Abstract
In a two-year study, two groups of participants were surveyed to examine the common attraction to clothing and accessories decorated with English writing found in Japan. Next, after taking part in a lecture concerning the misuse of English on articles of clothing and accessories, participants were asked to write what they had learned. Overall, results reveal most participants do not fully understand the written English of their possessions, but that they will be more mindful of the meaning and nuance when purchasing items with English writing in the future.

Background
The purpose of this report is to introduce new data regarding the topic of the use of, and attitude toward, English in fashion items in Japan. This is a report on the findings of an ongoing research project in its second year. The content of this study and the results of the data collection and analysis from the first year were previously published by the same authors, titled, “Attitudes toward English use in Fashion: A Survey of Japanese ESL Students,” in The Journal of Heisei International University, No.15, March 2011. The focus of this follow-up paper is to report the findings of the surveys administrated in the second year, and to compare and discuss the results over the two-year period. We hope that the information in this report will be useful to a wide range of readers, encouraging ESL instructors to incorporate the importance of having an understanding of English in pop culture and fashion into their research and lessons, as well as prompting learners as consumers to gain awareness of the meaning and nuances behind the English writing in their future purchases and use of such items.

The frequent misuse of the displayed English raises concern as to whether or not Japanese students fully understand the written words, meanings and messages on their signs and
advertisements. American Journalist Douglas McGray, who has observed the fashion trends of Tokyo, for example, states, “Sometimes, like Starbucks or Nikes, it is authentic. Sometimes, like a ‘Harvard University’ sweatshirt or a potato salad pizza, it is not” (McGray, 2001). Similarly, with regard to apparel, 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, it raises the eyebrows of foreigners visiting and living in Japan.

Perhaps the written English in pop culture is regarded as nothing more than a pictorial image of the font. Therefore, is the use of written English a trendy item that is simply pleasing to the eye, as opposed to actually displaying words and phrases to communicate a slogan or a message? Investigating this type of question may yield useful information to educators in the field of ESL. This is especially the case in a country that appears, through years of devotion to formal study in ESL, to be committed to English as a lingua franca in academic settings (Mauranen, 2003).

**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 accessories and articles of clothing.

**Participants**

The participants of this study included approximately 200 Japanese first year university students, 100 in each year over two years. Before entering the university, all participants had at least six years of formal English instruction at their respective junior and senior high schools. In addition, upon entering the university, all 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 was comprised of six questions to examine the popularity of written English on shirts, bags and clothing, as well as the extent to which participants can understand the meaning of the written English. In order to avoid confusion or misunderstandings, the questions posed were translated into Japanese. Questions 1 to 4 required participants to respond with 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 of the session 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 displaying incorrect or potential offensive use of written English on various fashion items in Japan.

Also, students were shown a sample of comments illustrating how some of the errant, or subliminally nuanced, use of English may be interpreted by Americans who may not be familiar with “Japanese English” or Japanese pop culture. For example, one of the slides featured a t-shirt that misspelled the adage, “Relish the Thought,” and instead read, “Rerish the Thought.” This is not necessarily insulting, however, it could prove to be an embarrassing mix-up of the often-cited challenging differentiation between “r” and “l” for Japanese speakers of English. In addition, students viewed a slide of a trendy 1970s retro-style t-shirt highlighting a colorful rainbow with a heart design that read, “I hate myself and I want to die.” Considering the cheerful artwork, this an ironic message to send and could make a foreigner in Japan uncomfortable to read such a harsh phrase in a “fashionable” context (engrish.com). Finally, for the remaining 10 minutes, participants were asked to complete a survey in their lecture booklet and to write what they learned from the lecture.

Participants were informed that taking part in the survey was part of the lecturers’ ongoing research, and that their identity would remain anonymous, and that their responses would in no way affect their class grade or university standing. When it appeared that participants had finished, they were dismissed and asked to hand in their booklets to the instructor before leaving the classroom. After the lecture, participants’ responses were entered into a Microsoft Excel software program to analyze the trends. Also, responses of students’ comments from the lecture were reviewed.

Quantitative Responses

The responses from the surveys 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. The second group of questions 3, 4, and 6 (Q 3, Q 4, & Q 6) are concerned with accessories.
Similar responses are evident for the 2009 and 2010 surveys. With regard to Question #1, for example, eighty-seven participants from 2009 and ninety-three participants from 2010 indicated that they owned a shirt with English writing while only five and three participants from each respective year indicated that they did not have a shirt with written English. For Question #2, sixty-seven participants from 2009 and seventy-four participants from 2010 indicated that they completely understood the meaning of the English words on their shirt, while twenty and nineteen participants indicated that they did not.
from 2010 indicated that they did not completely understand the meaning of the English words written on their shirts while twenty and nineteen participants from each respective year indicated that they completely understood the meaning.

