Examining the New Course of Study of Japan

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Abstract

The Course of Study, set by The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) of Japan, describes overall framework in education system, from elementary school to high school education. It provides goals, contents, and guidelines for instructions for all subject areas and has been revised every ten years. The newest Course of Study was revised in 2017 and have been implemented during the past four years. In terms of English education, responding to the rapid growth of globalization, emphasize is given to the ability to effectively communicate in various situations. Increased number of vocabularies required are observed, which seems having an intention to raise the overall level of students' language proficiency. The study compares two groups of college students, one had no experience of such increase and the other group had one year (high school senior period) experience. The study measures their placement test scores, vocabulary sizes, and their attitudes toward English language learning. The IBM SPSS Statistics is used for numerical presentation, distributions, frequency, and correlation analysis. The study found significant differences in the above-mentioned variables. It also found correlations between their vocabulary size and attitudes toward English learning. More students who learn English under the new Course of Study is expected to increase. The continuation of examining students learning as well as their attitudes toward English learning would play important role to examine and evaluate the current Course of Study. The accumulation of such data can be beneficial for improvement or modification on the next revision.

Keywords: Placement Test, Academic Proficiency, GPA, Freshman Seminar

Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan is responsible for overseeing and implementing policies related to education, culture, sports, science and technology. Its primary mission is to provide quality education to all Japanese students, from early childhood through tertiary education.

The MEXT provides the Course of Study and curriculum guidelines as broad standards for all schools, from kindergarten through upper secondary schools, to design their programs in order to ensure a consistent standard of education across the country. The Course of Study has been revised every 10 years to reflect the current societal needs and developments. In 2017, the 7th revised Course of Study was announced and gradually implemented. The revised upper secondary school curriculum was implemented in 2022.

Problem Statement

In terms of English Education, the MEXT has emphasized the need to improve English language education in response to globalization. The new Course of Study focuses on students' "productive abilities" and "practical abilities" while also attempting to improve students' attitudes and encourage them to actively engage in learning. It has placed particular emphasis on laying a foundation for effective communication with others, stressing interactive language activities in which students communicate their thoughts and feelings to each other in various situations. At the same time, it should be noted that the new Course of Study has increased the amount of vocabulary required. In elementary school, 600 to 700 words are required. The required vocabulary in junior high school was increased from 1600 to 1800 words, and in high school, from 1800 to 2500 words. This increase appears to be intended to raise the overall level of language proficiency among students. However, concerns have been voiced that emphasizing increased communication activity leaves little time for students to develop fundamental grammatical knowledge and skills, as well as the vocabulary required for building a foundation.

Significance of the Study

To examine the effect of such revision, the current study aims to compare two groups of college students, one with no experience with the new Course of Study and the other with one year (high school senior period) experience. Since the implementation of the revision for high school started in 2022, few studies have been conducted in this regard. It should be mentioned that this study will function as a pilot study for data collection. The information on the 24th and 25th cohorts, who would be better exposed to the new Course of Study, would aid in obtaining more valid data for examining the effectiveness of the revision of the new Course of Study.

Purpose of the Study

To examine the effectiveness of the revision, a comparison of the two groups was performed in terms of the following points.

Study Methods and Analysis

The study measures the students' placement test scores, vocabulary sizes, grade point average (GPA) scores, and attitudes toward English language learning. IBM SPSS and Microsoft Excel are used for numerical presentation, distributions, frequency, and correlation analysis.

Studied University

The target university is a small private 4-year university with approximately 1200 students. It comprises two departments; one is the Health Science Department, which consists of the Rehabilitation major (Physical therapy・Occupational therapy) and Human Communication major. Another one is the Nursing Department with a Nursing major.

The subjects of this study came from Heath Science University. The participants include 83 first-year students (the 23 cohort) and 97 second-year college students (the 22 cohort).

