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Questionnaire survey on difficulties encountered in English business meetings at Japanese companies

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Abstract. With the expanding global economy, businesspersons need to attend more English meetings, at which non-native speakers of English encounter communication problems. In this paper, we examined the results of an online questionnaire survey of businesspersons working for large companies in Japan. Approximately 1,000 participants were asked about English business meetings to elicit difficult situations and problems caused by inadequate English skills, and we focused on the data from 227 respondents. The following aspects of English business meetings were examined: 1) meeting purpose; 2) the attendees (inter- or intra-organizational, and language background); 3) the business cycle of a meeting; 4) English proficiency based on the CEFR scale; 5) other factors including mental and psychological factors, and emotional intelligence. Our survey results showed a trend of BELF, Business English as a Lingua Franca, at multinational companies in Japan with ELF speakers accounting for the second majority of meeting attendees. We found problems caused by inadequate English skills, with listening being the most problematic. Further research is required to reach a solid conclusion but our findings suggest that advanced, high-CEFR level speakers of English can overcome the problems and we can target the skills when setting goals for English language curricula.

Keywords. CEFR, communication problems, English business meetings, Japanese businesspersons, online survey.

1. Introduction

1.1. JACET-EBP Survey and Research Committee

Due to increased globalization, Japanese companies are facing a greater need to do business in English. Previous research on business English conducted in Asia or the EU (Khoo 1994; Hagen 1999) suggests that spoken language rather than written language is the most problematic in a foreign language. In particular, reports (Hagen 1999; Koike et al. 2008) show that speaking over

the telephone, making small talk, and giving opinions at business meetings are difficult. In order to identify difficult communication situations specifically facing Japanese businesspersons at meetings carried out in English, JACET (The Japan Association of College English Teachers)¹ ESP (English for Specific Purposes) Survey and Research Committee was established. The committee started a business-academia collaborative project with IIBC (The Institute for International Business Communication)² in 2011. This joint research entitled “English skills for business meetings required at corporations” also involved local ESP SIGs nationwide.

The collaborative project of the two organizations is aimed at contributing to improving English language education in Japan.

1.2. Background

With the rapid expansion of globalization in business fields, many companies in Japan are pressed with the need for more global human resources. However, the shortage of qualified personnel has been a serious problem hindering Japan’s international growth. Yet, expanding into high growth overseas markets can help revive Japan’s long-stagnant economy. The Japanese Cabinet issued a summary of policy proposals for the development of Japan’s global human resources on June 11, 2012. The requirements for global human resources listed in this summary are: good communication skills in foreign languages; positive attitudes in global settings; and cross-cultural understanding. The summary also presents a scale for global human resources in terms of English communication skills: Level 1 through Level 3 are English for general purposes such as English used for overseas trips, daily living, and general tasks in the workplace, while bi-lateral and multi-lateral business talks/negotiations are referred to as Level 4 and 5, respectively. The summary states that Japanese businesspersons have made progress in Levels 1, 2, and 3. However, Japanese companies need to develop and expand human resources with English proficiency of Levels 4 and 5, which is essential for Japanese economic and social growth.

In fact, a number of needs analysis of business fields have revealed that bi-lateral and multi-lateral business talks and negotiations are frequent in business situations (Khoo 1994; Barbara et al. 1996; Hagen 1999). Koike et al. (2010) conducted a detailed questionnaire of 7,354 Japanese businesspersons and found that many Japanese businesspersons feel uncomfortable and stressed in business discussions and negotiations in English. Tsuji & Tsuji (2012) carried out a large-scale investigation of 1,000 businesspersons in manufacturing companies in Japan and the results suggest the need for systematic support to improve English skills of these businesspersons to function well in business interactions. Many recent discourse analysis studies examine negotiations and interactions at meetings (Nickerson 2005; Bargiela-Chiappini, Nickerson, & Planken 2007), indicating that much of business communication is carried out at business meetings. Handford (2010), through the compilation of a spoken corpus of one million words, provided a detailed description of the business meeting genre. However, to the best of our knowledge, there has not yet been a large-scale questionnaire survey focusing solely on business meetings.

Our project group conducted a large-scale survey to examine English business meetings at Japanese companies as the participants see them. Considering the fact that bi-lateral and multi-lateral business talk/negotiations are difficult for the Japanese, our aims were (1) to find the cause of communication difficulties and problems at business meetings, and then (2) to explore for possible solutions.

