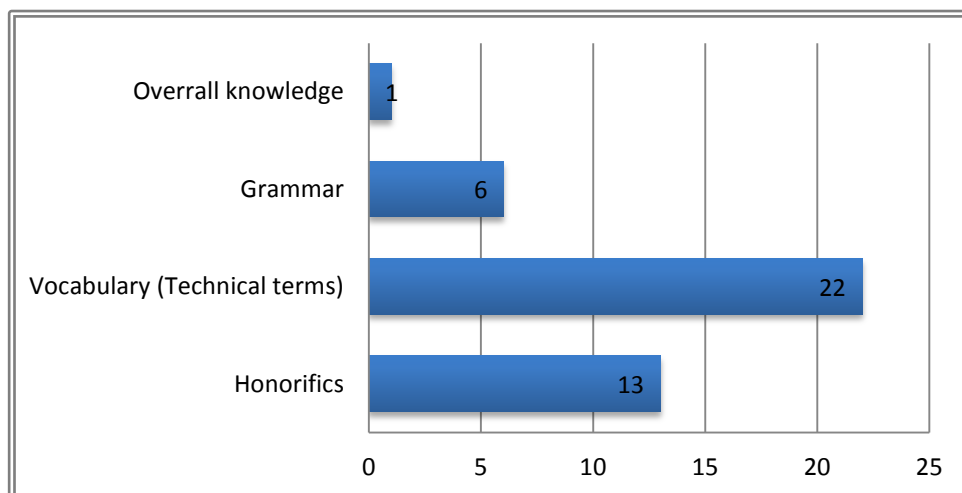


Fig. 6. Not knowing the Japanese language well enough to perform effectively at work

- Being confused with honorifics such as using 謙讓語 (humble expressions) when I was supposed to use 尊敬語 (honorific expressions).¹ (#5)
- Honorifics are difficult to grasp because I have a hard time figuring out who should be in my inner circle and who isn't. Vocabulary is a struggle as well especially if I do not have a dictionary with me, and it is doubly difficult if technical terms are being used.(#7)
- Difficulties encountered when using honorifics (had forgotten most of them since honorific terms were seldom used). (#13)
- Not proficient in *keigo* which caused some misunderstanding with customers during phone conversation. (#23)

4.3.2 Problems with the act of listening

Figure 7 indicates the problems found with “listening”. The most frequently occurring response was that native speakers spoke too fast. The next problem was ‘dialect’. It is understandable that SBP working in local areas of Japan with regional dialects could have serious problems; respondent #19 who is working in Osaka where there are totally different structural and phonological features from standard Japanese which are commonly used in teaching materials and by teachers. However, the fact that SBP working in Singapore also state this indicates that native speakers of Japanese from Japan are still speaking with regional dialects in Singapore.

