

## The effects of non-standard English in Japanese advertisements on Japanese EFL students.

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### < Abstract >

The use of the English language in advertising and on products is widespread in Japan. The Japanese EFL student of the twenty-first century is surrounded by the English language on a daily basis through print media advertisements, television advertisements, English slogans on products, and a wide variety of visible English on everything from billboards to packages of tissue. A vexing question for the English language teacher is whether the use of non-standard English in such advertisements has any effect on their student's ability to learn English. The amount of research on this difficult question is surprisingly sparse.

Through class survey results, this study found the Japanese EFL learner to have a generally high level of trust in the accuracy of English in Japanese advertisements and on Japanese products. When put through an experimental process of observing advertisements with grammatical errors and measuring a tendency to repeat those errors in the short-term, the experimental group was found to repeat those errors at a significantly higher rate than those in the control group. In addition, the study found that the higher the level of the EFL learner's English ability, the greater the tendency to repeat the errors. This leads to questions for further research into the long-term effects of the use of non-standard English in Japanese advertisements and on Japanese products, and the positive effects of correct English usage from these same sources on the Japanese EFL student.

Key Words: non-standard English, Japanese advertisements, Japanese EFL students, English in advertisements, level of trust

Basic errors in English grammar are prevalent in Japanese media, advertising and on Japanese products. What affect do these errors, that surround the Japanese EFL student, have on their ability to avoid common errors in English grammar? Several researchers have stressed the importance of developing critical thinking skills in students to aid them in the learning process. (Kuhar, 1998; King, 1995) Does viewing common English grammatical errors in advertisements or on products with an uncritical eye increase the probability of repeating those common errors? The major objective of this study is to measure the deleterious effect of viewing these errors in English grammar on the Japanese EFL student and their subsequent tendency to repeat those same errors.

This study also encourages 'active learning'

in Japanese EFL students. There has been extensive research into getting students doing things and, at the same time, considering what they are doing. (Chickering, Gamson, 1987) By encouraging students to be conscious of the English that surrounds them, while viewing it with a critical eye, this study was conducted in hopes of discovering a learning tool for the Japanese EFL student. Often described as being too passive in their learning style, Japanese EFL students should be encouraged to take more responsibility for their own learning. The pedagogical usefulness of this study as a teaching and learning tool for the EFL classroom is a second major objective.

One major assumption is that the basic errors in English grammar in advertisements and on products has a negative effect on the student's

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English ability, as they will have a tendency to repeat these grammatical errors. However, there is a possibility that this widespread use of English in advertisements and on products is actually helpful to Japanese EFL students. For example, exposure to English words may increase a student's overall vocabulary. While this may or may not be true, this study's main concern is whether a negative reinforcement of grammatical errors exists, and if so, whether students can avoid errors through learner awareness and critical observation. The aim is not to criticize 'funny English' or speculate on how advertisers and merchandisers come to use incorrect grammar, spelling, or pronunciation in their advertisements and on their products.

The influence of the media on the individuals in society is very powerful. We discourage both children and adults from imitating some of the behavior that they see in movies or on television, and instead encourage reflection and a consideration of consequences. So too should EFL students be encouraged to reflect on the English that they see in everyday life critically, to ensure that they come away with something positive that will aid, rather than hinder, their progress.

There seems to be a scarcity of research on the effect that erroneous English used in advertising and on products has on the Japanese EFL student's English ability. Assuming that a certain percentage of the English used in Japanese advertisements and on products is erroneous, we need to consider how this language is processed and perceived by students, what method can be used to avoid reinforcement of common grammatical errors, and to what extent this issue is relevant for the EFL teacher in Japan.