2. Methods

2.1. Online survey on English use in business meetings

We conducted an online survey on English use in business meetings in multinational companies based in Japan, from February 5th to April 30th, 2013. The survey period was divided into two

terms: from February 5th to March 31st and from April 1st to April 30th, 2013.

Requests to respond to the questionnaire were sent by email and the respondents voluntarily answered online. During the first term of the survey period, 2,934 people from IIBC’s client companies and 168 acquaintances of the JACET members received our requests, and 337 businesspersons responded to the questionnaire. After data cleaning, we found the data for 277 respondents to be valid for our analysis. During the second term, as many as 267,228 members of IIBC’s internet service were sent our questionnaire. After data cleaning, the data for 632 out of 749 respondents were found to be valid for our analysis.

From a statistical standpoint, the above-mentioned groups of 277 and 632 respondents are two different kinds of data because of the difference in sampling methodologies. They were labeled as “closed” and “open” because we could directly and personally contact all the respondents from the “closed” group of 277 businesspersons. In this paper, we discuss the data from this “closed” group.

With respect to the survey questions, the unique point is that we addressed the questions to business leaders and executives, who were to give answers about the members of the department to which they belonged and not about themselves.

The survey consisted of 30 questions: 19 closed questions, 2 open questions, and 9 questions on respondent attributes as follows:

Questions	Contents
Q1~Q6	Years of English use, business areas, number of people in the department, number of English users, ration of English use in business
Q7~Q8	Current level and goal of English skills in business meeting
Q9~Q14	Business meeting frequency, number of participants, forms of communication, mother tongues, purposes, asked separately according to the relationship of speakers
Q15~Q20	Difficulties according to purposes, situations, speaking and listening skills, English abilities, psychological and mental factors, and open question on the difficulties
Q21	Open question on problems of the business communication in general
F1~F9	Attributes of the company

Table 1: Survey questions

The average respondents had used English for business for 10 to 15 years with about four years of overseas experience. The ratio of English use in their business environment was about 30% with the ratio of English use in their business meetings about 20% of all the meetings. In a month, they have 6.2 internal meetings, 2.7 meetings with contracted partners, and 3.4 meetings with members from outside the company. As for the respondents themselves, 60% were 40 to 54 years old, with 80% being over 40. Almost all were in a management position and 80% had used English for more than five years.

3. Results

3.1. Using English as their lingua franca for the meeting

We found that the so-called BELF environment had spread beyond our anticipation (Kankaanranta & Planken 2010). The meeting participants were classified into four groups by mother tongue: Japanese speakers, native speakers of English, people who use English as the second language (ESL), and people who use English as a foreign language (EFL, excluding people whose first language is Japanese). In an average case, a meeting has about 40% participation from Japanese, a fourth from native speakers of English, and a third from ESL and EFL speakers. This means that about 75% of the meeting participants are non-native speakers of English.

3.2. The average CEFR level of the respondents

The two graphs below show the average CEFR level of the respondents in the closed group: Figure 1 shows the average CEFR level by business field and Figure 2 shows them by department. The horizontal axis shows their current CEFR level and the vertical axis shows the level they are expected to reach in the near future. The average current CEFR level is “B1” and the average expected CEFR level is “B2.2.”

Consequently, Figure 1 shows a gap between the goal and the reality and Figure 2 shows a clear difference in the CEFR level between departments. For example, the group at a high CEFR level includes departments of legal affairs and product planning. On the other hand, the CEFR level of staff of the general affairs department is not very high.