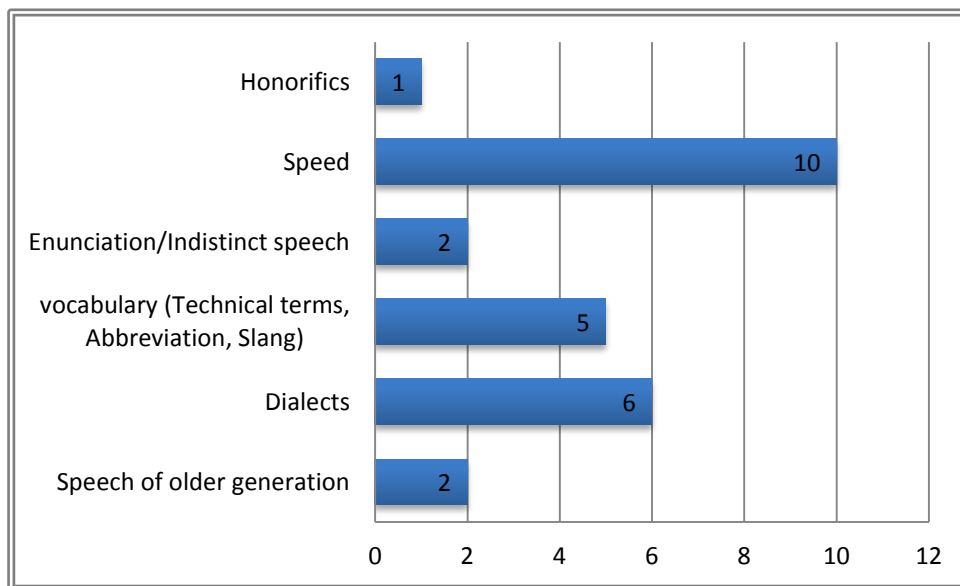


Fig. 7. Listening

¹ There are several types in *keigo* in Japanese, such as honorific expression, humble expression, beautified expression, polite expression, etc. , but all of them are often addressed as ‘Honorifics’ or ‘honorific expressions.’.

- Find certain dialects/accent very difficult to understand. (#9)
- Kansai dialect is a small problem sometimes. (#11)
- As the company is based in Osaka, many of my colleagues use the kansai dialect and it is hard to catch exactly what is said when they speak fast. (#19)
- Some dialects are hard to understand. (#21)
- Cannot catch very thick Kansai ben, otherwise can still understand most of the time. (#23)

4.3.3 Problems expressing yourself in conversation

Figure 8 indicates the problems SBP have when they express themselves in Japanese. The most frequently occurring problem was ‘lack of knowledge of general and technical terms.’ Even native Japanese face difficulties working where technical vocabulary is used, so it must be really difficult for learners. It is hoped that Japanese companies are aware of the handicap of SBP and take special care for teaching special terminology. The second problem was ‘Honorific Expression’. Honorific expressions are widely known to be one of the most difficult linguistic items to acquire for Japanese language learners. Despite that, inappropriate use of honorific expressions can harm relationship with others. For example, if honorific expressions were not properly used with senior colleagues or customers, the behavior of the speaker appears to be rude. On the other hand, excessive use of honorific expressions between socially equal and close colleagues makes it appear that the speaker is trying to keep their distance from the hearer. In the worst case it may cause failure in business. The responses in this study indicate that the respondents are aware of this and therefore, express their anxiety about unintended misuse of honorific expressions.

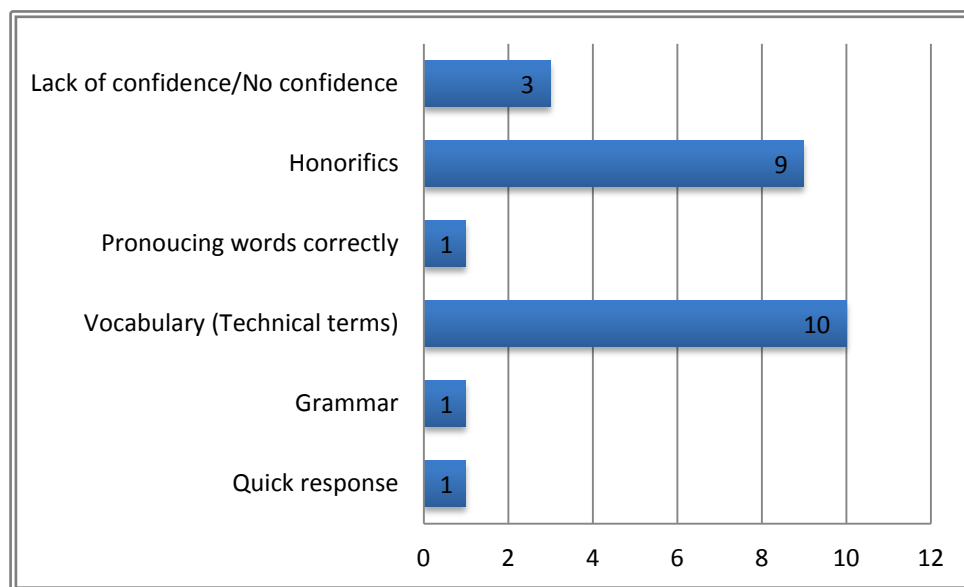


Fig. 8. Expressing yourself in conversations

- Insufficient vocabulary knowledge. (#7)
- Specialized technical terms for certain industry. (#9)

