

English Content in Japanese Universities: Foreign student demand for EMI

Ian James BISSET*

日本の大学における英語コンテンツ

—留学生の EMI 需要—

ビセット イアン ジェームス*

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes survey data from two groups of students in four courses studying EMI (English as a medium of instruction) economics courses at two universities in Japan taught by the same instructor, domestically enrolled students, and exchange students. All of the exchange students were from non-English speaking countries and expressed much more enthusiasm for the English language learning aspect of EMI than other studies (which mostly include native speakers of English in their samples). In the rapidly growing area of EMI in Japan and in the world, and in the global competition to attract foreign students, the conclusions found can point to a better understanding of non-English speaking foreign exchange students in Japan. The paper finds that English language study is an important part of the non-native English speaker's foreign exchange experience in Japan.

Keywords: EMI, Foreign Exchange, Japan, International Students

1. Background

English as a medium of instruction (EMI) is where students study content¹ in English. David Gradol has been shown prescient in observing in 1997 the growing global trend of EMI and predicting its growing popularity (Gradol, 1997). It has become a goal of educational policymakers around the world (Brown & Bradford, 2017). The number of students studying in EMI programs is booming worldwide both because of domestic demand and also because of global and domestic competition for foreign students (British Council, 2021). This is not surprising because there are more than one billion speakers of English as a second language in the world, making English the most spoken language in the world (Ethnologue, 2023). Students who travel to English-speaking countries are naturally studying EMI but EMI also widely exists in countries where English is not the native language. Foreign exchange students from both English-speaking countries and non-English speaking countries are included in the population of students studying EMI in non-English speaking countries.

*経済学部教授

1.1 EMI outside of Japan

EMI programs have proliferated across the globe in the past decade. And despite a lull presumably produced by the COVID-19 pandemic, EMI programs are expected to continue to grow rapidly. According to a report by the British Council, the number of EMI programs worldwide is forecast to quadruple from 2017 to 2025. Currently, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) dominates with more than 60% of the programs offered worldwide, but future growth is expected to be from Asia (currently just over 20%). Major hubs in the world for EMI programs are in Paris, Barcelona, Berlin, Istanbul, and Milano (38, 28, 23, 19, and 19, respectively, in terms of the number of institutions offering EMI programs within their metropolitan areas). These are all in the EHEA, but Shanghai and Beijing are catching up quickly (each with 18 institutions as of 2021). English requirements tend to be higher in the EHEA and the Americas and lower in other regions (British Council, 2021).

1.2 EMI in Japan

Japan has lagged in the growth of EMI programs offered compared to its peers. As of 2021, Japan had 187 programs offered at 24 different universities in EMI, an increase of 40 programs compared to 2017, but this shows much less growth than in other countries (British Council, 2021). Japan has made it a priority to attract foreign students for reasons including higher global ranking of domestic universities, internationalizing education, and improving English proficiency (Macaro, Curle, Pun, An, & Darden, 2018). Attempting improvement in the global ranking of Japanese universities places Japan in competition with other countries that are expanding their own EMI programs much more quickly. Compared to peer country progress in both Asia and Europe, Japan both lags the exponential growth seen elsewhere and also the outright number of existing programs (British Council, 2021).

<i># of EMI programs, selected countries</i>			
Country	2017	2021	% increase
China	586	2481	323%
Germany	1132	1826	61%
Malaysia	337	848	152%
Hong Kong	203	690	240%
Singapore	120	272	127%
Thailand	80	195	144%
Japan	147	187	27%
South Korea	77	155	101%
Bulgaria	50	169	238%