Background Information

Placement Test Scores

At the start of each school year, the university conducts placement tests for English, mathematics, and Japanese for first-year students. These placement tests are developed, implemented, and evaluated by the faculty members responsible for each subject. For English, all new students take the English placement test. Students are assigned to groups based on their test scores for the mandatory English I class. A placement test for mathematics is required only for PT and OT students. Students with low scores are recommended but not required to take a basic mathematics class. For Japanese, a placement test is administered to all students. The information on students' scores is used for the freshman seminar, and students with lower scores are recommended to take non-credit Japanese courses.

GPA and the GPA System Used at the University

In response to globalization, Japan has adopted the GPA system that is used internationally. According to JUDGIT's study, 92.2% of Japanese universities employ the GPA system as of 2018. Regarding the GPA system, the university calculates each student's individual semester scores and uses them to decide whether to move them up a grade level or for graduation criteria.

Vocabulary Size

The Vocabulary Size Test (VST) assesses the students' vocabulary size. Hamada et al. (2021) developed a VST for Japanese learners of English as a foreign language based on the New JACET List of 8,000 Basic Words (VST-NJ8). The current study level ranges from 1 to 5, concluding with 100 words. It was administrated at the beginning of the school year. In daily conversation, a vocabulary size of 2000 to 3000 is considered a requirement, whereas 5000 is needed for reading authentic text. However, the VST results show that the 23 cohort has a much lower average than such scores, indicating insufficient vocabulary size.

Attitudes and Perceptions Toward English Learning

The online survey was conducted using Microsoft TEAMS. The participants include 83 first-year students and 97 second-year college students. There are 20 questions related to intrinsic/extrinsic motivation as well as negative and positive attitudes toward English learning. Agawa's study (2011) on motivation factors is used as a reference for questionnaire

development. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale, and Excel was used for analysis, which provided descriptive analyses.

Conclusions

The Results of the Study

Findings of the current study will be presented as the following manner.

Placement Scores
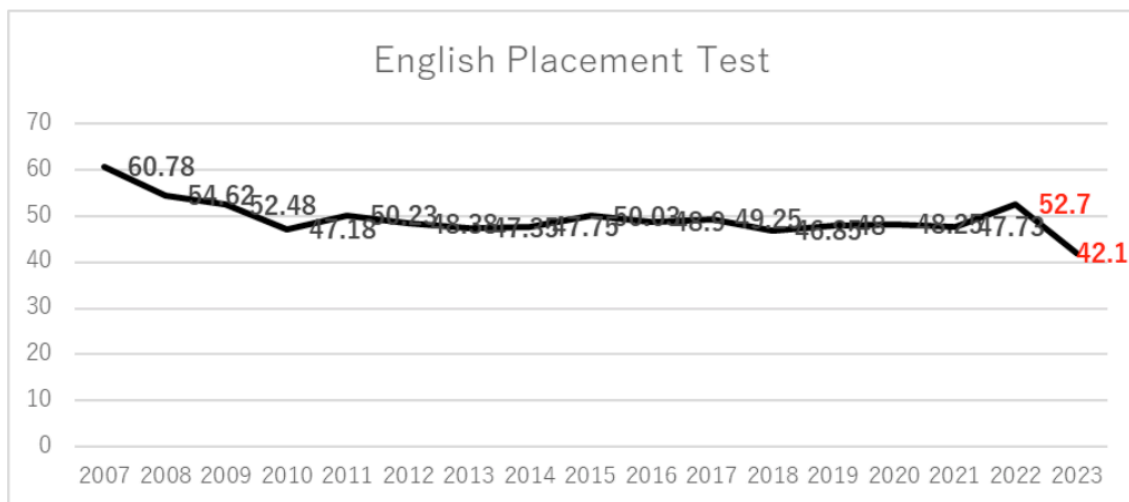Figure 1 shows the average of the placement tests over 17 years.

Figure 1: Placement Test Scores

As shown, when the data was collected for the first time, the average was 60.78, but it has since been lowered to the lowest average of 42.1 in 2023, which is the 23 cohort, whereas the average of the 22 cohort was 52.7.

