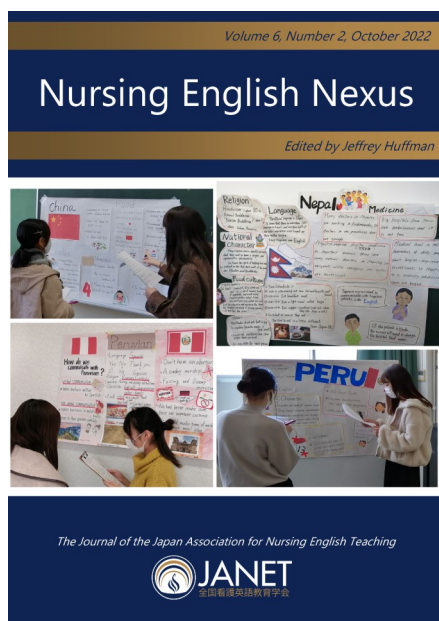


# Looking at English Education in Japan from the Inside Out: Nursing Students' Perspectives

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## Article citation

Ghashut, R., Elfandi, S., Hashizume, L., Tanaka, K., Ninomiya, D., & Bolstad, F. (2022). Looking at English education in Japan from the inside out: Nursing students' perspectives. *Nursing English Nexus*, 6(2), 30–38.

## Nursing English Nexus

<http://www.janetorg.com/nexus>

ISSN 2433-2305

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## Looking at English Education in Japan from the Inside Out: Nursing Students' Perspectives

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**Abstract:** English is the language of communication in the international field of science. According to the National Curriculum Standards (2008-2009 Revision), the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) adopted reform plans to establish an educational environment that would enhance Japanese scientists' ability to participate in research at a global level. Nevertheless, Japan still ranks low in this field. This study aims to investigate the difficulties and challenges in learning English facing Japanese nursing students and proposes solutions that may help to counteract such difficulties. The participants consisted of 169 students, with 93%, 80%, 38%, and 72% of the students reporting having difficulties in speaking, writing, reading, and listening to English, respectively. Most students felt inadequate in situations requiring English communication. In their free responses, 59% percent emphasized the importance of having more speaking activities in class, while 18% proposed non-traditional teaching activities (for example, use of English games, quizzes and movies). Additionally, 16% highlighted the difficulties of using English in their daily lives, and 6% thought there was no need to study English. In conclusion, after many years of English language education based on the grammar-translation teaching approach, more effort is needed to focus on communicative English in Japan.

**Keywords:** Japanese nursing students, English teaching, English in Japan

English has been the primary language of globalization (Jenkins & Leung, 2014). Its most extensive use is as a lingua franca among speakers from different first language backgrounds, mainly, but not exclusively, for non-native English speakers from countries with no history of British colonization (Jenkins & Leung, 2014) such as Japan. With a view to participating in a global environment, promoting and strengthening English education was given an important role in the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology's (MEXT) "Japan 2020 vision" (Tada, 2016). Haruoka (2019) highlighted the focus of the MEXT (2008b) plan on speaking and listening rather than reading and writing. However, English has no official status in Japan and is not often used in everyday communication (Yano, 2011).

MEXT has adopted a series of policies applicable to elementary, secondary, and tertiary education and has worked to implement these policies through its regulation of the Japanese school system and through a public relations

campaign to build support for its policies and programs (Hashimoto, 2007). In 2013, MEXT issued a report titled "English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization," stipulating that by 2020, English instruction would start in Grade 3 and English classes in Grade 5 and 6 would be changed to a formal academic subject (MEXT, 2013).

Despite all these efforts to teach English, Japan still ranks low globally, suggesting that English language education may not be as effective as it could be (Morita, 2017). In fact, in 2015, Japan's average total score on the TOEFL was 71, the second-lowest in Asia. The Lao People's Democratic Republic ranked lowest at 66, while Singapore is highest at 97 (Education Testing Service, 2016). A critical factor in the lack of success in English language education is that English is taught chiefly using the grammar-translation method, especially in Japanese middle schools and high schools (Rosenkjar, 2015; Stewart & Miyahara, 2011). Despite MEXT's reforms, this outdated grammar-translation

method is still widely used in schools and universities. Focusing mainly on the use of the grammar-translation method has been associated with neglecting the development of communicative competencies, intercultural awareness, and global perspectives (Whitsed & Wright, 2011).

