

On Developing a Core Guideline for English Language Training Programs in Business Settings

T. Ito, K. Kawaguchi, R. Ohta

Abstract—The purpose of this study is to provide a guideline to assist globally-minded companies in developing task-based English-language programs for their employees. After conducting an online self-assessment questionnaire comprised of 45 job-related tasks, we analyzed responses received from 3,000 Japanese company employees and developed a checklist that considered three areas; i) the percentage of those who need to accomplish English-language tasks in their workplace (need for English), ii) a five-point self-assessment score (task performance level), and iii) the impact of previous task experience on perceived performance (experience factor). The 45 tasks were graded according to five proficiency levels. Our results helped us to create a core guideline that may assist companies in two ways: first, in helping determine which tasks employees with a certain English proficiency should be able to satisfactorily carry out, and secondly, to quickly prioritize which business-related English skills they would need in future English language programs.

Keywords—Business settings, Can-do statements, English language training programs, Self-assessment, Task experience.

I. INTRODUCTION

THE acceleration of economic globalization is ever increasing the demand for English communication skills in the Japanese workplace. Including small to medium-sized enterprises, Japanese companies have been expanding their global operations through the setting up of branches, plants, and even headquarters overseas. English is regularly used both within companies, and also in communicating with foreign colleagues, clients, and their suppliers. In response, some companies have taken drastic measures to promote the use of English in their company. For instance, Nissan Motor Corporation and Internet company Rakuten adopted English as their corporate language. Financial management company Nomura Holdings introduced a compensation system for college graduates joining their global department; for employees who meet the company's language-proficiency requirements, an annual salary can more than double. However, although the majority of companies are not ready to take such radical action, most have been scrambling to find ways to boost the business communication skills of employees. This has often taken the form of *in-house* language training programs, but

despite such efforts, Japan still lags behind her global rivals in terms of communicative efficiency. According to the 2013 World Competitiveness Yearbook released by IMD (International Institute for Management Development), Japan is 58th among 60 nations in rankings to indicate whether language skills meet the needs of enterprises [1]. Indeed, many companies admit that the shortage of global-minded professionals, who are skilled in English, remains a major obstacle to their competing effectively on a worldwide scale [2].

Recognizing the pressing need to foster globally-minded employees, this present study aims to develop a checklist that can be used to assist companies in designing an English language training program—a checklist that can be applied in the shortest amount of time possible and raise a workforce up to a desired level of language proficiency for specific jobs. The checklist provides 45 general or specialized tasks that employees in various industries are expected to carry out in English. They cover five proficiency levels that are defined through scores taken from the world's leading test of workplace English language proficiency, the TOEIC® (The Test of English for International Communication). By using the checklist, companies will be able to rapidly calculate which job-related tasks should be prioritized in training programs, which would be of great use to companies with employees of widely differing language levels and wide-ranging job experience.

II. BACKGROUND

In 2008, we investigated the validity of self-assessment as a tool in measuring foreign language proficiency through the results of a self-assessment questionnaire from 8,386 Japanese company employees. Confirming that self-assessment is a reliable means of assessing foreign language abilities, the research also revealed that employees who completed the same or similar type of task beforehand would rate their ability to perform the task as higher than those without previous task experience [3]. This suggested that task experience or, what Ross termed, the *experiential factor* [4], is a major factor that affects self-assessments. These findings inspired us to conduct a series of studies on the relationship between task experience and its impact on self-assessment, which consider the possibility that task experience, gained through language training, may give trainees the confidence to successfully carry out a similar task in English in real work situations. In 2009, we provided a list of 65 job-related tasks along with three criteria for determining which tasks should be covered in training courses: i) their experience in performing the tasks, ii) how well

T. Ito is Associate Professor of Toyota Technological Institute, Nagoya, 468-8511 Japan (corresponding author to provide phone: +81-52-809-1763 (direct); fax: +81-52-809-1721; e-mail: tae@toyota-ti.ac.jp).