Figure1 EMI data, source: British Council

1.2.1 Foreign students in Japan

Japan has made attracting foreign students a priority, with a goal of 400,000 students by 2033, up from 230,000 in 2022 (the pre-pandemic high was 300,000) (Nikkei Shimbun, 2023). The top five countries from which these students are currently from are all Asian and represent the

vast majority of the total number of foreign students in Japan: China, Vietnam, Nepal, Korea, and Indonesia, all countries where English is not the native language (JASSO, 2023). There are two kinds of foreign students in Japan: those enrolled in a full-time program and those here on exchange. With the exception of foreign students in one of the comparatively few EMI programs, full-time foreign students have Japanese language ability. Those on exchange in Japan often have an interest in studying Japanese, but the language requirements are often less. Indeed, some universities set up special English-only courses for these students. This study will segment these two groups of foreign students as the full-time program foreign students are considered to have similar EMI needs to the domestic Japanese students. They have enough Japanese ability to enter Japanese programs but also may have interest in EMI. The exchange students are the other group: students studying abroad with an interest in Japan often do not have the language ability to study in regular Japanese-language subject courses. As such, these students need EMI to be able to come to Japan. In this second group, there are two types: those whose native language is English and those whose native language is not English. As noted above, the latter forms the much bigger group in Japan (JASSO, 2023). All of the students in this study happen to be from the latter group, i.e. all foreign students in this study come from non-English-speaking countries.

1.2.2 EMI programs, EMI courses, and ESP

In addition to the EMI programs noted above, some universities in Japan also offer EMI courses within a regular Japanese language undergraduate degree course. A-University, one of the two universities included in this study, has several of these, including two from which survey data will be used in this study, “International Trade” and “American Economy.” In addition to EMI courses, almost all undergraduate students in Japan are required to take an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) class (Terauchi, 2017; Terauchi, Noguchi, & Tajino, 2019). These courses are taught by experts in their field and are intended to extend the students’ general English education towards English in their chosen field. These courses may fall under the EMI umbrella, but for the vast majority, they are taught by Japanese faculty, mostly using Japanese to explain various English content sources (Brown & Bradford, 2017; Jones, 2019). Part of the reason for this is the perception that students want at least some Japanese explanation in their English content classes (O’Halloran, 2019; O’Halloran, 2020). As a result, these ESP courses are of little use to foreign exchange students.

1.3 Previous Studies

There have been several attempts to assess the learner experience of EMI. In a widely cited study, Galloway & Ruegg (2020) surveyed more than 700 students in China and Japan and recorded their views on student needs in an EMI context. Many reported that they felt that language support from the institution is important. An important conclusion from this research is that students from different countries may need different things from the EMI experience based on culture and language level. Also, students in Japan may be particularly averse to taking EMI unless they were returning from stints abroad (presumably based on language ability). Also, Japanese attitudes towards EMI as a tool for improving English were more negative than those of international students (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020).

A further study (Galloway & Curle, 2022) surveyed more than 100 foreign students studying at EMI programs in Japan. Students were asked about their reasons for entering their respective

EMI programs at one of four universities. Japanese students were also interviewed as part of the second stage of their research. Notable conclusions included foreign students being more appreciative of the career advancing aspects of being in an EMI program. However, the Japanese students were more appreciative of the chance to improve their English (Galloway & Curle, 2022).

The title of the study “I just wanted to learn Japanese and visit Japan,” hints at a key conclusion: that foreign students aren’t really interested in the English aspect of EMI. It seems a reasonable observation that by choosing to come to Japan, and rather than enroll in a Japanese program, the students enroll in an English program, students have an interest in both Japan and/or the Japanese language but do not have sufficient proficiency in Japanese to study at the undergraduate level. But the conclusion that foreign students are less interested in the English language benefits of EMI may be misleading. Approximately half of the surveyed students were from English-speaking countries, and one survey question asks, “What were your main reasons for enrolling in this EMI program me?” To which the students are asked to “Strongly Agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” or “Strongly Disagree” to several statements including “To improve my English language proficiency.” It seems natural that the half of students coming from English-speaking countries would have little interest in this. A British student on exchange in Japan is presumably much less interested in the English language learning aspect of the experience as a Nepalese student, who in addition to being interested in Japan and Japanese, is also interested in English. As such, an assessment of students from only non-English speaking countries studying EMI in Japan could be useful to compare with the attitudes of the domestically enrolled students in Japan.

