



A Study of Japan's High School Education Market

Drafted by: Intern Yuki Ikeda
Edited by: Specialist Kazuko Tsurumachi
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Lower English Abilities and a Later Start than Asian Peers

While Japan is a world leader in innovative technology and quality of life, one may often be surprised to hear that the country's English scores are not necessarily on par with its Asian neighbors. A 2015 survey conducted by major newspaper outlet Sankei News documented that 44% of middle and high schools students felt that "English was unnecessary." The 2013 World TOEIC ranking had Japan at 43 out of 48 countries, and a 2014 Education First ranking had Japan's English proficiency at 26th out of 60 countries. Contrary to standard assumptions, Japanese are not as proficient in English as one may imagine, and the importance of English is not recognized to the degree that it is in other nations.

Lower English proficiency is not necessarily the student's fault. Official English language instruction does not start until middle school, putting Japanese students already years behind other Asian peers. A Japan specific test, the EIKEN (<http://www.eiken.or.jp/eiken/en/>) and English tests specific to university and high school examinations focus on grammar and writing skills. There are limited opportunities to actually focus on learning the language when one is trying to aim for certain test scores on Japan specific English tests---especially since these tests do not focus on speaking and listening comprehension.

So, just how are Japanese high school students scoring? The Ministry of Education conducted a study in 2015 that rated Japanese high school students against the European Framework of Reference. Japanese students scored 129.4 points out of 320 for Reading, 27.2 points out of 140 for Writing, and 4.5 points out of 14 for Speaking Sections. When compared with the TOEIC score system, this would be 200-380 points out of 990. It is quite obvious that scores are extremely low.

To gain entrance into high school, students are expected to know between 900-1200 English words. Tests involve memorization and grammar rules. To gain entrance into university, especially one that is prestigious, a TOEFL iBT score of 71 is becoming more of a necessity. The maximum score is 120, so 71 is not a hard requirement.

What this essentially means is that Japanese students are not as interested, or as proficient in English as their Korean and Chinese counterparts. They start English later, and learn it in a manner that suits the Japanese system. At the high school level, the reward for having English abilities is not significant. Benefits do come at the university level, but English alone will not guarantee admission into a prestigious university. In fact, studying to score highly on university specific entrance examinations will likely be more beneficial than a high English score.

Payoff for Learning English Not As High

One will wonder if the payoff comes during the job hunt especially with Japan's emphasis on globalization and use of English. To work at an international company, English is certainly required. However, the score requirement is not to the level most would assume. A 2011 survey conducted by weekly Magazine Diamond has a list of required TOEIC scores.

Company Names	Scores Required for Job Offer
Over 850	NTT Communication
Over 800	Sumitomo Real Estate, Nomura Real Estate
Over 730	Softbank
Over 700	NTT East Japan, Mitsubishi Electric, Yamato Logistics
Over 650	Asahi Beer, Sagawa Global, Citizen
Over 600	Nitori, Daiwa House, Taisho Pharma

Some companies require TOEIC scores for promotion, but this is a slowly growing trend, and true use of English as the official corporate communication language is far from being wide spread in actual practice.

What this means is that investing in English, either financially or through study abroad, does not have the payoffs it does in other countries. In 1997, 47,000 Japanese studied abroad in the United States. This number is now just under 20,000. Out of the 20,000, more than half are opting for short term programs that do not require significant financial or time commitment. University students are slowly realizing the benefits of English study, but for high school students whose first focus is university admissions, English sadly is not yet a priority or a necessity.

The Financial Reality in Japan

In considering study abroad and English study, one must remember the average incomes in Japan and how this plays into whether families can finance study abroad. The National Census survey from March 2014 to March 2015 lists the national average salary at \$35,000. While this may seem shockingly low, this is the norm in Japan. Families survive based on rent subsidies and commute allowances, in addition to an extremely affordable health care system. Naturally, families in the greater Tokyo area would be expected to make more, but it is often said that only 10% of Japan's population makes over \$100,000.

Given such financial realities, sending children abroad is a luxury that many cannot afford.

Japanese Education is Affordable

Mandatory education is only until middle school in Japan and attending high school comes with a cost. According to a survey by Japan's Ministry of Education for 2014, public school tuition is around \$1500 per year with private school tuition being around \$8000 a year. Tuition for the Nation's best public university, Tokyo University, is less than \$9000 a year. Tuition for Japan's most prestigious universities are under \$20,000.

When analyzing market potential for Japan, one needs to be aware of the huge cost difference. For a Japanese student to study abroad, the program, location, and future occupation prospects need to justify immense financial costs. Very few families would be in a position to make such a decision, and not just any school or program will do. Families in Japan that can afford to send children abroad will choose the best of the best. They will even choose schools with close Japan ties, and Japanese customer service such as Keio Academy New York (that offers guaranteed admission into Keio), or Kumon Leysin Academy of Switzerland.

Keio New York

<http://www.keio.edu/page.cfm?p=638>

Kumon Leysin Academy

<https://sites.google.com/a/klas.ch/klas/home>

How to reach Japanese High School students?

Reaching Japanese high school students is challenging, and usually done through a small number of agents that specialize in high school study abroad programs. Such agents mainly promote one year study abroad programs to public schools in the United States.

There is only one event supported by the Commercial Service for high school students, and this would be The Association of Boarding School Fair held in Tokyo every October.

<http://www.boardingschools.com/for-schools/marketing/asia-tour.aspx>

Due to the small market size and limited opportunities, CS Japan unfortunately does not focus on the high school market in Japan. Furthermore, high schools in Japan are not receptive to sales calls, and connecting with end users is challenging, except through agents. Agents have little incentive to add new programs or relationships unless the programs are truly unique and affordable. They have no resources or staff to allocate for programs they feel will not have a high rate of success.

Recommendations for the Market

While CS Japan would like to proactively welcome players in the high school market, realistic expectation management is of utmost importance. Should the few high school focused agents be uninterested in meeting, success in the market is extremely challenging. Schools that do not have a unique edge that translates into benefits specific to Japan will not succeed. Therefore, general sales pitches emphasizing English skills or unique programs will not work as most Japanese do not need to invest in study abroad to get to an English level necessary for success in Japan, and because many programs, while unique, do not directly connect to benefits in Japanese society.

Schools need to convey that beyond the huge price package, that there are unparalleled advantages and a clear indication of success once one returns to Japan for a job. Featuring alumni who have returned to Japan and successfully secured jobs at Japanese companies, and offering certification that is recognized in Japan is crucial.

Round the clock Japanese customer service for concerned parents, who would be paying nearly 5 times the price in Japan for education, is also of utmost importance.

While CS Japan would be happy to arrange market learning meetings and briefings, commitment to matchmaking services will not be possible unless one of the two agents indicates interest in meeting.

CS Japan regrets the slightly dismal market appraisal but beyond that values a client's time and financial resources and does not want to set unrealistic expectations.

For More Information, please email Education Specialist Kazuko Tsurumachi at Kazuko.Tsurumachi@trade.gov.