In the following graph (Figure 2), a dotted line represents the percentage of students whose scores were less than one-third of the total score, and a line represents the percentage of students who had less than half the total score. As indicated, the percentage of students with lower scores has dramatically increased in 2023. In 2007, just 15.74% of students did not get half of the score on the test; however, in 2023, 60.7%, or more than half of the students, could not get half the score and 36.1% could not even get one-third of the score. In contrast, for the 22 cohort, over half of the students could not get half of the score, and 16.5% could not get even one-third of the score.
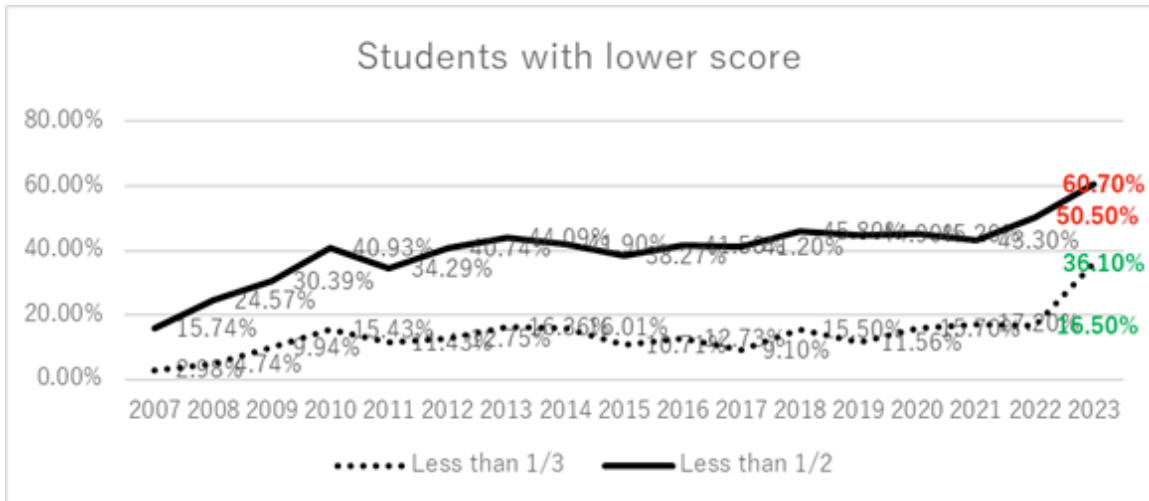
Figure 2: Students With Lower Scores

Vocabulary Size

Figure 3 shows a comparison of the vocabulary sizes of the two groups. The left indicates the vocabulary size for the 23 cohort, whereas the right shows that of the 22 cohort. The average of the 2023 cohort was 1639, whereas the 2022 cohort had an average of 2436.
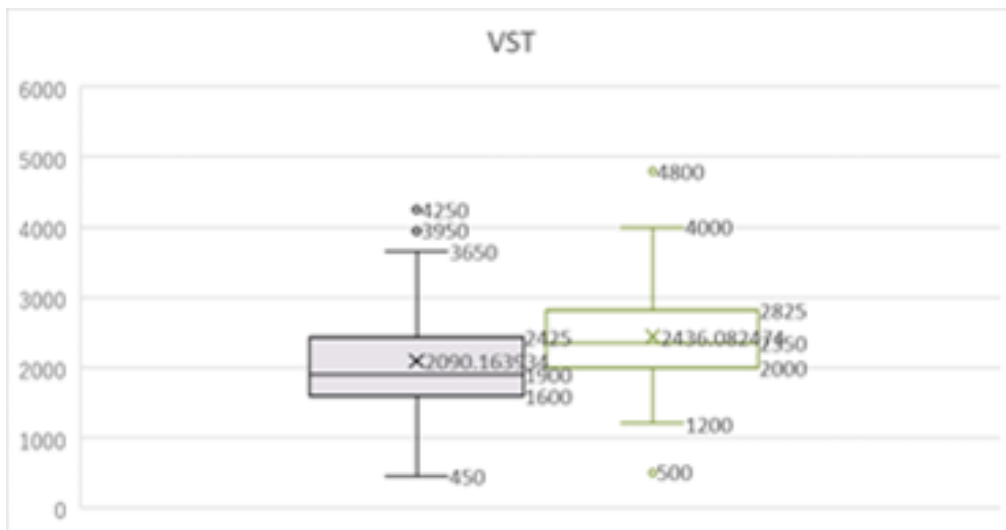