1.4 Research Question

As in Galloway & Curle (2022), this study attempts to assess learner experience in the EMI classroom. Specifically, it seeks to compare two sets of non-native English experiences of the EMI classroom in Japan: domestically-enrolled students, who chose to enter a program in Japanese, and are supplementing it in English, and foreign exchange students from non-English speaking countries who chose to come to Japan but wish to study at least in part in English.

Research question: What are the different opinions and experiences of two sets of students studying EMI in Japan, domestically enrolled students and exchange students from non-English-speaking countries?

2. Research setting

2.1 EMI at A-University and B-University

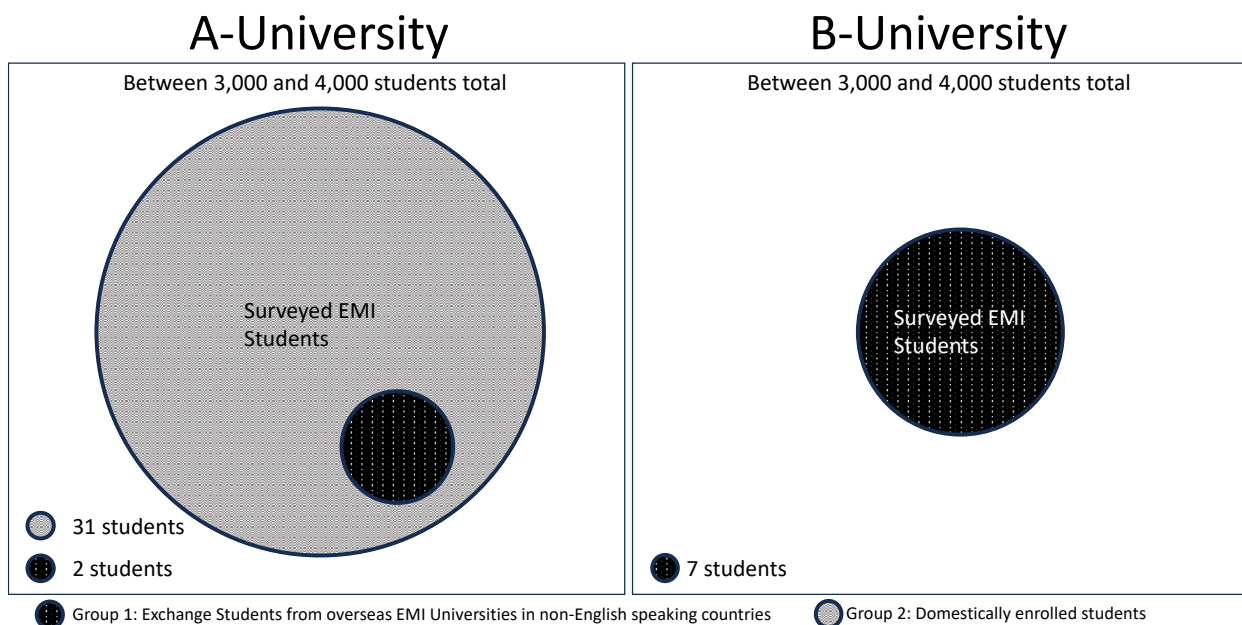
Both A-University and B-University are private universities in western Japan. Two separate groups of students at the two universities were surveyed. Both groups are Social Science or Economics majors taking at least one of two economics-related courses in English (EMI) at each of the universities. A total of four courses at the two universities are taught by the same instructor, an expert in the field of economics, and a native English speaker.

The first group is a group of students from non-English speaking countries who study at universities in their home countries where English is used as the language of instruction. These

students have chosen to come to Japan for a period of six months to one year as exchange students, where the Japanese language is not necessarily required, so they are taking at least some EMI courses while in Japan as part of their curriculum. Two of these students study at A-University and the rest at B-University. The group of students surveyed at B-University are enrolled in a program specifically designed for these types of students (where EMI is used at their home universities) and do not take classes with the general population of students at B-University. The students at A-University take these EMI classes together with the general population of students at A-University.

The second group of students is a group of domestically enrolled undergraduate students in Japan. These students are all studying at A-University and include both Japanese native speakers and non-Japanese citizens that are studying in Japan. The differences between these non-Japanese students and the first group of students (noted above) are that Japanese is a required element for admission to the university, English is not required for admission to the university, and that they have made a commitment to travelling to Japan to pursue a complete undergraduate degree, rather than a six-month to one-year time period on an exchange.