- Mixing up polite terms with slang terms during conversations with Japanese co-workers. (#3)
- Would be worried during conversation that an inappropriate word/description is used. (#11)
- Accidentally mix formal and casual forms. (#13)
- Accidentally using informal form during conversations with senior colleagues. (#21)

4.3.4 Problems with the act of writing

Figure 9 shows the problems with writing in Japanese. Respondents claimed that ‘honorifics’ are most problematic when they are writing as well. However, one respondent wrote that “so far ok, there are more or less standard formats/fixed phrases and I’m very used to them already”. This comment implies that writing, especially e-mails have a typical format and it eases SBP to deal with honorific expressions. The second problem was again vocabulary. The lack of general and technical terms challenge respondents’ act over writing. These results are similar to the difficulties with conversation.

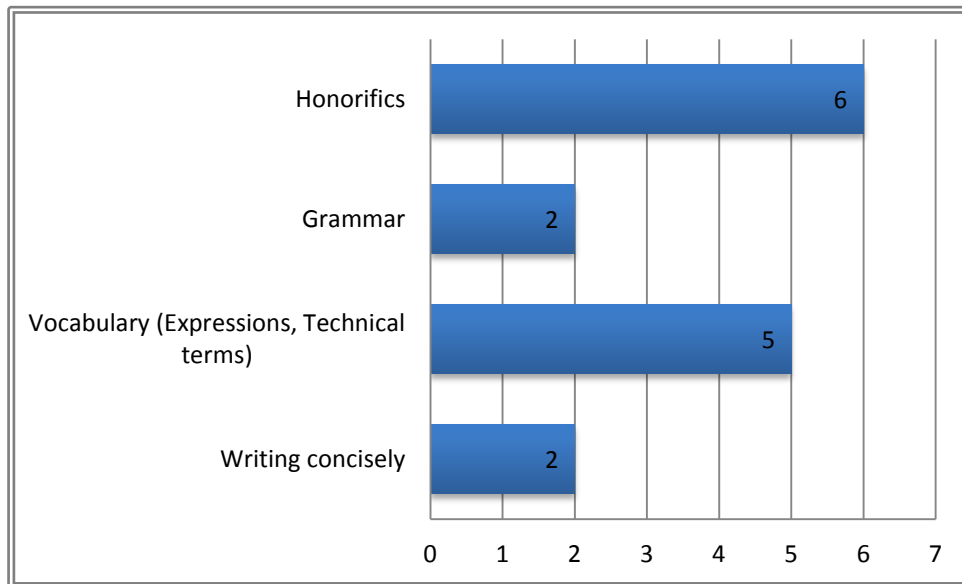


Fig. 9. Writing

- usage of honorifics as well as when requesting for information. (#12)
- so far ok, there are more or less standard formats/fixed phrases and I’m very used to them already. (#13)
- and also take a long time deciding which one is better between xx 取締役 and 取締役 xx 様 (when I know both is correct). (#9)
- It is hard to find the equivalent technical terms in Japanese. (#11)