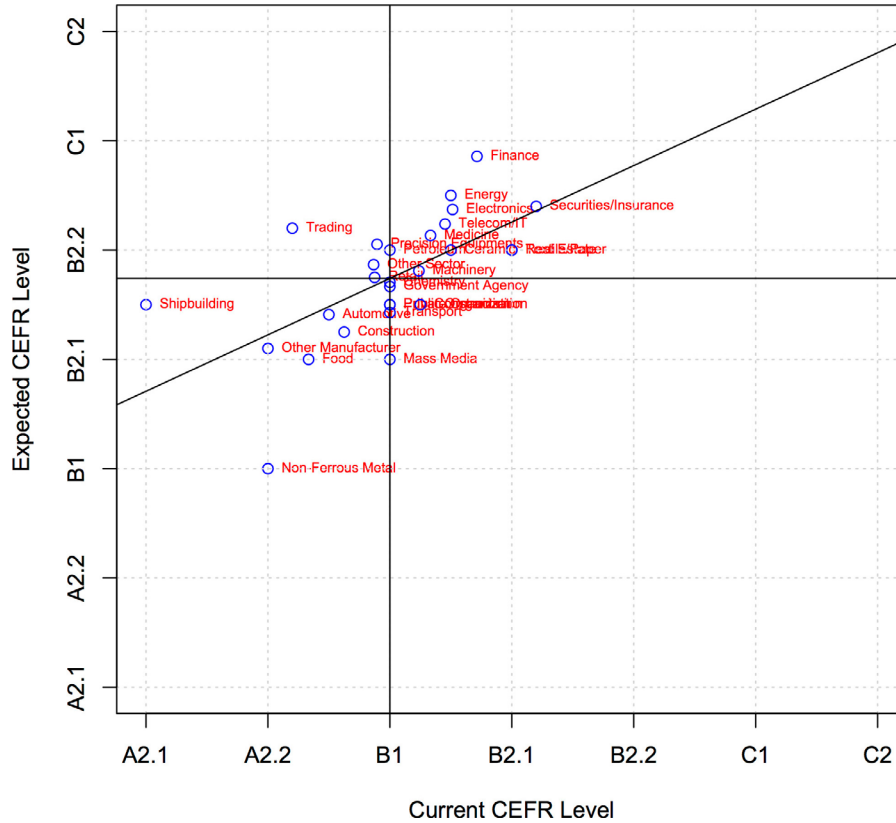


Figure 1: Average current- and future-CEFR level of respondents in the closed group by business field

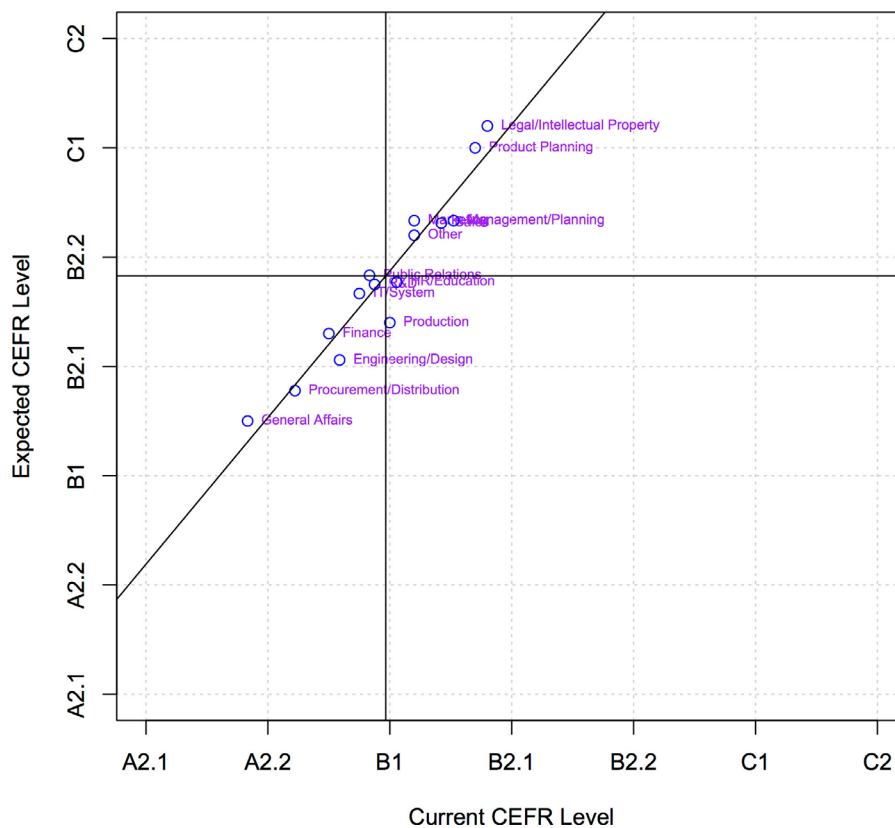


Figure 2: Average current- and future-CEFR level of respondents in the closed group by department

3.3. Difficulties by meeting purposes and meeting types

In our survey we focused on “difficulties” by meeting purposes and meeting types. Informed by the meeting classification used in Handford (2010), we classified difficulties into six different purposes: Reviewing; Planning; Giving and receiving information/advice; Task-oriented or Problem-oriented; Buying/Selling/Promoting a product; Negotiation. From another point of view, meetings are categorized into three types such as internal meetings, meetings with contracted partners, and external meetings. Figure 3 shows “Negotiating” and “Task-oriented/ Problem-oriented” are the most difficult of any type of meeting.