Figure 3: Vocabulary Size Test

GPA

Figure 4 compares the GPA scores. Although the average scores of both groups are similar, the 23 cohort has a longer interquartile range and a longer lower whisker with a negative skewed distribution.
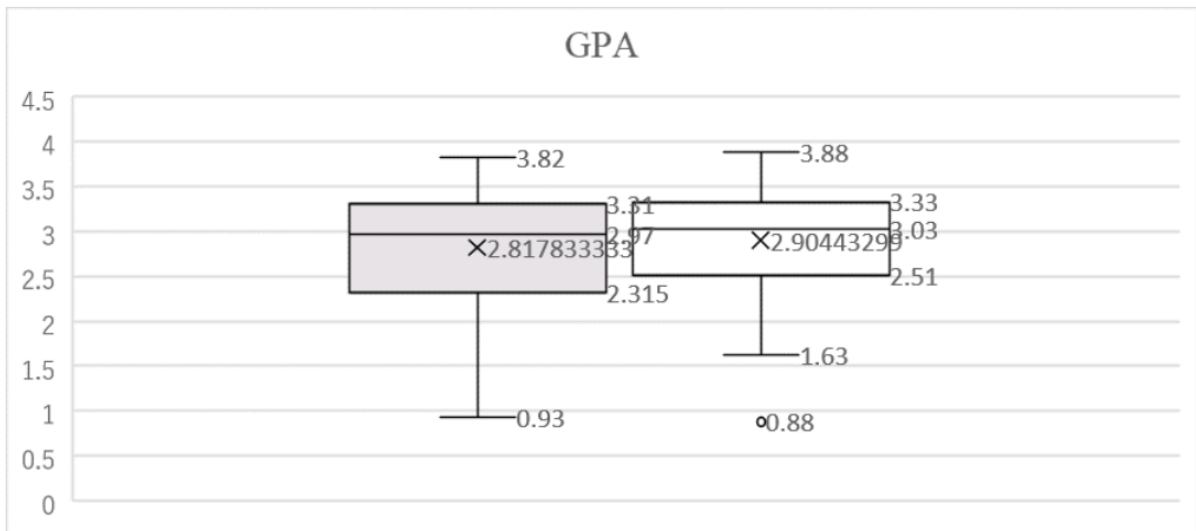
Figure 4: GPA

Correlational Analysis of the Placement Test Scores, Vocabulary Size, and GPA
Figure 5 focuses on the 23 cohort. As is shown, there is a high correlation (**p.> 0.01 .701)
between placement test score and vocabulary size and a weak correlation (**p.> 0.01 .464)
between the placement test score and GPA as well as GPA and vocabulary (**p.> 0.01 .284).

Correlation   Analysis for the 1ˢᵗ year students

		Placement	VST	GPA
Placement	Pearson's correlation	1	.701**	.464**
	Sig. (2 tails)		.000	.000
	N	61	61	60
VST	Pearson's correlation	.701**	1	.284*
	Sig. (2 tails)	.000		.028
	N	61	61	60
GPA	Pearson's correlation	.464**	.284*	1
	Sig. (2 tails)	.000	.028	
	N	60	60	60

**. P<0.01
*. P<0.05

Figure 5: Correlational Analysis (22 cohort)

For the 22 cohort, there is a moderate correlation (**p.> 0.01 .639) between the placement
test score and the vocabulary size. In contrast, a weak correlation was found (**p.>
0.01 .376) between the placement test score and GPA as well as between GPA and
vocabulary size (**p.> 0.01 .451) (Figure 6).