4.3.5 Problems with the working culture

Figure 10 is the summary of problems with working culture. Interestingly, 7 out of 10 participants (70%) working in Japan commented on working culture whereas 12 out of 39 participants working in Singapore (30%) did. To quote a few, #5 and #6 are those working in Japan. They found “They (JBP) have a different thinking and don't take initiative as much as they should.” and have “Very slow decision-making process with many layers of command and control - not a language proficiency issue but a corporate culture issue” and “Have to seek consensus from all parties involved - which usually results in no action as it's impossible to gain approval from everyone.” However, SBP working in Singapore also expressed difficulties with working culture. One of them displayed specific terms; “detailed-oriented” and “thoughtfulness” which are translated into “細かい (Komakai)” and “思いやり (Omoiyari)” and states that “Japanese colleagues on the whole, tend to be more detailed-oriented and prepare/provide more information on matters in advance. Understandably, Japanese customers or counterparts will expect the same level of "thoughtfulness" which can be tough for me to match, though I try.” These comments indicate that the different working culture must be a challenge for SBP regardless of their proficiency level. In fact, one respondent who has JLPT1 commented that “‘No’ is still hard to discern sometimes.” and another SBP has difficulties with “Japanese way of expressing ideas and concepts indirectly”. These comments imply that a competence to read social cues behind words is required when speaking with JBP. Another interesting finding is that SBP in Japan and SBP in Singapore raised the same point about JBP as “Japanese/locals tend to stick to themselves. Don't really mix a lot” and “Japanese expats in the company tend to stick together. They hang out among themselves, making it difficult for locals to join them.”

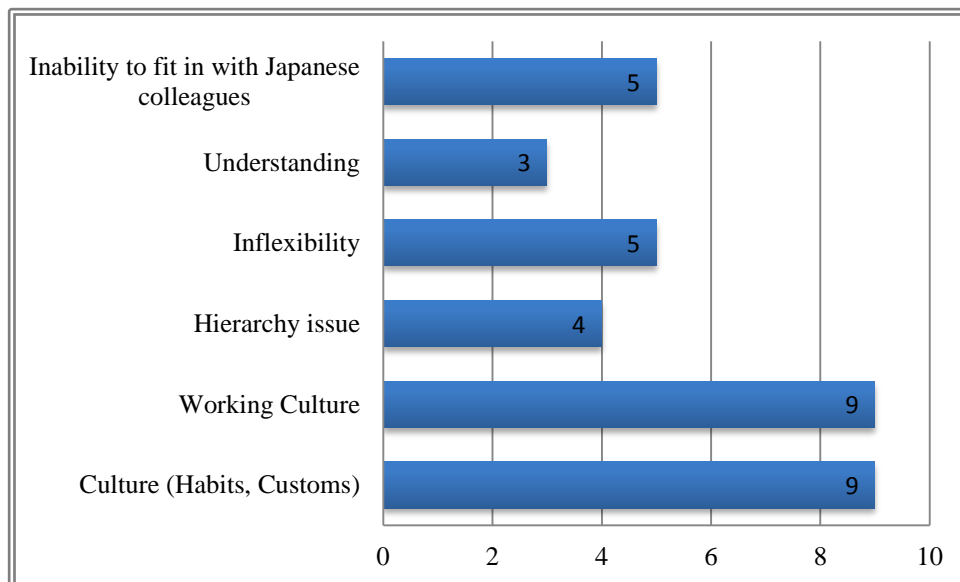


Fig. 10. Culture factors

- They have a different thinking and don't take initiative as much as they should. (#5)
- Japanese colleagues on the whole, tend to be more detailed-oriented and prepare/provide more information on matters in advance. Understandably, Japanese customers or counterparts

will expect the same level of "thoughtfulness" which can be tough for me to match, though I try. (#5)

- Very slow decision-making process with many layers of command and control - not a language proficiency issue but a corporate culture issue. (#6)
- Have to seek consensus from all parties involved - which usually results in no action as it's impossible to gain approval from everyone (#6)
- Japanese/locals tend to stick to themselves. Don't really mix a lot. (#6)
- Japanese way of expressing ideas and concepts indirectly (#1)
- "No" is still hard to discern sometimes (#11)
- Japanese expats in the company tend to stick together. They hang out among themselves, making it difficult for locals to join them. (#7)

5 Discussions

Based on the findings, this chapter discusses two points; the characteristics of the Singapore workplace in terms of language use, and suggestions on how to deal with socio-cultural or cultural differences between SBP and JBP.