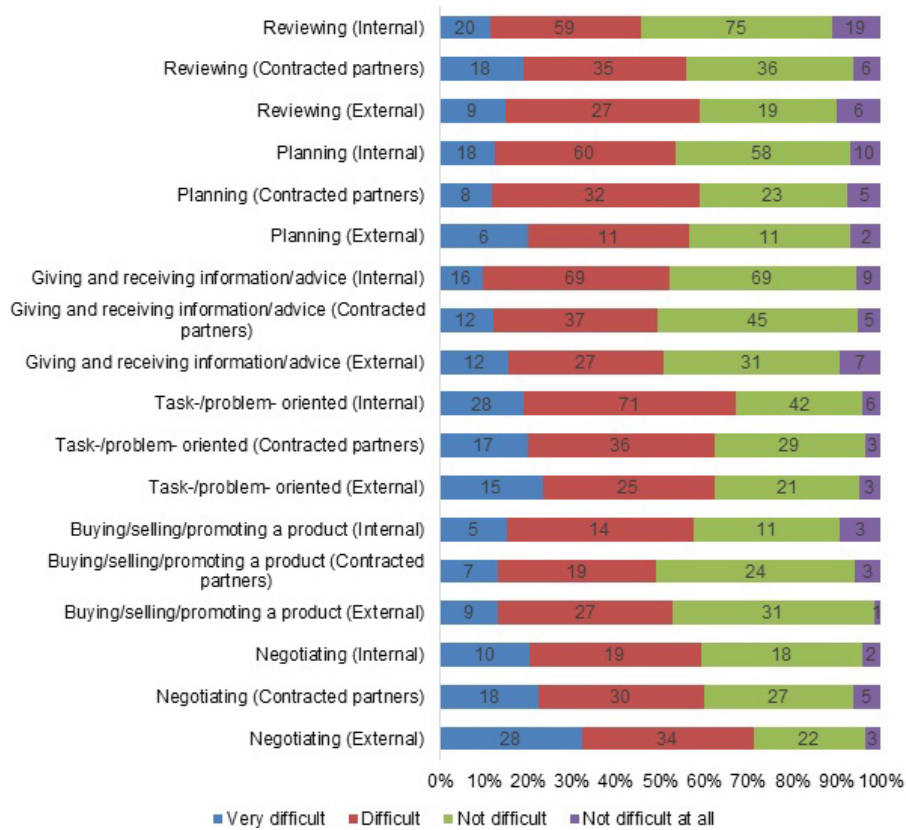


Figure 3: Difficulties by meeting purposes and meeting types

3.4. Task difficulties of the meeting process

In general, businesspersons start a meeting by preparing presentation materials and end the meeting by making decisions. Judging from task difficulties of the meeting process, the survey respondents answered that “Organizing attendee’s ideas & Building consensus”, “Making decisions”, and “Proposing solutions” are the most difficult.

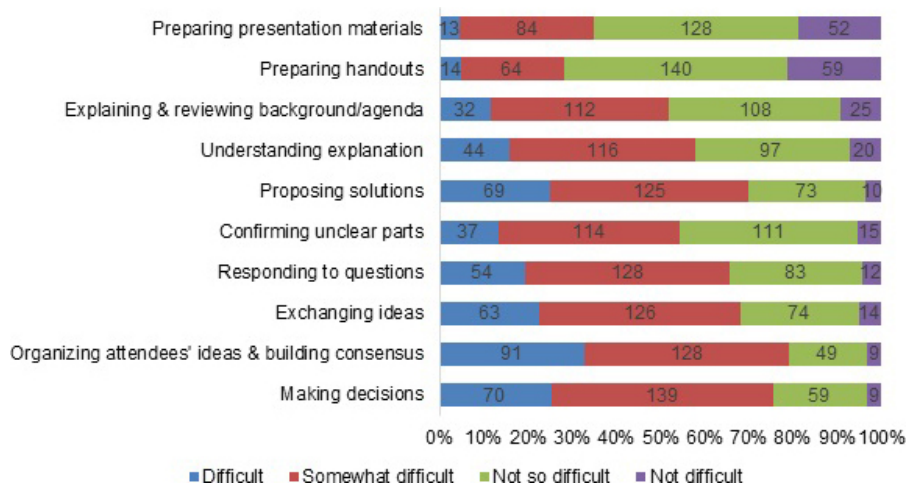


Figure 4: Task difficulties in the meeting process

3.5. Identifying problems: Running a meeting smoothly

We also asked the respondents to identify the problems impeding the progress of the meeting. The most typical problems related to linguistic skills were: “Not conveying subtle nuance,” “Not understanding subtle nuance,” “Not understanding the details,” “Not explaining the details,” and “Not explaining with clear points.”