### Processing of Advertisements

The process of persuasion in advertising is a topic covered by countless research studies. Most of the research has been conducted regarding how a person is persuaded by, and in turn forms a judgment of an advertisement's message. While this involves native language speaker's processing information in their native tongue, I will use some of the same

cognitive theories of the persuasion process to show how a Japanese EFL student might process the English that appears in advertisements and on products.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model offers a systematic route to persuasion, as well as a peripheral one. The systematic route involves a critical analysis of the message, while the peripheral route results in very weak judgments based on simple inferences as to the accuracy of the message. (Petty and Cacioppo 1986) This model presents us with two possible ways for the Japanese EFL student to view English used in advertisements and on products. The former would result in a stronger critical analysis of accuracy while the latter would result in a less stringent consideration. Currently, I believe that most Japanese EFL students view these advertisements and products peripherally, without any deep critical analysis of their accuracy.

Other studies focus more directly on judgment formation. The influence of contextual information surrounding messages can have a powerful influence on judgment formation and correction. The concepts or meanings that surround the message are related positively to the judgments made about the message. (Alba, Marmorstein and Chattopadhyay, 1992) In our case, the judgment as to whether or not the English used in an advertisement or on a product is, in fact, correct is affected by the context in which it is presented. The fact that the advertisement is on a billboard or the product lines the shelves in a store, may lend credibility to its assumed grammatical accuracy. This combined with a scant or peripheral viewing may cause this judgment to be triggered by mere sensations or feelings. This type of experiential processing (Strack 1992) could plant common grammatical errors in the brains of unsuspecting Japanese EFL students.

Avoiding the effects of experiential processing is achieved by becoming aware of the contextual data that may influence one's views, as well as having a willingness to expend cognitive resources on correction. (Schwarz and Clore 1983) In other words, students need to pay attention and consider the correctness of the English used around them.

### Active Learning and Critical Thinking

Active learning is defined as “anything that involves students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing”. (Bronwell and Eison, 1991) Active learning encourages students to take a more dynamic role in the learning process. Rather than memorizing and regurgitating information in the classroom, the students’ discuss “what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives”. (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) The students learn more by getting involved in the process to a greater degree.

Critical thinking can be defined as “the ability and willingness to assess claims and make objective judgments on the basis of well-supported reasons”. (Wade, 1995) Through critical thinking, students develop “intellectual maturity” and gain “true autonomy” in society. (Glen, 1995) The development of critical thinking skills involves both cognitive and metacognitive skills. This study will encourage the development of metacognitive skills through which students become aware of, monitor and control their own cognitive processes. (King, 1995) Of most importance is the ability to “identify and challenge assumptions”. (Kuhar, 1998) This will help students to view the English they see in day-to-day life in a new light. Through critical analysis of the English around them, active EFL learners will make considered decisions as to its accuracy.

### Relevance to the EFL Teacher

There has been considerable debate as to the relative importance of grammatical correctness vs. communicative ability for the EFL student. One side believes that grammar is “given a degree of symbolic importance out of all proportion to its real value”. (Swan, 1997) The concern is that if our true goal as EFL teachers is to foster better communicative ability, strict attention to grammatical accuracy might be counterproductive. Many teachers believe that excessive grammar correction can destroy a student’s confidence and interest in communicating.

The other side insists that communicative ability is meaningless “if what you communicate is imprecise”. (Moulin, 1998) They believe that grammar should be presented systematically, and errors should be corrected before they “impress themselves on the learner’s memories and fossilise”. (Moulin, 1998)

The purpose of this study is not to settle this debate. The value of this study lies in locating a possible contributing factor in the numerous common grammatical errors shared by Japanese EFL students. If grammatical errors on advertisements and on products tend to be repeated by students, the EFL teacher can use this information as a tool in the learning process.

### **Research Methodology and Data Collection**

To adequately measure the effects of errors in English language present in advertisements and on products on EFL students in Japan, we must attempt to isolate the experience of viewing those errors. We must also guarantee as natural a viewing as is possible within this controlled environment. As this experiment’s purpose was to prove or disprove the theory that errors in advertising reinforce and encourage common errors made by Japanese EFL students, a qualitative experiment conducted under strict and impartial guidelines was required.