The survey questions for the present study were developed based on previous studies, particularly the survey conducted in Hong Kong (Aibara, 2009) because Hong Kong has similarities with Singapore in terms of the language situation; it is a multi-lingual nation with Chinese and English bilingual speakers. However, there must be differences as well, so this study attempted to compare the findings of the two studies. Table 1 provides the percentage who answered "Yes, I am using Japanese" for each occasion. The gap was computed by subtracting the Hong Kong result from the Singapore result.

The results show that the overall use of the Japanese language is similar between the two city-states, but there are substantial differences in the use of some skills. First of all, it appears that Japanese seems to be more commonly used by HBP (Business Persons in Hong Kong) because 69% of the respondents answer the telephone using Japanese. HBP use Japanese for writing e-mails (81%), much more than SBP (58%) as well. Secondly, the major reason behind SBP using Japanese is to have casual conversations with colleagues, while for HBP, it is in answering telephone calls. This implies that Japanese is used more for business purposes in Hong Kong, while in Singapore Japanese is used to create and maintain good working relationships between SBP and JBP. It should be also noted that the percentage of writing e-mails in Japanese (58%) is far less than reading e-mails (77%). Does this mean that participants in Singapore read e-mails in Japanese but reply using another language? Further studies are necessary to determine this. Furthermore, there is a huge gap for translation between the countries; 71% of SBP are engaged in translation while only 40% do so in Hong Kong. In other words, 31% more SBP are doing translation jobs than HBP.

Why is there such a difference in terms of "Translation"? There are two possible reasons. One reason may be due to differences in how long respondents have worked, their age and positions in Hong Kong and in Singapore. The age and length of working of respondents in Aibara (1999) are not provided, but most of the respondents in the present study were junior employees with only a few years of working experience after graduation, so they might be asked to do the translation or interpretation when attending to the simple greetings or

receiving an e-mail written in Japanese to colleagues who don't understand Japanese. It is assumed that for translation of official documents or for meetings that involve complicated matters or when VIPs are involved, companies would hire professional translators or interpreters, but on other occasions SBP, particularly junior staff, may be tasked with translation or interpretation. The other reason is the difference in proficiency levels between SBP and HBP. From the overall survey results as well as previous studies conducted in Hong Kong (Aibara 2009, 2012, etc.), HBP seem to have higher proficiency levels than SBP. Because of this, Japanese speaking environment is established in the companies in Hong Kong, and translation to English may not be necessary compared to Singapore.

Table 1. The comparison of major occasions to use Japanese between Singapore and Hong Kong

Speaking and Listening			
Ranking	Singapore	Gap (Singapore-Hong Kong)	Hong Kong
1	Casual conversation with Japanese colleagues (77%)	+12%	Picking up phone (69%)
2	Greetings (69%)	+1%	Work conversation with Japanese colleagues (68%)
3	Interpretations for simple casual conversations (65%)	+54% ²	Greetings (68%)
4	Work conversation with Japanese colleagues (63 %).	-5%	Casual conversation with Japanese colleagues (65%)
Reading			
1	E-mails (77%)	-12%	E-mails (89%)
2	Memos (60%)	+23% ³	Business reports and letters (48%)
3	Business reports and letters (57%)	+9%	FAX (43%)
Writing			
1	E-mails (58 %)	-23%	E-mails (81%)
2	Memos (31%)	-4%	Business reports and letters (37%)
3	Business reports and letters (31%)	-6%	Memos (35%)
Others			
1	Translation (71%)	+31%	Not related personal scope (42%)
2	Not related to personal scope (60%)	+18%	Translation (40%)

The present study also revealed that SBP have difficulties coping with socio-cultural or cultural differences. Then, how can SBP manage such cultural differences? Is the Japanese side aware that such cultural difficulties exist? Since this study was only conducted from the SBP side, let us review some examples of how JBP perceive this.

² Interpretations for simple casual conversations in Hong Kong is 11%.

³ Reading Memos in Hong Kong is 37%.