K. Kawaguchi is Professor of Shibaura Institute of Technology, Saitama, 337-8570 Japan (phone: +81-48-687-5012 (direct); fax: +81-87-687-5013; e-mail: k-keiko@sic.shibaura-it.ac.jp).

R. Ohta is with the Department of Environmental and Information Studies, Keio University, Fujisawa, 252-0882 Japan (phone: +81-0466-49-3406; e-mail: ree@toyoeiwa.ac.jp).

they believed they could perform the tasks, and iii) the impact of task experience on their perceived performance. This study was, however, targeted at employees solely from the *manufacturing industry*. In addition, the data was also skewed through the majority of participants working for electrical product companies and who were considered as having low proficiency levels [5].

We attempted to further examine the influence of task experience on perceived performance in 2012 and 2013. For these projects, we used a revised self-assessment questionnaire and collected new data that had a more balanced number of respondents from each of the five proficiency levels and from across different industries. This allowed us to analyze the results according to each proficiency level. Our revised questionnaire consisted of 45 business-related tasks after we eliminated some of the more general tasks. Statistical results (ANOVA) indicated that employees with task experience self-assessed their performance more highly than those without experience. However, the effects of task experience were not the same across all proficiency levels; for some tasks, the influence of task experience on perceived performance was not strong among employees of advanced language proficiency; for some other tasks, it was small among employees of low language abilities [6], [7]. These findings led us to this present study in which we take the *experiential factor* into consideration when designing a language curriculum; we believe this may possibly help to make the language program more efficient and effective.

The present study aims to develop a checklist similar in design to one constructed in 2009, but it is more generic in that it is applicable to a variety of industries. More specifically, the list will show; i) what tasks are needed at each of the five proficiency levels. We term this their *need for English*; ii) how well a person with a certain TOEIC score can accomplish a specified task. We call this a *task performance level* and iii) the extent to which task experience affects the perceived performance of these tasks, i.e. *the impact of task experience*. This list will help curriculum developers of a company language program select which tasks should be included in a course, in order to equip their employees with a way to efficiently develop their required English-language skills, and to thereby improve the functioning of the company on a global stage.

III. METHODS

A. Materials

This research used results obtained from our 2012 and 2013 studies. The revised questionnaire, consisting of 45 general or specialized job-related tasks, covered six different work settings from situation A through situation F: A. meeting a guest, B. doing a routine task, C. making/receiving a call, D. placing orders, making payments and making complaints, E. in business talks and presentations, and F. attending a meeting or conference. Each task required the participant to deal with one of the following five skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and interactive communication skills. Respondents

were asked to assess how well they could carry out each of the 45 tasks in English through the use of a five-point scale, which were detailed as follows: 1. not at all, 2. with a great deal of difficulty, 3. with some difficulty, 4. with little difficulty, and 5. easily. Respondents were also asked to check the box next to tasks they had already performed and tasks they would likely need to do in their current workplace. After collecting the data, based on the mean self-assessment scores, we classified the 45 tasks into three difficulty levels: difficult tasks (labeled D), tasks with medium difficulty (M), and easy tasks (E). The self-assessment scores highly correlated with the TOEIC scores ($r=.69$), which indicates that this self-assessment questionnaire is a reliable tool to measure one's English language proficiency.

B. Participants and Procedures

The data were collected over the Internet. In total, 3,000 Japanese company employees participated in the survey, but after eliminating uncompleted questionnaires, data from 2,906 respondents were used for our analysis. The total mean age of participants was 38.8 with the majority being male (2,341). Vocationally, they worked in a broad range of industries that included electrical machinery (27%), telecommunications (12%), production/chemicals (8% each), machinery/services (7% each), and banking (4%). They were divided into five groups according to TOEIC scores with the mean TOEIC score being 588(SD 174.9). These five levels were based on ETS's own proficiency scales that show the general communication abilities people in each level would likely have. We added an additional *cutting-point* in our study, by dividing ETS's score band of 470-725 into two groups: the 470-595 and 600-725 groups. Our rationale is that past studies on the relationship between TOEIC score and self-assessments of language performance clearly show the existence of a significant difference in performance level between these two score levels. A summary of participants in each score group is shown in Table I, and shows the number of participants, their mean TOEIC scores, their mean self-assessment scores, the percentage who experienced carrying out similar tasks and the percentage of those who indicated they need or will need English for work.