Both EMI courses at A-University are considered to be “recommended” (other options are “required” and “optional”) for domestically enrolled students but “optional” for exchange students. Both courses at B-University are “optional.” This could influence the decision to take the courses in the first place. There may be instances where the true answer to “why did you take this course” is that “I needed one more ‘recommended’ course.”



2.2 The classroom environments

The levels of English used in the four sampled classes are varied. The two classes at B-University, “International Finance” and “International Economics,” consist exclusively of students from schools where English is the lingua franca and thus are taught at a near-native level of English. The two classes at A-University, “International Trade” and “American

Economics,” are populated by students of varying levels of English, from low-intermediate to near-native. As such, the two EMI classes taught at A-University are a materially different environment to the two EMI classes taught at B-University, despite including two students, exchange students from EMI schools abroad, that would easily fit into the English level of the B-University class.

It is important to note that all four courses taught at the two universities are all in the field of economics, and more specifically in areas which seem particularly pertinent to many future career opportunities in ways that other EMI courses may not be. It seems possible that students majoring in Economics find “International Trade,” “American Economics,” “International Economics,” and “International Finance” taught in English to be more helpful to their careers than students majoring in, for example History, would find specific History courses taught in English.

That all of the students, both the domestically enrolled students at A-University and the exchange students, from both A-University and B-University, are non-native English speakers is an important distinction and different from previous research. It is posited here that the decision to come to Japan and then pursue an EMI program or course is different for a non-native speaker of both English and Japanese than it would be for a native speaker of English. The natural environment of the four classes at the two universities is that there are no native English speakers. All students are studying in their non-native language.

3. Research Design

3.1 Survey

(Galloway & Curle, 2022) Survey

QUESTIONNAIRE about your views on English Medium Instruction (EMI) in university settings

1. What were your main reasons for enrolling in this EMI programme?

Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

1. To increase my knowledge of the subject

2. To improve my English language proficiency

3. To improve my career option

4. To meet international students

5. Other

If other, please specify:

2. What is your overall opinion on EMI in your context?

Bisset Survey

EMI Survey

Questions 1-3 strata identifiers

1. Student Year

2. Programs

3. Courses

Strongly disagree/Disagree/Agree/Strongly agree

4.I am taking this (these) course(s) because I want to increase my knowledge of the subject

5.I am taking this (these) course(s) because I want to improve my English language proficiency

6.I am taking this (these) course(s) because I want to improve my career

7.I am taking this (these) course(s) because I want to meet international students

8.I am taking this (these) course(s) because of a different reason (please specify)

9.What is your overall opinion of taking a subject in English?

3.2 Survey details and stipulations

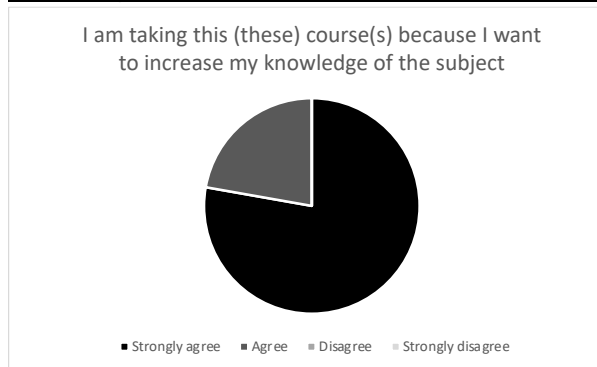
The survey was taken from Galloway (Galloway & Curle, 2022), utilizing the first step of their 3-step process with some slight modifications. There is a key difference in wording that should be noted regarding EMI *programs* and EMI *courses*: because the largest group of

students (domestically-enrolled students at A-University) are not in EMI *programs* but in at least one EMI *course* within a Japanese program, the question “What were your main reasons for entering this EMI programme” was changed to “I am taking this (these) course(s) because...” This is important because the sample from Galloway was all students who were coming to Japan as international students to an EMI *program*. Even students in the EMI program at B-University were asked why they were taking this (these) specific EMI courses. This then attempts to separate the questions of “Why are you in Japan?” (“Why are you in this program?”) from “Why are you in this EMI course?” An additional difference is that in Galloway, students from English speaking countries were included. A total of 41 students were surveyed in the current study, compared to 102 in Galloway.