Mr. Shimura, Managing Director of Asia Pacific Division of Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation, who manages over 12 Asia-Pacific regions with 1700 local staff, which was established in Singapore in 1963, before Singapore was even born as an independent nation, states that Japanese employees often complain about NNBP, such as “they don’t keep time”, “what we ordered are not served properly”, etc. However, he asserts that such JBP sticks to “Japanese common sense” and these employees won’t be able to succeed in business outside Japan. “It is very important to reflect on oneself calmly and objectively, and not to insist on Japanese logic”. He emphasizes the importance of “Omoiyari (consideration to others)”, “Kanyo-sa (generosity)” and “Kyokan (sympathy)” toward differences with his employees regardless nationalities. Regarding the working culture, he proudly states that his company has never fired anyone even when many Western companies have done so when Lehman shock and Global Financial Crisis (GFC) occurred in 2008. It is because Japanese companies treat their employees as a family, try to maintain continuity, and establish trust with each other. It is indeed the corporate identity that has led the continuous success as a global company. Nevertheless, Mr. Shimura also admits that the traditional corporate system such as “Nenjojoretsu (ranking by seniority)” may be reconsidered for foreign employees in the future.

It is evident from articles in business journal like the above that it is not only SBP but also JBP that feel cultural difficulties and at least the management level of Japanese companies are well aware of them, and are trying to reduce such problems although it will take time to change the whole company. Therefore, it is important for SBP to understand such efforts as well as the positive and negative features of Japanese business culture. For example, as Mr. Shimura asserts, true understanding of “Omoiyari (consideration to others)”, “Kanyo-sa (generosity)” and “Kyokan (sympathy)” would be helpful to overcome cultural conflict between SBP and JBP although it should not be expected that SBP can behave just like JBP. At the same time, it would be helpful if JBP try to adjust their way of speaking when they are communicating with SBP. For example, reducing speaking speed, refraining regional dialects, and stating more directly would be helpful for SBP. Such mutual efforts are indeed vital to reduce communicative and socio-cultural issues.

6 Conclusions

The present study investigated the needs of Japanese language competencies for Singaporean business persons (SBP) to work for Japanese companies as well as issues in achieving Business Japanese Competence (BJC). The findings reveal that Japanese language is used for limited occasions, namely reading e-mails, casual conversation with colleagues, translation, and greetings, but except for e-mails writing in Japanese is not much required in Singapore. The findings also revealed that many SBP have both linguistic and socio-cultural difficulties, such as use of honorific expressions, reading social cues behind words, hierarchical issues and so on. Most of these findings support previous studies conducted in other Asian countries such as Hong Kong, China, and Japan. The SBP perceptions about Japanese business culture are also similar to those studied by Kondo (2007) and Son et al. (2009). However, there are some findings that are unique to Singapore.

For example, the major occasion for SBP to use Japanese is for casual conversations with colleagues. Secondly, translation is another frequent tasks given to SBP. 71% of SBP do translation jobs while only 42% HBP do translation.

The present paper discusses that the differences between Hong Kong and Singapore may be due to the fact that the main language used in the workplace in Singapore is English where as Japanese is more commonly used in Hong Kong although further studies are necessary to confirm this absolutely. Nevertheless, Japanese language competencies must still play an important role for SBP because language is not a simple collection of words and grammar, but a complex structure of behaviors dictated by both socially appropriate and culturally meaningful conventions, and the language competencies would help understand Japanese way of thinking and behavior, etc. Lastly, these findings also provide useful teaching implications for Japanese language education in Singapore.

First of all, the fact that the major purpose for using Japanese is for casual conversations with colleagues but not for business purposes suggest that Japanese language may play an important role in building and maintaining good work relationships. Therefore, teaching language so that such ability of learners can be fostered would be important. This includes how to conduct social acts appropriately, how to express yourself in a pleasant manner, and how to show your respect to others, etc.