The Nara Medical University Department of Clinical English has developed a required English-speaking fluency program, which extends over the first and second years, in order to help our students to improve their spoken English ability (Ghashut et al., 2019). The first-year nursing course is a general, four-skills, communicative English course designed to prepare students for the more difficult content-based second-year nursing and healthcare English course (Ghashut et al., 2019). Accordingly, our courses cover the four English language skills; including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with the intention that our students develop the ability to use English effectively in the real world. However, as speaking and listening are the main skills required for English communication, many Japanese students face difficulties, because in Japan, speaking and listening proficiency is not given as much attention as reading and writing skills (Ku et al., 2021). Therefore, at NMU, as our primary aim is to improve our future nurses' communication skills, we emphasize the teaching of English speaking and listening skills in our classes.

In this study, we investigated our nursing students' thoughts and reflections on the areas where they felt their English skills most needed to be improved. In addition, we also elicited their views on how English language teaching in Japan might be improved.

### Method

The study was conducted at Nara Medical University during the 2020–2021 academic year; in the final class of the academic year, we asked students to fill out a semi-structured questionnaire. This questionnaire was based on a

survey carried out by a research team in the University of Jyväskylä (Leppänen et al., 2011). The questionnaire was adapted and modified by one of the co-authors (S. E.) and translated into Japanese by two of the co-authors (L. H. & K. T.). Students were asked to complete the paper questionnaire in class. Also, students were given the option to answer the free response question in section (7.4) using either English or Japanese, according to their preference. We explained the purpose of the study and guaranteed the anonymity of the students' responses to the questionnaire. Consent was obtained from the students.

Because this study is one part of a larger ongoing research project, only the sections of the questionnaire used in the data analysis for this study are included (see Appendix A for the English questionnaire and Appendix B for the Japanese version).

### The Questionnaire

The semi-structured questionnaire was composed of three sections. The first part covered the students' demographic data including age, gender, and school year.

The second part covered how many years they have studied English and required students to evaluate their English skills in four categories: I speak English, I write English, I read English, and I understand spoken English. Using a Likert scale, we asked students to evaluate each skill from 1 to 5, with 1 being "fluent" and 5 "not at all fluent."

The second part also covered situations in which students felt their English skills to be inadequate. Seven conditions were available for students to choose from, and multiple responses were allowed. The conditions were as follows: (i) when reading in English, (ii) when writing in English, (iii) in situations which require listening comprehension, (iv) when discussing with native speakers of English, (vi) when traveling abroad, and finally (vii) I do not feel that my English

language skills are inadequate in any situation.

The third part was an open-ended question; we asked the students about their thoughts on improving English language teaching in Japan. Students were given the option to answer in Japanese or English.

## Results

### Participants

A total of 87 students from year one and 89 students from year two participated in this study. A total of 7 students (3 from year one and 4 from year two) did not complete the questionnaire and their answers were not included in the study. Of those who completed the questionnaire, 164 (97%) were female and 5 were male (3%). The ages of the participants were as follows: 62 (37%) were aged 18, 42 (25%) were aged 19, 60 (35%) were aged 20, and 5 (3%) were 21 or older. Regarding how long they had been studying

**Table 1**

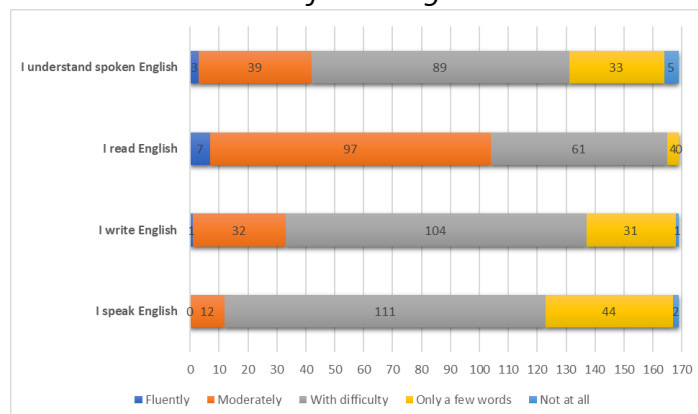
*Demographic data of the participants*

	Number	Percentage
Total number of participants	169	
1 <sup>st</sup> year students	84	
2 <sup>nd</sup> year students	85	
Gender of participants		
Male	5	3%
Female	164	97%
Age (years)		
18	62	37%
19	42	25%
20	60	35%
>20	5	3%
English study period (years)		
3-5	7	4%
6-10	131	78%
11-15	31	18%

Note: Data from 7 students who did not complete the questionnaire is not included in this table.