### 2009 & 2010 Responses

**Q5: When you go shopping, what is attractive about an item that has English writing on it?**  
*(Series 1: 2009; Series 2: 2010)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Responses</th>
<th>The color of the letters or words</th>
<th>The font or style of the letters or words</th>
<th>The size of the letters or words</th>
<th>The meanings of specific words</th>
<th>The overall meaning writing on the shirt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>系列1</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>系列2</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses for Question #5 indicate for both years that letter font or style (2009 = 76; 2010 = 72) followed by letter color (2009 = 69; 2010 = 70) were the most common explanations for the attraction of a shirt with English written letters or words. On the other hand, the overall meaning written on a shirt (2009 = 26; 2010 = 17) and the meaning of the specific words (2009 = 16, 2010 = 21) were not common reasons for the attraction to a shirt. For the 2009 and 2010 surveys, the size of the English letters on the shirt received forty-three and thirty-eight responses, respectively.
**Accessories**

Similar responses are also apparent for the 2009 and 2010 accessory surveys. For Question #3, forty-six participants from 2009 and sixty-one participants from 2010 indicated that they had a bag or pencil case with written English, while forty-five and thirty-four participants from each respective year indicated that they did not. For Question #4, thirty-five participants from 2009 and fifty participants from 2010 indicated that they did not
completely understand the meaning of the English words written on their bag or pencil case while only eleven participants from both 2009 and 2010 indicated that they completely understood the meaning.

**2010 Responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Series 1</th>
<th>Series 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The color of the letters or words</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The font or style of the letters or words</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The size of the letters or words</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The meaning of the specific words</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The overall meaning written on the shirt</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Responses to Question #6 for both years indicate that letter font or style (2009=71; 2010=66) followed by letter color (2009=61; 2010=65) were the most common reasons for the attraction of a bag or pencil case with written English written letters or words. However, the overall meaning written on an item (2009=28; 2010=22) and the meaning of the specific words (2009=20; 2010=20) were not common reasons for the attraction to an accessory. For the 2009 and 2010 surveys, the size of the English letters on the shirt received thirty-seven and thirty-two responses respectively.

**Qualitative Responses**

In addition to the survey, the following are some of the responses participants wrote after taking part in the lecture which educated them on how native speakers of English may respond to articles of clothing or accessories that have non-sensical or offensive English. *Responses were edited only slightly from the original, maintaining as much as possible the original voice of the respondents:

“Since now, I really didn’t care about the meaning of the shirts. But, today I decided to think about the meaning. Because I don’t want to be laughed at by a foreigner.”
“I’ll be careful about what I wear. I notice that some t-shirt have stupid irony and offensive meanings. When I go back home I’ll try to check my t-shirts.”

“I learned that the meaning of words written on clothes we wear is very important, especially in the country where the language is used. I don’t want to make people around me misunderstand me. So when I wear something, I’ll pay attention to the words in it.”

“We should think about the meaning of t-shirts we wear, because it may make English speaking people uncomfortable. Also, we may study or work in America, Canada or UK.”

Discussion

Although this analysis was not statisically correlated, there are nevertheless some trends shared between the two groups of participants surveyed for clothing (shirt) and accessories (bag or shirt sections). 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, for both groups of participants, 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 in explanation to the attraction to items with written English. Overall, the quantitative data from this study suggests that university students are more attracted to the letter or word image of written English rather than the meaning an item may hold. However, the qualitative data from the responses students wrote after the lecture suggest that they will pay more attention to the meanings of English words on their items in the future.

It is understandable that Japanese university students may be attracted to the décor of English just as their western counterparts are, in the same way, 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, one wonders about the importance of understanding the meaning of our apparel.

For example, 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 phrase 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. Furthermore, with regard to studying or working
abroad, although the freedom to express oneself is highly valued in the United States, for example, “political correctness obliges people to choose their words carefully so they don’t offend anyone” (Powell, 2005). This should be a point of concern as more foreigners are coming to live, work, and study in Asia. Specifically, 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).

Furthermore, thanks to the advancements of technology, visiting, studying, working and living in a predominately homogenous environment such as Japan is no longer 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). As a result, it is inevitable that the number of foreigners coming to reside in Japan will continue to climb in the future. Therefore, one can conclude that it is important to represent oneself well, not only to demonstrate competent language ability and to be taken seriously as a student or working professional, but also to exercise cultural sensitivity as members of an ever-expanding global society.

Regarding the future direction to continue this study, the authors propose to follow-up on the results of the qualitative data. Specifically, when the same two groups of 100 students that responded to this study, are in their third or fourth year at the university, we propose to launch a similar reseach project to examine the students’ awareness of the use of English in popular culture in Japan. In short, the purpose would be to determine if they are in fact, after having participated in the lecture and having responded to the surveys in their first year, more conscientious in their daily lives, of the use of written English in fashion and consumer goods.
References


APPENDIX A

1. Do you own a shirt with English writing on it?
   Yes _____  No _____

   英語の文字を入れたシャツを持っていますか？
   はい  いいえ

2. Do you completely understand the meaning of the English words on your shirt?
   Yes _____  No _____

   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？
   はい  いいえ

3. Do you have a bag or pencil case that has English writing on it?
   Yes _____  No _____

   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？
   はい  いいえ

4. Do you completely understand the meaning of the English words on your bag / pencil case?
   Yes _____  No _____

   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？
   はい  いいえ
5. When you go shopping, what is attractive about an item that has English writing on it?

(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 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