Secondly, as Japanese is used more for reading than writing implies that it is important to enhance receptive skills more than productive skills. To enhance reading skills would also help translation jobs, that is the major purpose of using the Japanese language, because SBP need to understand what is written in Japanese in order to translate it into English. Furthermore, since the major occasion to use Japanese was e-mail suggests that it is important to teach how to read and write e-mails in Japanese. Such a task can start from the elementary level, and various speech acts necessary for daily life can be incorporated, such as sending e-mails to the teacher to inform them of absence, to apologize for late arrival to the class, to request to write a recommendation letter, or to borrow a book, etc. Depending on the level of learners, the tasks can be adjusted and for learners who learned honorific expressions, learning how to write a polite e-mail would be a very effective task to learn honorific expressions, which was found to be one of the most difficult linguistic items for SBP in this study.

In the questionnaire, participants also showed interest in taking a Japanese language course after graduation. This can be understood from the fact that most of the universities in Singapore can only offer elementary level Japanese language courses except a few universities, and the proficiency level that can be achieved before starting work at Japanese companies is limited. Therefore, it is suggested that more opportunities for leaning Japanese can be given to learners, and it would be even better if they can get opportunities to take Business Japanese courses before graduation so that their Business Japanese Competencies (BJC) can be fostered before working for Japanese companies. However, under the current circumstances in Singapore, the only way to enhance BJC would be to incorporate BJC in Japanese language curriculum in general.

Then how can BJC be integrated into Japanese language curriculum? The possible way would be to enhance socio-cultural competencies from an early stage. In fact, this can start from the first lesson when greetings are introduced. For example ‘Good morning’ can be explained that a senior person can say ‘ohayoo’ to a junior person, but a junior must say ‘ohayoo gozaimasu’ to a senior person. Similarly, ‘Thank you’ can be introduced that a senior person can say ‘arigatoo’ but a junior must say ‘arigatoo gozaimasu’ to a senior person, etc. and practice these expressions in variety of contexts where people in different social ranks exist. It is important to help learners to understand why different expressions are used in such a way, and how Japanese people would feel if such socio-cultural norms are ignored. As the learning progresses, contexts where more complicated linguistic items such as honorific expressions are required are created, and train learners to be able to perform socio-culturally appropriate and culturally meaningful behavior. Furthermore, how to avoid possible cultural conflict would also be a useful skill to learn. Another possible way would be to foster learner’s observation and analytical skills to learn cultural differences using media materials such as TV drama and film so that SBP are not shocked when they start working for Japanese companies. Fostering intercultural communicative competence (Byram 1997) , or to enhance ability with how to speak with people who have different cultural identities, social values and behaviors, is indeed an important part of BJC, and this needs to be acquired over a long period of time.

Above all, while the current study has found useful findings regarding the use of Japanese by Singaporean business persons (SBP) at workplace in Japanese companies, as the first ever study conducted in Singapore it aimed at obtaining an overview of the entire picture. Furthermore, the participants were restricted to young SBP with only a few years of work experience after graduating from universities in Singapore, thus the results may be different if the survey participants were more senior. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the results would be useful for progressing Japanese language education in Singapore and business education research in the world. It is also suggested that Japanese language educators should keep it in mind from the first lesson that Japanese language learners have potentials to become future SBP or global business persons who are dealing with JBP.

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Appendix A

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR JAPANESE LANGUAGE USERS IN THE WORKPLACE

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out how people who are learning, or have learned Japanese, use the language in the workplace. All findings and responses will be kept confidential. They will only be used for research purposes to contribute new ideas to the teaching of Japanese language.

Only the executive committee members and core researchers will have access to identifiable information provided by the participants. This information will not be released to anyone else, including other members of the Japanese Language Teachers' Association in Singapore (JALTAS).

The results of the questionnaire will be presented in the JALTAS workshop scheduled for November 2013 and possibly in other related events. However, no identifiable information will be used in any related publication or presentation. All research data will be coded at the earliest possible stage of the research and deleted once the research is completed.

