Attitudes toward English use in Fashion:  
A Survey of Japanese ESL Students

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Background

Japan has enjoyed decades of worldwide recognition of its domestic innovation: technology, automotives, electronics, robotics, and in recent years, pop culture and fashion trends. Japanese pop culture has been tagged as a potential influential export to gain recognition overseas. For example, in an effort to generate an increase in tourism, the government has begun to promote “cool Japan,” a term first coined by American Journalist Douglas McGray, who observed quirky fashion trends in Tokyo, “Sometimes, like Starbucks or Nikes, it is authentic. Sometimes, like a ‘Harbard University’ sweatshirt or a potato salad pizza, it is not.” (McGray, 2001). Along the lines of this interest, researchers are noting that modern tourists have developed an appetite for tasting local cultures and experiencing social trends up close in their travels, a shift from the traditional pilgrimages to the scenic Mt. Fuji backdrop, for example, or photo opportunities in the heart of ancient Geisha culture. Rather, social conventions relating to pop culture, “invite thousands of enthusiastic fans scattered around Europe and US.” (Motani, 2008)

Therefore, with eyes around the world turning toward Tokyo for fashion trends, one would expect that Japan would be more closely focused on its use of written English in pop culture, specifically on trendy items seen everywhere from fashion icons and famous actors in the well-known hubs of Harajuku or Ginza, to students in the classrooms nationwide, when it comes to clothing for casual wear and items for everyday use. Certainly clothing, shopping bags, pencil cases and backpacks, as well as other fashion accessories featuring written design in English have been popular for years in Japan. However, the frequent misuse of the displayed English raises concern as to whether or not Japanese owners of these items fully understand the written words, meaning and messages presented on such materials. The question of whether or not the wearer comprehends the English, as well as the concern regarding the attitude in Japan toward the use of English in such cases
could be useful to educators in the field of ESL, particularly in a country that appears, through the years of devotion to formal study in ESL, committed to English as a lingua franca in Academic settings. (Mauranen, 2003)

As a result of the international role English plays as the prominent global lingua franca, wearing a T-shirt or jacket with English writing in a non native speaking country may appear stylish or exotic as a fashion trend. (Seidlhofer, 2005) However, due to the frequent use of incorrect or senseless English presented on fashion trends, perhaps the written English in pop culture is regarded as nothing more than a pictorial image of the font. That is, a trendy item is simply pleasing to the eye, as opposed to actually displaying words and phrases that communicate phrases or concepts, and thus puzzling a wide range of native English speakers, from the tourists visiting Japan, to the native ESL instructors in the schools.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the popularity of English written materials and the extent to which Japanese university students understand the words and messages on their fashion items, clothing and accessories.

**Participants**

The participants of this study included approximately 100 Japanese first year university students. Before entering the university, all participants completed at least six years of formal English instruction at their respective junior and senior high schools. In addition, upon entering the university, a random one-third of participants were administered an abridged version of the TOEIC test which measured listening and reading ability. Their average score for this test was 550, a range interpreted to mean that they, “can understand difficult, complex, and uncommon grammatical constructions” (ETS TOEIC Japan, 2007).

**Materials**

The survey participants were asked to complete consisted of six questions to examine the popularity of written English on shirts, bags and clothing, and the extent to which participants can understand the meaning of the written English. The six questions were as follows:

1) Do you own a shirt with English writing on it?
2) Do you completely understand the meaning of the English words written on your shirt?
3) Do you own a bag or pencil case that has English writing on it?
4) Do you completely understand the meaning of the English words on your bag or pencil case?
5) When you see another person who is wearing a shirt with English writing, what do you find attractive?

6) When you go shopping, what is attractive about an item that has English writing on it?

In order to avoid confusion or misunderstanding, the above questions were translated into Japanese. Questions 1 to 4 required participants to respond either yes or no. However, for questions 5 and 6, participants could select more than one option (See APPENDIX A).

**Procedure**

The survey took place during a 70 minute class which was part of a lecture series provided by the university. As a part of a warm up activity, for the first 20 minutes, participants took part in a discussion concerning the topic of fashion in Japan. Next, for 40 minutes, participants were introduced to 20 slides of a PowerPoint presentation of how some English written accessories found in Japan may be interpreted by Americans who have never been to Japan.

For the remaining 10 minutes, participants were asked to complete a survey in their lecture booklet. They were told the survey was part of an ongoing research project, their identity would remain anonymous, and their responses would in no way affect their class grades or university standing. When it appeared that the participants had finished, they were dismissed and asked to hand in their booklets to the instructor before leaving the classroom. Soon after the lecture, participants’ responses were entered into a Microsoft Excel software program where visual graphs were produced to compare and analyze the trends.

**Results**

The questions of the survey have been grouped into two categories. The first group of questions 1, 2, and 5 (Q 1, Q 2 & Q 5), for example, are concerned with clothing while the second group of questions 3, 4, and 6 (Q 3, Q 4, & Q 6) are concerned with accessories. The results are as follows:
Clothing

Q1: Do you own a shirt with English writing on it?

Q2: Do you completely understand the meaning of the English words on your shirt?