**Figure 1**

*Students' evaluation of their English skills*



English, 7 (4%), 131 (78%), and 31 (18%) students had been studying English for 3–5, 6–10, and 11–15 years, respectively, as shown in Table 1.

### English Skills

Students evaluated their English skills as follows (Figure 1).

#### Speaking Skill

Twelve students (7%) thought their English-speaking skills were moderate, 111 (66%) indicated that they can speak but with difficulty, 44 (26%) can speak only a few words, and two students (1%) thought their English-speaking skills were not good at all.

#### Writing Skill

One student (1%) thought that their English writing skill was fluent, 33 (19%) thought that their English writing skills were moderate, 104 (61%) believed they could write, but with difficulty, 31 (18%) stated that they could write only a few words, and one student (1%) thought that their English writing skills were not good at all.

#### Reading Skill

Seven students (4%) evaluated their English reading skills as fluent, 97 (58%) evaluated their reading skills as moderate, 61 (36%) could read, but with difficulty, and four students (2%) could read only a few words.

### Listening Skill

Three students (2%) thought that their listening skills were fluent, 39 students (23%) thought that their skills were moderate, 89 (53%) could understand spoken English but with difficulty, 33 (19%) could understand only a few words of spoken English, and five (3%) students thought that their listening skills were not good at all.

### English Skills Inadequacy

Students also identified situations where they felt their skills to be inadequate (Figure 2). More than one answer was possible, and the results were as follows: 56 students (33%) felt that their English skills were inadequate when they read in English, 110 (65%) thought that their English was deficient when writing in English, 126 (75%) reported that their English skills were insufficient in situations which required listening comprehension, 125 (74%) thought that their English was inadequate when discussing with native speakers of English, 46 (27%) reported that their English skills were insufficient when they travel abroad, four students each (2%) thought that their English was inadequate when taking tests and when reading YouTube comments, and one student (1%) did not feel that their English skills were insufficient in any situation.

### Open-Ended Question

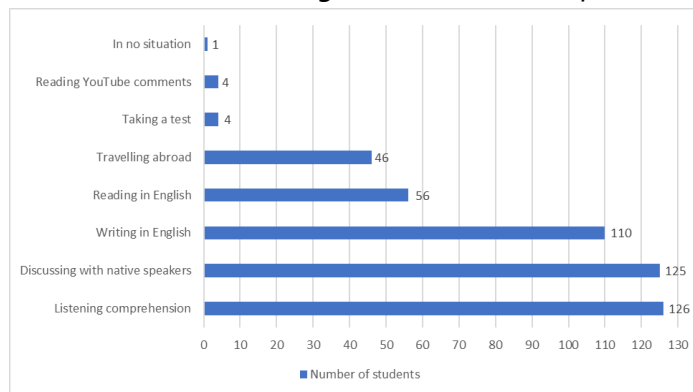
Fifty-six students responded to this question. Their responses were categorized into four themes, focusing on speaking, studying English in class, English in daily life, and no need to learn English. All students answered the question in Japanese.

### Discussion

Most of our nursing students have studied English for six to ten years, yet felt they still have difficulties understanding spoken English, speaking English, and even writing in English. Students evaluated their English reading skills more highly than the other three skills.

**Figure 2**

*Situations in which English skills are inadequate*



### English Skills

Sixty-six percent of our nursing students reported that they could speak English with difficulty, and 25% could speak only a few words. With regard to their listening skills, 53% stated that they could understand spoken English but with difficulty, and 19% evaluated their listening skills as being “not good at all.” Speaking English as a second language can be challenging, particularly for learners who are not living in an English-speaking country.