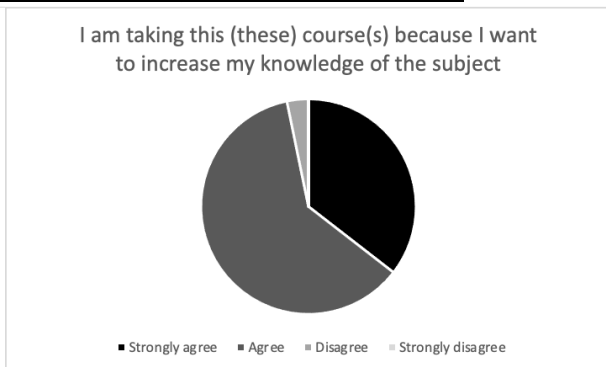
4. Research Results

4.1 Closed-ended questions

Exchange Students



Domestically Enrolled Students

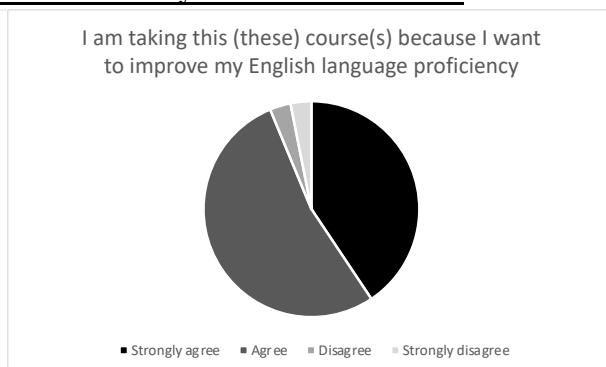


The responses to this question indicate that most students are taking an EMI course because they are interested in the content. There is a slightly less emphatic response from the domestically enrolled students, but still a clear acknowledgment of interest in the subject taught.

Exchange Students



Domestically Enrolled Students



The responses to this question are revealing and in contrast to previous research. Although a very small proportion of domestically enrolled students chose “strongly agree,” both the domestically enrolled and exchange students largely agreed with the goal of improving English language proficiency. Indeed, all of the exchange students agreed with this while two domestic students disagreed at least somewhat. This is in contrast to (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020) and possibly explained by the lack of native English speakers in the sample. All of the exchange

students from non-English speaking countries agreed at least somewhat with the goal of improving English language proficiency while studying an EMI course in Japan.

Exchange Students

Domestically Enrolled Students



Most of the exchange students strongly think that the EMI course they are taking in Japan will help their careers. This is consistent with previous research results indicating that exchange students are focused on careers. But the domestically enrolled students also largely agreed, which is in contrast to previous research. As noted above, it seems possible that subject matter may influence the responses beyond EMI. It may be that there is something about studying material where English instruction is relevant to the course material.

Exchange Students

Domestically Enrolled Students



While a slightly higher proportion of exchange students strongly agree with this statement and one more student strongly disagrees with it, the overall sentiment seems very similar between the responses of the exchange students and the domestically enrolled students.

4.2 Open-ended question

Responses to the question “What is your overall opinion of taking a subject in English?”:

Exchange Students

- *Good for their research and opportunities.*
- *I like this.*
- *I really like learning new things no matter the level of language being used.*
- *I think it is pretty useful both for the Japanese students and the International ones. There are many new words that come out and everybody can deepen their knowledge about global trade.*
- *It is most useful in the parts of the world I'm interested in working, easy to understand and share information.*
- *It's important if you already have the language to improve your knowledge about international economics, because you learn terms and words that are used in all the world. You also developed more strengths to communicate in different areas and with different people.*
- *Just do it - Nike*
- *Learning it in English makes me both improving my English language proficiency and I actually prefer studying subjects about my major in English because it's more useful for my future career (I want to work for a foreign company). Most of the terms are originally in English, and it's worldwide, and some are hard to translate so English is the best access.*