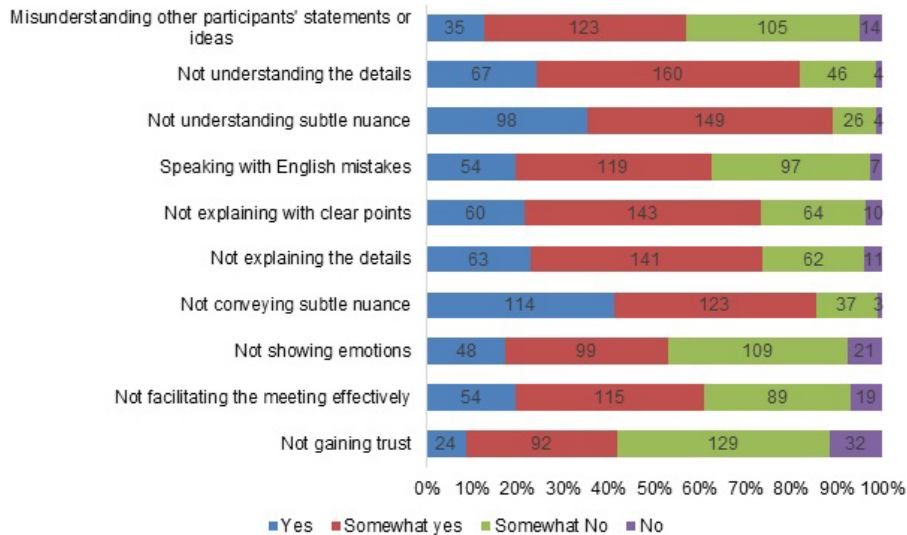


Figure 5: Problems impeding smooth running of a meeting

3.6. CEFR levels and problems

Figure 6 shows the correlation between the CEFR levels and problems that the survey respondents pointed out by way of correspondence analysis. In sum, the linguistic factors were strongly associated with the intermediate levels and emotional factors were strongly associated with the introductory levels.