TABLE I
PARTICIPANTS BY PROFICIENCY LEVELS

Proficiency levels (TOEIC)	N (=2906)	TOEIC Mean(SD)	Self-assessment Mean(SD)	Task Experience Mean	Need for English Mean
Low (220-465)	800	376(62.3)	1.6(0.61)	13%	30%
Lower Middle (470-595)	709	531(35.5)	2.1(0.74)	20%	35%
Middle (600-725)	720	654(37.6)	2.6(0.84)	28%	36%
Upper Middle (730-855)	447	784(37.8)	3.2(0.87)	41%	40%
Advanced (860-990)	230	912(39.3)	4.0(0.92)	52%	46%
Average		588(174.9)	2.4(1.05)	31%	37%

As Table I shows, the numbers of participants in proficiency levels are more or less balanced except in the case of advanced groups. Self-assessment scores become higher as the proficiency level advances, as does the percentage of those with task experience.

IV. DEVELOPMENT OF A CHECKLIST

We developed a checklist that company training planners can use as a quick and easy reference when designing an effective

in-house language program. Table II shows the checklist and the criteria for deciding which tasks should be targeted for practice at each of the five proficiency levels. They include the percentages that have a need for English, their task performance levels, and the impact of task experience on their perceived performance for each of the 45 can-do statements. In order to raise accessibility and versatility of the list as a guide, statistical values were replaced with symbols and simpler numbers.

TABLE II
CHECKLIST

				CHECKLIST																
				Low			Lower Middle			Middle			Upper Middle			Upper				
Skills	Difficulty	Content	Can-do Statement	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor		
A. Meeting a guest: In English, I can																				
1	L	E	G	Understand a person's name when given, and the reason for his/her visit and give a message to the person in charge	43%	2	X	47%	3	X	50%	3	X	51%	4	X	55%	4	X	
2	S	M	G	Describe my career and/or my present job responsibilities	38%	2	X	45%	2	X	48%	3	X	48%	4	X	54%	4	X	
3	S	M	G	Show a guest around my office (e.g., where the restroom is)	32%	2	XX	37%	2	X	42%	3	X	43%	3	X	47%	4	X	
4	S	M	G	Ask foreign colleagues about their local customs (e.g., food, manners, etc.)	29%	2	X	32%	2	X	37%	3	X	38%	3	X	46%	4	X	
5	S	D	G	Discuss work ethic with foreign clients, colleagues, or supervisors	30%	2	X	33%	2	XX	38%	3	XX	41%	3	XX	49%	4	X	
6	S	D	G	Explain the meanings of Japanese expressions often used in the workplace	29%	2	X	30%	2	XX	36%	2	XX	43%	3	X	49%	4	X	
B. Doing a routine task: In English, I can																				
7	W	E	G	Write a memorandum or send an e-mail confirming some information related to my daily job	43%	2	X	55%	3	X	53%	3	X	58%	4	X	60%	4		
8	R	E	G	Read an English manual about office equipment	41%	2	X	44%	3	X	46%	3	X	47%	4	X	50%	4		
9	R	M	S	Read documents in my field with no use or little use of a dictionary	40%	2	X	47%	2	X	49%	3	X	50%	4	X	57%	4	X	
10	R	M	G	Read and understand an inter-office memo with no use or little use of a dictionary (e.g., announcement of a meeting)	36%	2	X	44%	2	X	44%	3	X	46%	4	X	55%	4	X	
11	R	D	S	Read and understand a contract for supplying products from my company with a client, with no use or little use of a dictionary	30%	2	X	34%	2	X	35%	3	X	43%	3	X	45%	4	X	
12	S	D	G	Tell a foreign colleague or new employee how to perform a routine task	30%	2	X	34%	2	X	37%	3	X	38%	3	XX	41%	4	X	
13	R	E	G	Search and collect some English materials necessary for my work requiring use of the Internet	39%	2	X	49%	3	X	47%	3	X	49%	4	X	58%	4		
14	R	E	G	Organize collected English materials and summarize them in Japanese	31%	2	XX	41%	3	X	41%	3	X	43%	4	X	55%	4		
15	W	M	G	Organize collected English materials and summarize them in English	29%	2	X	33%	2	XX	36%	3	X	42%	3	X	48%	4	X	
16	L	M	G	Understand a foreign co-worker talking about a task	33%	2	X	42%	2	X	39%	3	X	41%	3	X	50%	4	X	
17	I	D	S	Discuss the improvement of customer service/product quality with my supervisor/co-worker	27%	1	X	28%	2	XX	31%	2	X	34%	3	XX	40%	4	X	
18	W	D	S	Write a report explaining the progress being made on a current project (with a dictionary)	31%	2	X	36%	2	X	35%	3	X	39%	3	XX	45%	4	X	
19	W	M	G	Send an e-mail or write a letter requesting necessary information to a public organization (with a dictionary)	32%	2	XX	39%	2	X	41%	3	X	45%	3	X	53%	4	X	
20	W	D	S	Write directions/specifications describing the services/products of my company (with a dictionary)	28%	2	X	29%	2	X	29%	3	X	34%	3	X	40%	4	X	
21	I	D	G	Discuss with my foreign supervisor, co-workers, or subordinates to solve problems caused by cultural or commercial practice differences	24%	1	X	27%	2	XX	28%	2	X	34%	3	XX	43%	4	XX	
C. Making/Receiving a call: In English, I can																				
22	L	M	G	Understand a person's name when given or a request made over the telephone and connect him/her to the person in charge	37%	2	X	45%	2	X	42%	3	X	49%	4	X	51%	4	X	
23	L	M	G	Take a message for a colleague over the phone when he/she is not at his/her desk	33%	2	XX	42%	2	XX	39%	3	XX	44%	4	X	50%	4	X	
24	S	M	G	Leave a message for a person and ask his/her secretary to have him/her call me back	32%	2	XX	39%	2	XX	38%	3	XX	42%	4	XX	48%	4	X	