		Placement	VST	GPA
Placement	Pearson's correlation	1	.639**	.376**
	Sig. (2 tails)		.000	.000
	N	97	97	97
VST	Pearson's correlation	.639**	1	.451**
	Sig. (2 tails)	.000		.000
	N	97	97	97
GPA	Pearson's correlation	.376**	.451**	1
	Sig. (2 tails)	.000	.000	
	N	97	97	97

**. $P<0.01$

Figure 6: Correlational Analysis (23 cohort)

Students' Attitudes and Perception Toward English Learning
Although there are 20 questions on the survey, some of the results show similar tendencies for both groups. Therefore, major differences between the two groups will be presented in this section.

Figure 7 shows the students' responses to the statement, "I like English because I like to be exposed to English itself." This statement reflects the intrinsic motivation of the students. The pie graph on the left presents the 23 cohort, whereas the right indicates the 22 cohort. Notably, approximately 13% of the 23 cohort and 28% of the 22 cohort responded positively.
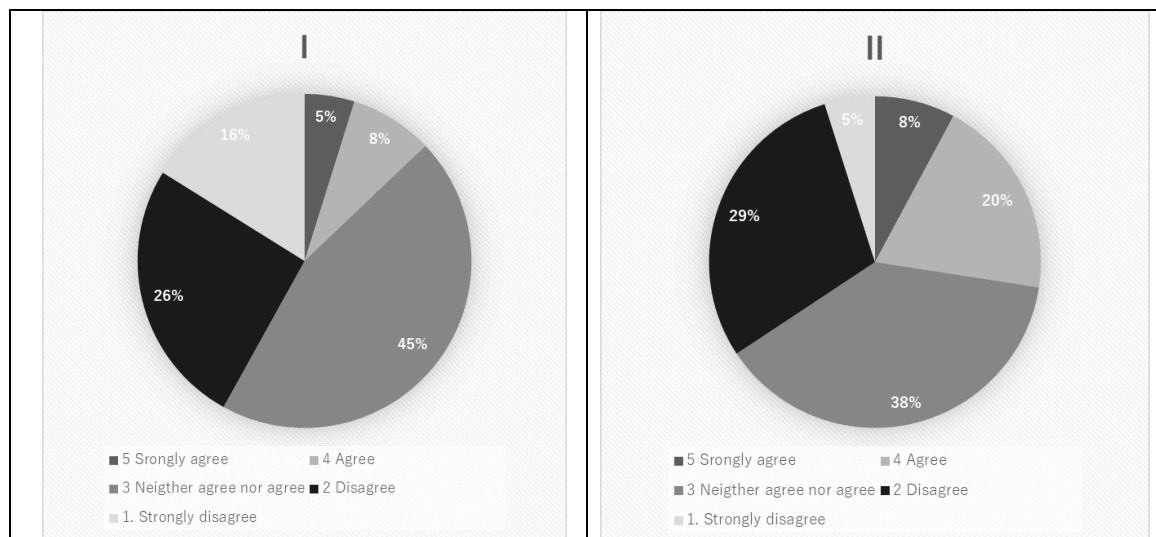

Figure 7: Intrinsic Motivation (1)