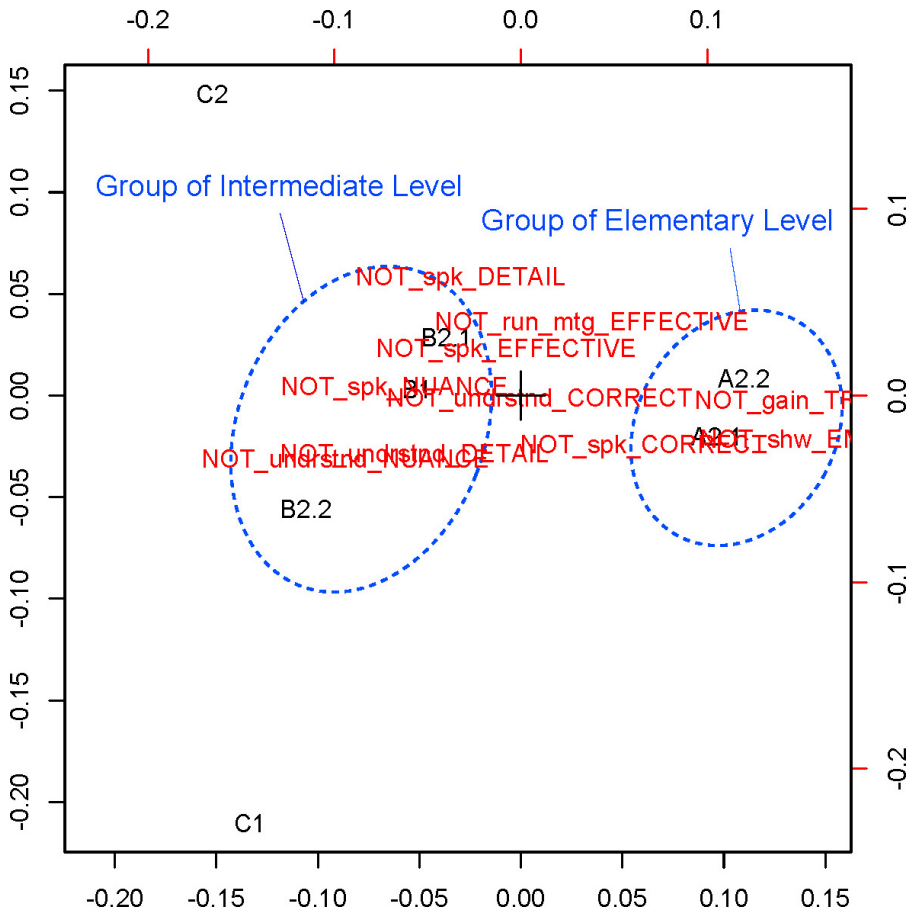


Figure 6: CEFR Levels and Problems

3.7. Identifying problems: Language factors

Figure 7 shows the problematic language factors. Listening skills are rather challenging. The respondents answered, “Understand English with native speed” and “Understand varieties of English pronunciation” are difficult.

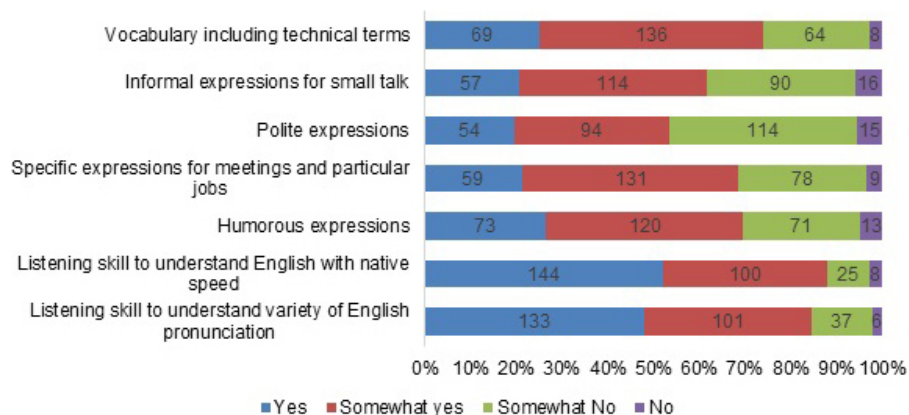


Figure 7: Problematic language factors

4. Conclusion

As our research is a multi-year project and is still on-going, we need to conduct further research to reach a solid conclusion. Thus far, our findings suggest the following:

- Firstly, we can see the trend of ELF or BELF, Business English as a Lingua Franca, at multinational companies in Japan. ELF speakers, or English speakers of Outer Circle and Expanding Circle, according to Kachru (1985), compose the second majority of meeting attendees following the group of people whose first language is Japanese.
- Secondly, listening is the most problematic issue. It is difficult to understand when a speaker talks too fast and/or uses native dialect. Our findings suggest that advanced, high-CEFR level speakers of English can overcome these problems. Thus, improving listening skills is required to be more competitive in today’s global market.
- Thirdly, judging from the meeting process, problems with English at meetings are “Clarifying the point,” “Building consensus,” “Making a decision,” and “Reaching a conclusion.” Our findings suggest that advanced, high-CEFR level speakers of English could overcome these problems and thus we should target these skills as a goal of English language curricula for students, and business majors in particular.

In the next stage, we will conduct detailed interviews with businesspersons. We will also continue our analysis with the aim of proposing countermeasures for problems caused by inadequate English skills for non-native speakers of English, and consider how to overcome difficult situations and problems caused by differences in culture, business customs and meeting strategies between countries. A detailed report will be issued in 2014.

5. Acknowledgements

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6. Notes

¹ JACET was founded as an independent organization in 1962. As of August 1, 2013, the academic society comprises 98 supporting organizations/companies and 2,531 individuals. JACET was established in a time of educational reform in order to improve the state of English language education. Those involved were strongly convinced of the need to solve university-level problems related to teaching at all levels in the educational system.

² IIBC, founded in 1986, promotes the development of global human resources through various activities including the administration of the TOEIC® test, TOEIC Bridge® test and TOEIC® Speaking and Writing tests. To implement its mission to promote smooth communication in the global community, IIBC works with Japanese major corporations and universities to improve Japanese English skills through the administration of the tests.

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