					Low	Lower Middle			Middle			Upper Middle			Upper				
Skills	Difficulty	Content		Can-do Statement	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor	Need for English	Task Performance	Experience Factor
D. Placing orders, making payments, making complaints: In English, I can																			
25	S	D	S	Telephone a company to ask if a certain item is in stock, to ask for an estimate to be sent, or to place an order for a certain item	19%	1	XX	21%	2	XX	21%	2	XX	25%	3	XX	25%	4	X
26	W	M	S	Write a letter or send an e-mail to a company to ask if a certain item is in stock, to ask for an estimate to be sent, or to place an order of a certain item	20%	2	XX	25%	2	XX	26%	3	XX	28%	3	XX	30%	4	X
27	I	D	S	Handle customer complaints about a wrong product delivered, a broken product, or staff in person or on the phone	18%	1	X	20%	2	XX	20%	2	XX	25%	3	XX	27%	4	XX
28	W	M	S	Write a letter or send an e-mail to a company to make a complaint about a different product being delivered, a wrong service, a broken product, or nonpayment	18%	2	XX	22%	2	XX	22%	3	XX	27%	3	XX	29%	4	X
E. In business talks/business presentations (the number of participants is 1-3): In English, I can																			
29	S	D	G	Briefly explain about my company while looking at some data (e.g., how and when the company started, what the main business is, how much profit it makes, how much capital and how many employees it has)	28%	2	X	32%	2	XX	34%	3	XX	37%	3	XX	39%	4	XX
30	S	D	S	Sell my company's products/services comparing them with other companies' products in terms of quality, efficiency and prices using prepared materials	25%	1	X	30%	2	XX	30%	2	XX	31%	3	XX	36%	4	XX
31	S	D	S	Give a prepared 20-30 minute presentation about a new project or a new product	27%	1	XX	30%	2	XX	31%	2	XX	36%	3	XX	39%	4	XX
32	R	D	S	Read and understand handouts for a business presentation with little use of a dictionary	28%	2	XX	32%	2	XX	33%	3	XX	39%	3	XX	41%	4	X
33	S	D	S	Ask questions regarding unclear or problematic points during the meeting/presentation about the presentation	28%	1	X	31%	2	XX	32%	2	X	40%	3	XX	41%	4	XX
34	I	D	S	Negotiate prices of a product. (e.g., explain how a price has been set, negotiate for a price reduction, or discuss a method of payment)	22%	1	X	23%	2	XX	24%	2	XX	29%	3	XX	34%	4	XX
F. Attending a meeting or conference related to my job/my field of specialty: In English, I can																			
35	L	D	G	Understand talks about management plans or business strategies given by CEOs of my company or other companies related to my business	28%	1		30%	2	X	31%	2	X	38%	3	X	45%	4	XX
36	S	D	G	Tell the other party about problems during a teleconference such as noise interference	26%	1		32%	2	XX	32%	3	XX	39%	3	XX	46%	4	XX
37	I	D	S	Conduct a meeting smoothly as a facilitator	21%	1		24%	2	XX	26%	2	XX	32%	3	XX	40%	3	XXX
38	L	D	S	Understand an ongoing discussion over an issue related to my job or my field of specialty	30%	2		36%	2	XX	35%	2	X	39%	3	XX	48%	4	X
39	S	D	S	Present my opinion orally that I have prepared in advance	32%	1		36%	2	XX	36%	3	XX	43%	3	XX	49%	4	XX
40	I	D	S	Interrupt someone while he/she is speaking to clarify some points that I don't understand	28%	1		34%	2	XX	33%	2	XX	39%	3	XX	47%	4	XX
41	I	D	S	Ask or answer questions about an issue being discussed	33%	2		39%	2	X	40%	2	X	43%	3	XX	54%	4	XX
42	I	D	S	Actively participate in a discussion	33%	1		38%	2	XX	39%	2	XX	43%	3	XX	52%	4	XX
43	I	D	S	Point out problematic points and argue against them in reaction to someone's opinion	29%	1		34%	2	XX	34%	2	XX	41%	3	XX	47%	4	XXX
44	W	D	S	Write a report summarizing the main points discussed in a meeting	30%	1		32%	2	XX	32%	2	XX	42%	3	XX	47%	4	XX
45	R	D	S	Read and roughly understand a presentation/lecture handout with little use of a dictionary	31%	1		34%	2	XX	35%	2	XX	42%	3	XX	48%	4	XX