In Japan, exposure to English outside the classroom has been found to be insufficient (Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2008). Our nursing students are not an exception. In most cases, students only make an effort to speak English in class when under their teachers’ supervision. However, students have less chance to speak English outside of class, and they almost never hear people speaking English around them. As a result, it is challenging to practice and improve their English communication skills. In addition to the students’ learning environment, it is normal to feel embarrassed when speaking a second language. This feeling may be because students cannot express themselves adequately or because of the fear of making mistakes, which is common among Japanese people. This fear can present a great obstacle to conversation in a language class (Doyon, 2000).

Surprisingly, 75% of students reported inadequate writing skills. As English educators in



Japan, we consider reading and writing to be among the strengths of Japanese learners of English. Since speaking and listening are not given as much attention as the development of reading and writing skills in Japan, most people do not question this imbalance in the conventional school curriculum (Ku et al., 2021). In addition, many teachers assume that students in Japan might find writing English easy, since students in Japanese high schools have been trained to write in English for university entrance exams, and because written English texts are usually more organized, more carefully formulated, and less time-pressured.

However, in our department, in one writing exercise where we teach students how to answer essay questions, we encourage them to answer the essay question in an organized manner with an introduction, main body, and conclusion. In the introduction, students need to explain why the topic is important and give an overview of the topic. In the body, students are expected to provide two or more reasons or examples to support their answers, and they are expected to summarize their answers in the conclusion. This structure might be slightly different from what they learned in high school, so that might be the reason why students felt that they could write English but with difficulties.

Reading was the skill in which our students felt the most confident. Fifty-eight percent of the students thought that their English reading skills were moderate. Only four percent thought they are fluent. Yet 36% reported difficulties when reading in English. Students are familiar with English reading in their high school classes since most classes focus more on reading comprehension than the communicative component (Ku et al., 2021).

Additionally, students recognized the situations where they felt their English skills were most deficient. Most of the students thought they lacked English skills for listening comprehension

and when talking with a native speaker, while 27% of the students reflected on their inadequate English skills for traveling abroad. It is worth mentioning that this study was conducted during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Therefore, students had fewer chances to travel outside Japan and use English abroad. Only 2% of students reported that their English skills were inadequate for taking English tests. With the expansion of the use of social media by the students, we had expected that more students would have English difficulties related to social media use. However, only 2% of students felt that their English skills were inadequate when reading YouTube comments; this might be because students were not interested in English content, preferring instead to rely mainly on Japanese content. Only one student (1%) was confident about their English skills. Most of the students would still express lack of confidence when it comes to writing in English and to a lesser extent when reading an English text.

### **Students' Perspectives on How to Improve English Teaching**

At the end of the questionnaire, we asked the students to express their own thoughts and ideas on English teaching in Japan and how it can be improved. Students' responses were translated from Japanese to English. We conducted a content analysis on the English translation, dividing students' responses into four categories: focus on speaking, teaching English in class, English in daily life, and no need to study English.

#### **Focus on Speaking**

Nearly all students in this study (93%) reported that their English-speaking skills were moderate or below. Therefore, focusing on speaking was frequently mentioned by the students. Most students highlighted the flaws in the English teaching style of their junior and senior high schools, namely focusing more on reading and

writing than on speaking and listening, particularly with regard to the grammar-focused learning style. The following students clearly expressed it:

*"It is nonsense to study only grammar. It is good to make more chances to speak English."*

*"We only focus on learning grammar, that's why we can't listen to English and speak English. We usually study grammar which is not used in daily life very much, we should have more classes of practical conversation."*

*"I studied English since elementary school, I only studied grammar and reading long English passages, that's why we can't speak English well. We should regard speaking English more."*

Teaching English using the grammar-translation method originated in the second half of the nineteenth century when Japan wanted to gain knowledge and practices from the West. One of the ways to achieve such acquisition was by reading English documents and translating them into Japanese (Morita, 2017). Although outdated, this method is still widely used in Japanese schools and universities (Whitsed & Wright, 2011).