Figure 8 depicts the students' responses to the statement, "I study English because I feel happy when I understand something I did not know before." The statement also shows intrinsic motivation. More than half (52%) of the 22 cohort gave positive answers, as well as 41% of the 2023 cohort. Again, this shows that more students in the 2023 cohort have a higher level of intrinsic motivation.
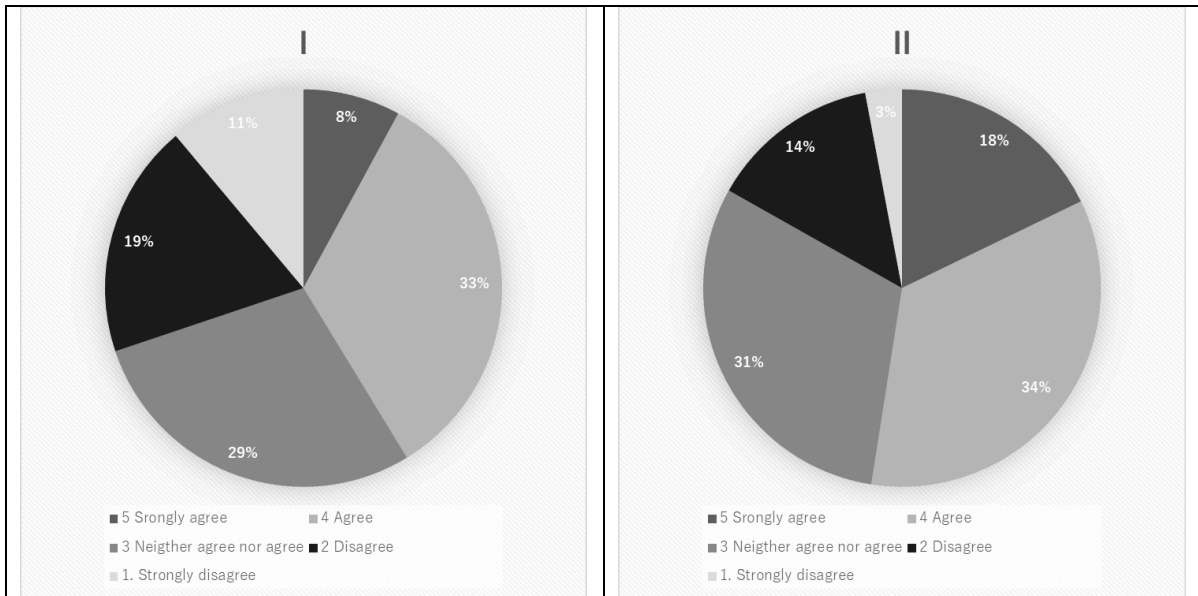
Figure 8: Intrinsic Motivation (2)

Figure 9 depicts the students' intrinsic motivation based on their response to the statement, "I study English out of necessity to pass exams." 39% of the 23 cohort and 30% of the 22 cohort gave positive answers to this statement. Notably, 2023 students show higher levels of extrinsic motivation.
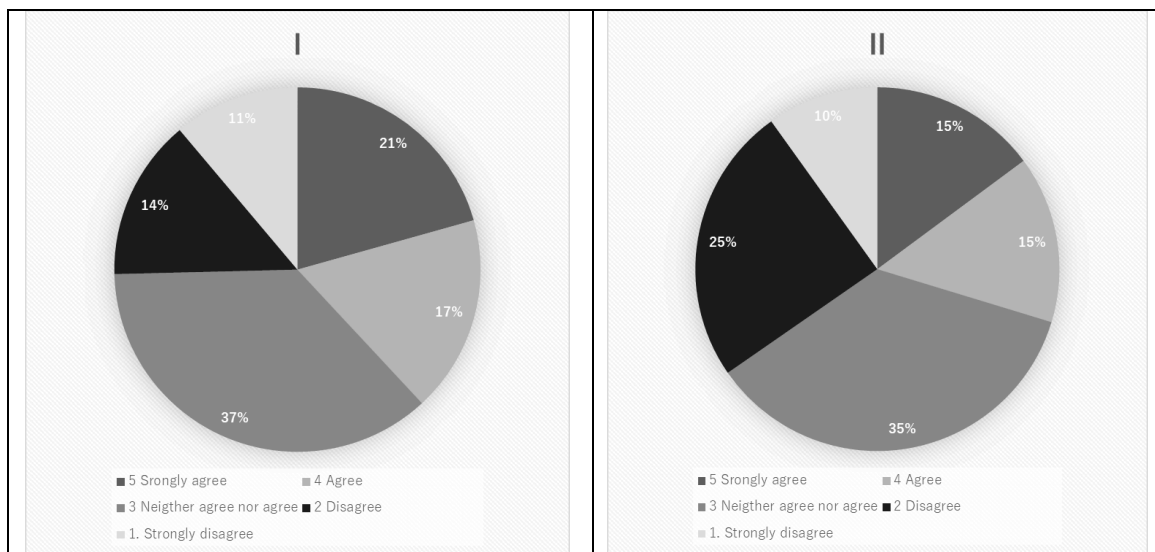