Difficulty: E=easy, M=medium, D=difficult

Content: G=general, S=specialized

Skills: L=listening, S=speaking, R=reading, W=writing, I=interactive communication

Task Performance: 1=cannot do the task, 2=can do with a great deal of difficulty, 3=can do with some difficulty, 4=can do with little difficulty, 5=can do easily

Experience Factor: blank (no X) =the difference of self-assessment scores is between 0.00 and 0.49, X=the difference of self-assessment scores is between 0.50 and 0.99, XX=the difference of self-assessment scores is between 1.00 and 1.49, XXX=the difference of self-assessment scores is more than or equal to 1.50

A. Need for English

The figures in *Need for English* are the percentage of people who answered that they need or will need to perform tasks in English in their current workplace. These figures can be used as

an index to prioritize tasks to practice in a language program. The higher the percentages, the more the tasks are required in the workplace.

B. Task Performance

Task Performance shows how well a person with a certain TOEIC score is likely to accomplish a specific task (task performance level). These figures are based on the results of the mean self-assessment scores of all respondents regardless of their prior task experience. The following five grades were used: 1=cannot do the task, 2=can do with a great deal of difficulty, 3=can do with some difficulty, 4=can do with little difficulty, and 5=can do easily.

C. Experience Factor

Experience Factor relates the degree of influence that task experience has on perceived performance. We measured this by a number of Xs. A blank column indicates that the difference in the self-assessment scores between experienced and inexperienced participants is 0.00-0.49; one X(X) equates a difference between 0.50-0.99, two Xs (XX) equates a difference between 1.00-1.49, and three Xs (XXX) equates a difference of more than or equal to 1.50. In short, training tasks with two or three Xs may be much more effective than tasks with fewer Xs.