At NMU, we put a lot of emphasis on speaking during our English classes. We give the students a list of speaking topics at the beginning of the semester, and students are expected to prepare and be ready to talk about each topic with a partner for five minutes at the beginning of each class. In addition, during class time, teachers actively encourage students to speak English by asking them questions and encouraging them not to use Japanese to communicate with each other. Many students reported that this helped them improve their speaking skills, and the following students clearly expressed it:

*"In the university, the English is practical because of focusing on speaking, so we*

*should have classes focusing on speaking in compulsory education, because we can have the ability to use English in society."*

*"I really enjoy classes at college, unlike those in high schools, because in high school, the grammar and reading were most important."*

*"Unlike NMU, I didn't speak English very often from elementary school to high school, though we had a native English teacher. It is good for students from elementary school to take more speaking classes."*

One student mentioned how their view on English changed after joining the university. They wrote:

*"I thought I was good at English in high school, but I realized I was just good at writing. In university, it is important to have more opportunities to speak."*

### **Teaching English in Class**

For many years, the predominant English teaching method in Japanese schools has been the traditional teacher-centered approach, with the teacher at the front of the class. This makes the students passive knowledge receivers and in-class writing task doers. Some students suggested "non-traditional" class activities to improve their English learning experience. Dinçay (2004), in his study entitled "Kill the blackboard? Technology in language teaching and learning," emphasizes the importance of using technology in teaching instead of using the blackboard only. Students suggested using in-class English quiz games:

*"We should have something to motivate us, for example, it is good to study English by doing some games."*

*"You will be interested if you remember English through quizzes or other games."*

Using games has been shown to be beneficial for language learning, by making the language

learning experience interesting for the students. Using games is an excellent way to improve students' language skills, as "Games can be found to give practice in all skills, in all the stages of teaching and learning and for many types of communication" (Wright et al., 2006).

Other students suggested using English movies as a learning tool:

*"It is better to use not a textbook but movies."*

*"I like movies, I think learning English with movies is good for me."*

Many researchers have reported that using movies in English language teaching increases motivation and makes the class more interesting (Ismaili, 2013; Goctu, 2017; Kobooha, 2016). Additionally, videos can develop students' listening comprehension ability and present new language material or consolidate what has already been introduced through the activities (Dinçay, 2004). In our department, we offer an elective class called "Comparative culture through media," in which we use English movies to teach English. However, despite providing this class for both medical and nursing students, no nursing students have enrolled in this class.

### English in Daily Life

Some students highlighted the lack of exposure to English in their everyday life. Exposure to English outside of class is very limited in Japan and has been found to be insufficient (Mizumoto & Takeuchi, 2008). Some students referred to this with suggestions such as:

*"I think there are few chances to use English in our daily life."*

*"They should increase English announcements in official places and in towns, and make more opportunities to speak English."*

As English language educators, we acknowledge the limited exposure to English outside of class; thus, we always encourage

students to have online meetings to speak with each other in English in their free time. In addition, at NMU we offer daily online lunchtime speaking sessions, where students can talk with teachers or other students about general topics while having lunch. However, nursing students rarely attend.

### No Need to Study English

Three students thought they did not need to learn English, especially with the availability of translation applications and devices which can help them when English is required. Using those applications or devices can be beneficial even for medical and para-medical professionals. Students stated:

*"Thanks to translation technology, we don't need to learn other languages."*

*"We can have the translators, so I don't feel the importance of studying English."*

However, the situation might be different for our future nurses as they will have to work in emergencies where quick response is essential. In addition, nurses play a vital role in conveying messages between patients and physicians. They have more contact with patients and spend more time with them than physicians; therefore, competence in English is a crucial and fundamental part of our future nurses' lives.

### Conclusion

Traditional English education in Japan, often employing the grammar-translation method, prepares students for entrance examinations, whereas English conversation or communicative language teaching (CLT) is primarily considered an extracurricular activity (Ku et al., 2021). This was heavily reflected in our nursing students' responses. The majority of our students highlighted the inadequacy of their English speaking, listening, and writing skills. They considered reading in English, on the other hand, to be their strong point. Furthermore, most



students emphasized that the situations where their English skills were insufficient were when listening and discussing with English speakers and when writing in English. Students felt more confident when reading an English text. Despite all the efforts invested in teaching English in Japan, Japan still ranks low, mainly in communicative English. One of the main reasons for this is the continued reliance on the grammar-translation teaching method, which the students heavily criticized.

In contrast, students appreciated the communicative-centered English teaching offered by our department. Our sample size is small. However, we believe it gives an insight that reflects the situation of most Japanese nursing students. With this in mind, we recommend changing the approach to English teaching to include a significantly greater emphasis on the development of students' communicative competencies.

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