For Question #1, 79 participants indicated that they owned a shirt with English writing while only five participants indicated that they did not have a shirt with written English. For Question #2, 58 participants indicated that they did not completely understand the meaning of the English words written on their shirts while 20 participants indicated that completely understood the meaning. Responses for Question #5 indicated that letter font or style (67 participants) followed by letter color (57 participants) were the most common reasons for the attraction of a shirt with written English letters or words. On the other hand, the overall meaning written on a shirt (26 participants) and the meaning of the specific words (20 participants) were not common reasons for the attraction to a shirt. The size of the English letters on the shirt received 33 responses.
Accessories

With regard to accessories, for Question #3, 45 participants indicated that they had a bag or pencil case with written English and 43 participants indicated that they did not have a bag or pencil case with written English. For Question #4, 54 participants indicated that they did not completely understand the meaning of the English words written on their bag or pencil case while only 12 participants indicated that they completely understood the meaning. Responses of Question #6 indicated that letter font or style (69) followed by letter color (64) were the most common reasons for the attraction of a bag or pencil case with written English letters or words. However, the overall meaning written on an item (21) and the meaning of the specific words (14) were not common reasons for the attraction to an accessory. The size of the English letters on an item received 38 responses.

Discussion

Although this analysis was not statistically correlated and the number of responses were
not equal for each question, there are nevertheless some trends shared between the two
groups of clothing (shirt) and accessories (bag or shirt) in this survey. First, owning a
shirt, bag or pencil case with written English is popular among first-year Japanese university
students. Second, the written English for both of these items is not completely understood
by the vast majority of participants. Third, letter or word font or style followed by letter
color and, to a lesser extent, letter size, appears to be the most attractive features of
written English. Fourth, the overall meaning or the meaning of specific words of a shirt,
bag or pencil case markedly received one half to one third fewer responses for the attraction
to items with written English.

Overall, it seems that university students are more attracted to the letter or word “image”
of written English rather than the meaning an item may hold. This may be understandable
as their western conterparts, in the same way, may be attracted to the “exotic” appearance
of Chinese and Japanese kanji characters. However, whether it be Japanese students wearing
clothes with written English or American students wearing clothes with kanji characters,
does understanding the meaning of our apparel and possessions really matter? After all,
university students have been purchasing, wearing and using such items for years.

There are legitimate reasons as to why university students and working professionals
should be concerned with what is written on their apparel. Not doing so may foster the
social linguistic term known as language shock or, “the realization that you must seem
comical to speakers of the target language” (Gass & Selinker, 237, 1994) Or, perhaps
worse, wearing apparel without the full comprehension of what may be written may be
interpreted as offensive. For example, with regard to studying or working abroad, although
the freedom to express one’s self is highly valued in the United States, “political correctness
obliges people to choose their words carefully so they don’t offend anyone” (Powell, 2005).
And, with regard to studying or working in Japan, more foreigners are coming to live and
study in Asia. For example, Debito Arudou, a naturalized Japanese citizen and Associate
professor at Hokkaido Information University, has noted an upsurge of immigrants to Japan
in recent years. (Debito, 2006) Thanks to the advancements of technology and various
communication choices available, visting, studying, working and living in a homogenous
culture such as Japan is not the culture shock to westerners it once was because, “it is as
easy as a mere click of the mouse to call home” (Matthews, 2010). Therefore, due to
modern technology, it is inevitable that foreigners from several nations will come to live
and work in Japan more than ever before. As a result, whether a medical student studying
at an overseas hospital or an exchange student studying abroad or interviewing for an
internship, it is important to represent oneself well not only to demonstrate competent
language ability and to taken seriously as a student or working professional, but also to
exercise cultural sensitivty for people of different cultures.


APPENDIX A

1. Do you own a shirt with English writing on it?  
   英語の文字が入ったシャツを持っていますか？  
   Yes  No

2. Do you completely understand meaning of the English words on your shirt?  
   そのシャツにある英語の単語の意味が完全に分かりますか？  
   Yes  No

3. Do you have bag or pencil case that has English writing on it?  
   英語が書いてあるバッグや鉛筆入れ（ペンケース）を持っていますか？  
   Yes  No

4. Do you completely understand the meaning of the English words on your bag / pencil case?  
   そのバッグやペンケースの英語の意味を完全に理解していますか？  
   Yes  No

5. When you go shopping, what is attractive about an item that has English writing on it?  
   買い物するとき、英語が書いてある商品のどこが魅力的ですか？  
   商品のどこに魅（ひ）かれますか？  
   (You may check more than one answer.)  複数回答可
   A) The color of the letters or words  文字や単語の色（色彩）
   B) The font or style of the letters or words  文字や単語のフォント／形
   C) The size of the letters or words.  文字や単語のサイズ（大きさ）
   D) The meaning of specific words?  一部の単語の意味
   E) The overall meaning of the message written on the item?  商品に書いてあるメッセージの全体的な意味
6. When you see another person’s who is wearing a shirt with English writing, what do you find attractive?

(You may check more than one answer.) 複数回答可

A) The color of the letters or words

文字や単語の色 (色彩)

B) The font or style of the letters or words

文字や単語のフォント／形

C) The size of the letters or words

文字や単語のサイズ (大きさ)

D) The meaning of specific words?

一部の単語の意味

E) The overall meaning of the message written on the shirt?

商品に書いてあるメッセージの全体的な意味

Attitudes toward English use in Fashion: A Survey of Japanese ESL Students 53