Domestically Enrolled Students

- *Difficult.*
- *I have to speak English even if I am not good at it, so I want to have fun and learn.*
- *I love the subjects since learned trade and factors so really love to take more this type of subjects.*
- *It can encourage me to learn English, make it easier for me to understand in class and train my ears.*
- *It helps us to learn more economic English vocabulary.*
- *I am enjoying this class.*
- *Taking a subject in English is good.*
- *I can understand knowledge from multiple angles.*
- *What is needed for the society of the future.*
- *Took this course out of curiosity, but it's a lot of fun!*
- *I like English and trade so. I want to learn more.*
- *Learning about international trade through English while also gaining English language skills kills two birds with one stone!*

Eight of the nine exchange students provided an answer to the open-ended question, while just twelve of thirty-two domestically enrolled students did, perhaps an indicator of educational culture and the generally more-reserved Japanese students. Several themes stand out. First, there is only one negative comment of the twenty total (“difficult”), the rest positive to varying degrees. Three of the nine comments from exchange students mentioned learning English language aspects, while six of the twelve comments from domestically enrolled students mentioned it. This is notable because in previous surveys, exchange students were both less positive in general and also some negative responses were noted. In this survey there was a total lack of negative comments from the exchange students. Also, many of both students specifically noted that they enjoyed the course content, some referring to future career benefits.

The most important finding is that students from non-English speaking countries are still very keen to use and learn English while studying in Japan. This seems to be true even when their main goal of coming to Japan was to learn Japanese. This is an important distinction from other research, which included native speakers of English. That the students who choose to come to Japan from non-English speaking countries, whose Japanese is not proficient enough to enter a fully Japanese curriculum, are still very much interested in the English language aspect of EMI is an important consideration for universities in Japan that are trying to attract foreign students.

5. Discussion and further research

Japan is keen to attract foreign students. It would seem from this research that foreign students, specifically those from non-English speaking countries, appreciate the opportunity to study in English. It should be noted that the global reach of English is presumed to be the important factor here: a Greek student studying abroad in Japan may indeed prefer to study in Greek, but a French classmate may yet prefer French! So the compromise, English, acts as kind of a lowest common denominator for students as a secondary language offering to Japanese. Surely, this study and others like it, combined with the rise in EMI programs globally, is evidence enough that Japanese universities keen on attracting foreign students, particularly those who are coming on exchange, want EMI options.

6. Further research and a note on sample size

This was intended as a study to take advantage of a short time window where one instructor was teaching different groups of students in four separate classes at two universities. But because of the time constraints, a full follow-up study with interviews and discussion groups would be very beneficial. A key question remains about the specificity of the situation: were students more positive because of the subject matter and how economics and trade-related courses are perceived to be more career-enhancing than other courses? Also, that there was only one instructor indicates that it is possible that the students are satisfied with that aspect and if there were different instructors included, the results would be less positive.

Also, the segmentation of exchange students and domestically enrolled students may be incomplete. A further subset of foreign students within the domestically enrolled student group may provide further observable data. Finally, the sample size should be much more robust before making any concrete observations.

7. Conclusions

In contrast to previous surveys of foreign students in Japan, this study finds that among the exchange students studying EMI at universities in Japan, the non-native speakers of English, by far the largest group of those coming to Japan to study, have a positive view of the English language learning aspect of EMI programs. This is a useful finding for universities in Japan who are trying to attract foreign students. Not only does an EMI program provide an opportunity for foreign students, interested in both Japan and the Japanese language, to come to Japan to study, but that many of these students also seem keen on improving their English language abilities.

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ⁱ Programs taught in English are sometimes referred to as ETP (English Taught Programs). This paper will use EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction) and distinguish between EMI *courses* (single or multiple content courses taught in English as part of a non-English degree program), and EMI *programs* (degree programs where the primary language is English). Both source universities for this study offer EMI courses, but not EMI programs.