V. HOW TO USE A CHECKLIST

The task checklist is relatively easy to use and navigate. This can be explained by looking at a few examples. *Task #7* is on writing a memorandum or sending an e-mail to confirm information related to a daily job. It is one of the most required skills in an office, as shown by the high percentages (43%-60%) in Need for English category. However, the task is not a skill that employees of more advanced language proficiencies should practice in a language program. Those who score 4 for Task Performance and have no X in their Experience Factor would carry out the task quite successfully even without previous task experience. On the other hand, the same task may be taught to the lower and middle proficiency classes. Despite the rather high percentages of Need for English (43%/55%/53%), their actual performance scores are quite low (2/3), whereas the Experience Factors are greater (X). If we look at *task #14*, the XX score for Experience Factor at the lowest proficiency level indicates that training is more effective for employees of lower language abilities, whereas the tasks in situation F (attending a meeting or conference related to my job/my field of specialty) are strongly recommended to be practiced in higher proficiency classes but not in lowest level classes because the impact of task experience is small (no X) for the lowest proficiency group and greater for the upper proficiency group. In fact, most of the tasks may be too difficult in lower proficiency classes as the scores for Task Performance suggest (1/2). On the other hand, when considering which of the three tasks, #43, #44, and #45, to prioritize in highest level classes, *task #43* are recommended because the impact of Task Experience for *task #43* is greater (XXX) than those of the other tasks (XX), but the scores of Task Performance and the percentages of Need are almost the same for all the three tasks at the highest proficiency level.

By making use of three types of information: the Need for English, Task Performance, and Experience Factor on this list, it is easy to tailor a language program to meet the specific needs of employees. By choosing the most important and effective

tasks to practice, it is possible to develop an efficient language program which could greatly improve the employees' performance.

VI. CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to develop a list of job-related tasks linked with TOEIC score levels and task performance abilities so that the list can act as a guideline for companies in various industries that need to develop an effective English-language training program for their employees. By referring to the percentages of need for English and the impact of experience factor, curriculum designers can choose the most appropriate tasks to include in their program. They can also know what types of tasks their employees are likely to have trouble performing by checking their language skills involved, the difficulty levels, and their contents (general or specific). In short, our can-do descriptors can give companies concrete ideas of the goals to achieve. We hope that this checklist will help company planners design an in-house English training program that can train their employees to meet the needs of an increasingly borderless business world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This work was supported by Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) (23520719).

REFERENCES

- [1] The International Institute for Management Development, *The Competitiveness Yearbook*. Lausanne, Switzerland: IMD, 2013.
- [2] The Ministry of Economy, Trade & Industry, *The Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development*. 2011. Available: http://www.meti.go.jp/policy/economy/jinzai/san_gaku_kydo/sanko1-3.pdf
- [3] T. Ito, K. Kawaguchi, and R. Ohta, "The influence of experiential factors on self-assessment of foreign language proficiency," *Japan Language Testing Association Journal*, vol.11, pp. 156-172, 2008.
- [4] S. Ross, "Self-assessment in second language testing: A meta-analysis of experiential factors," *Language Testing*, vol. 15, pp. 1-20, 1998.
- [5] K. Kawaguchi, R. Ohta, and T. Ito, "English language competencies needed by Japanese employees in the manufacturing industry," in *Proc. Professional Communication Conf. 2009, IEEE International*, Honolulu, 2009, pp.1-10.
- [6] T. Ito, K. Kawaguchi, R. Ohta, and Y. Sasaki, "Analyses of can-do self-assessments in business settings," paper presented at *16th JLTA*, Senshu University, Tokyo, October 27th 2012.
- [7] T. Ito, K. Kawaguchi, and R. Ohta, "Exploring the effective use of self-assessments for language training in work settings," paper presented at *RELIC International Seminar*, SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, Singapore, March 19th 2013.