Figure 9: Extrinsic Motivation

Figure 10 shows the students' responses to the statement, "If I did not have to learn English, I would not." It reflects a negative attitude toward English learning. As shown, 36% of the 23 cohort and 29% of the 22 cohort responded positively to this statement.
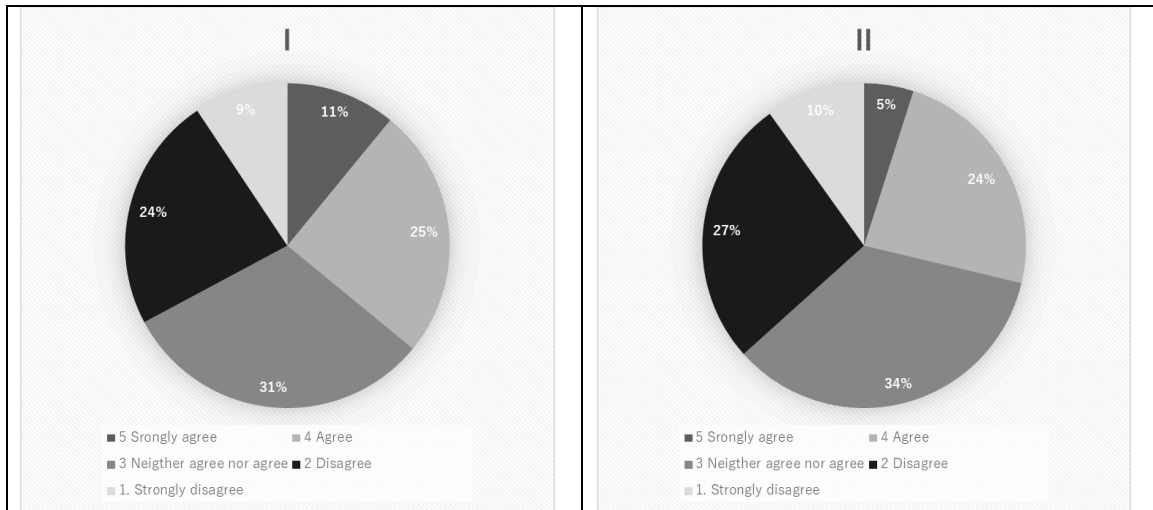
Figure 10: Negative Attitudes (1)