1. Gender

Male Female

2. What is your age?

Below 25 25 – 30 31-40 40 and above

3. Nationality

Singaporean Malaysian Indonesian Thai

Others (Please specify)

4. E-mail address: _____

5. How long have you been studying/ studied Japanese?

Less than 1 year 1–2 years

2–3 years More than 3 years

6. Where did you have your Japanese language classes? (Please mark where applicable.)

- Secondary School Junior College Polytechnic University
 Language school Others, please specify _____

7. Please rate your proficiency level of the languages that you know, including Japanese.

7.1 First Language: _____

- | | | | | |
|-----------|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Listening | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Reading | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |

7.2 Second Language: _____

- | | | | | |
|-----------|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Listening | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Reading | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |

7.3 Third Language: _____

- | | | | | |
|-----------|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Listening | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Reading | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |

7.4 Fourth Language: _____

- | | | | | |
|-----------|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Listening | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Speaking | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Reading | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |
| Writing | <input type="checkbox"/> Fluent (Native) | <input type="checkbox"/> Advanced | <input type="checkbox"/> Intermediate | <input type="checkbox"/> Basic |

8. Have you taken the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT)?

- Yes No (Please skip to Q.11.)

9. What is the highest level of JLPT you have passed?

- N5/N4 (Old Level 4) N3 (Old Level 3)
 N2 (Old Level 2) N1 (Old Level 1)

10. When did you pass the above stated level of JLPT?

- 2012 2011 2010 2009
 2008 2007 2006 Before 2006

11. Please write the location of the company (e.g. Japan, Tokyo) that you have worked at/are currently working for.

12. Which industry does the company belong to?

13. Please write your job title and responsibilities.

14. How long have you worked/been working in this company?

- Less than 1 year 1-2 years
 2-3 years More than 3 years

15. When did you join this company? (e.g. June 2010)

16. 1 What is the approximate percentage of time that you use Japanese for work-related matters?

Activities during office hours (including casual conversation with colleagues)

- 80-100% 50-79% 20-49% Less than 20%

Activities after office hours (e.g. attending to customers, work discussion with colleagues)

- 80-100% 50-79% 20-49% Less than 20%

Listening/Speaking

- Picking up the telephone
- Receiving customers (e.g. guiding them to the meeting room)
- Greetings
- Work conversation with Japanese colleagues
- Casual conversation with Japanese colleagues
- Company meetings
- Meetings with customers
- Attending to customers (e.g. dinner gatherings, sightseeing)
- Discussions and negotiations with customers
- Giving presentations
- Interpretations (for simple casual conversations)

Reading

- E-mails
- Fax
- Business reports and letters
- Memos
- Newspapers & magazines (for collection of business-related information)

Writing

- E-mails
- Memos
- Fax
- Business reports and letters

Others

- Translation
- Not related to personal job scope

17. Did you encounter any problem(s) in using Japanese language at work?

- Yes No (Go to Question 19)

18. 1 Not knowing the Japanese language well enough to perform effectively at work (e.g. vocabulary, technical terms, grammar and honorifics – Please describe in detail.)

18.2 Listening (e.g. speed, colloquial spoken forms, use of dialects)

18.3 Expressing yourself in conversations (e.g. use of inappropriate words, negotiating in Japanese)

18.4 Writing (e.g. e-mail to customers, business reports)

18.5 Others (Please elaborate)

19.1 Cultural factors (e.g. misunderstanding Japanese customs and habits)

19.2 Work-related cultural differences (e.g. hierarchical issues, work flexibility)

19.3 Inability to fit in with Japanese colleagues.

19.4 Others (Please describe.)

20. Would you consider taking courses to further enhance your Japanese language or related skills?

Yes

No

If your answer is “Yes” for the above, please rank your preferences accordingly for the type of language or business skills that you are interested in. (1 being the least preferred and 10 being the most preferred).

Grammar

Vocabulary

Listening

Speaking

Writing

Reading

Cultural knowledge

Technical expressions

Business manners

Others _____

For others, please write the type of language or business skill that you would like to learn.

21. If you have anything that you would like to share with us which is not covered in this survey, please write your comments in the below provided space.

22. If invited, would you be interested to share your experiences with us personally at the workshop?

Yes

No

Thank you for participating in this questionnaire.

For any enquiries or clarifications, please e-mail:
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