Figure 11 depicts the students' response to the statement, "I simply don't want to study English anymore." It is also a negative statement toward English learning. As indicated, 13% of the 23 cohort and 5% of the 22 cohort gave positive answers to this statement.
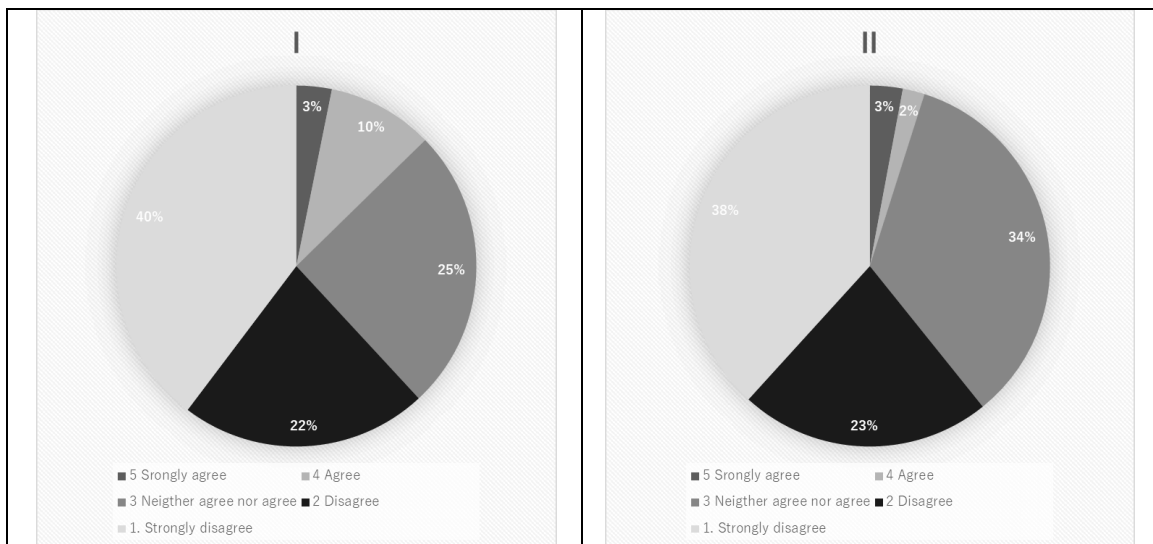

Figure 11: Negative Attitude (2)

Summary of Findings

The placement test score for the 23 cohort fell sharply, setting a record low. Moreover, the percentage of students with lower scores rose considerably in 2023. For vocabulary size, the average of the 23 cohort was 1639, whereas the 22 cohort averaged 2436. In daily conversation, a 2000 to 3000 vocabulary size is said to be needed, whereas reading authentic text requires 5000. However, the VST results in the 23 cohort revealed a significantly lower average than such scores, indicating insufficient vocabulary size.

Regarding GPA, the 23 cohorts tend to have students with lower GPA scores. Although the correlational analysis revealed that there are strong to weak correlations among variables, such as placement test score, vocabulary size, and GPA, the 23 cohort had slightly stronger correlations.

In terms of perception and attitudes, both groups responded similarly to several questions; however, the 23 cohort showed a tendency for extrinsic motivation and negative attitudes and perceptions toward English learning. More students in the 22 cohort have a higher level of intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, more students in the 23 cohort have negative attitudes or feelings toward learning English compared to the 22 cohort.

Although the new Course of Study intends to support students in actively engaging in their learning and being interested in and motivated to learn English, the findings of this study contradict such intentions. Without the necessary knowledge or vocabulary, it appears difficult to nurture productive or practical abilities, as well as positive perceptions or attitudes toward English learning.

Limitations of the Study

As this study focused on a small university, the sample size was relatively small. Such limitations tend to affect the generalizability of the study results. However, as stated before, this is a pilot study intended to accumulate more data for further investigation. Therefore, the study should be ongoing, with new data being added every year.

Implications and Further Study

This is a pilot study, and a similar investigation should be conducted among the 2024 and 2025 cohorts. These students will be more exposed to English under the new Course of Study. However, the speculation remains that the sharp drop in placement test scores or vocabulary sizes or even negative attitudes and perceptions toward English learning could be the influence of COVID-19. The 23 cohort started their high school with school closures and gradually transitioned to online learning, resulting in staggered attendance. In May 2023, Japan downgraded COVID-19 to a "common infectious disease." Notably, this 23 cohort was fully exposed to the COVID-19 situation during their 3 years of high school.

Furthermore, detailed analysis, such as examining the relationship between students' level of proficiency and their attitudes or perceptions toward English learning, should be required for further research. This data collection can be beneficial not only to provide an effective support system for students with low language proficiency and low motivation but also to improve the next revision of the Course of Study.

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