The experiment was of the posttest-only control group design and was conducted as a part of the student’s regular weekly English Communication class. First, the experimental group was introduced to the lesson’s target of ‘advertising’. After a display of a few posters and the identification of various advertised products and advertising target markets by the whole class, individual advertisement sets were handed out to all students individually. These ten advertisements had been designed specifically for experimental purposes. Five advertisements contained errors in English usage in their slogans. (App. A) The students were asked to identify the ten products in writing and then rank in order which ones they would be most interested in purchasing. This activity was completed individually, under

strictly timed conditions, with no communication between students allowed. Following this activity, in which students were exposed to incorrect English in a peripheral manner, a short group exercise took place in which small groups of four or five students identified target markets for a few more advertisements unrelated to the experiment. This activity allowed for some distance from the viewing of incorrect usage in the experimental advertisements and helped to disguise the true intent of the experiment.

The small-group activity was followed by a short *experimental error recognition quiz* (App. B), which was the essential data collection instrument. The quiz consisted of twelve sentences which the students were asked to review and correct whenever errors were discovered. These sentences contained errors of the same *type* as the advertisement slogans viewed earlier in the experiment. In addition, other common errors were included to allow corrections other than those made in the advertisements. Upon completion of the quiz, the informed consent form was distributed and the purpose of the experiment was explained by the instructor. This was followed by a full explanation of the errors present in the advertisements and class correction of those errors. While it might be argued that presentation of incorrect English to students by an instructor in the classroom violates the ethical prohibition against deceiving test subjects, I believe that this process actually had a strong positive effect on the student's English ability. The students in the experimental group are more likely to remember the class and its learning objective due to the slight deception involved. They may be more likely to avoid these errors in the future as a result of this memory. The control group received the identical quiz without the advertisement stimulus, followed by the informed consent and explanation.

As a secondary data collection instrument, an *opinion survey* (App. C) was distributed to both the experimental-group and the control-group before the experiment began. This survey allowed for a clearer understanding of the student's exposure to and impression of English used in advertisements and on

products in their everyday life. This data was used to help explain the data collected through the experiment.

## DATA ANALYSIS

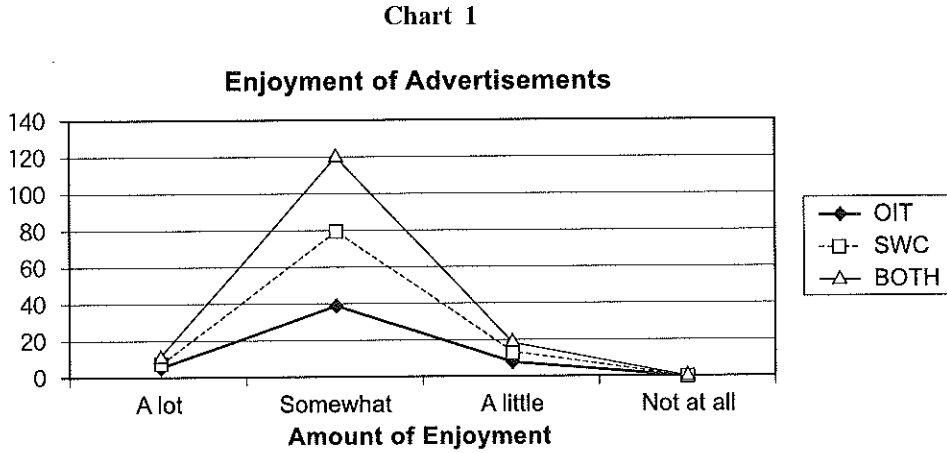
The research was conducted among fifty-four students from the Oita Institute of Technology (OIT) in Nakatsu City, Oita Prefecture, Japan and ninety-nine from Seinan Women's Junior College (SWJC) in Kitakyushu City, Fukuoka Prefecture, Japan, for a total of 153 students. The OIT students study Oral Communication in English once a week, but focus mainly on technical subjects such as engineering, design and electronics. The SWC students are English majors who study English every day. Through gathering data from two diverse groups, I hoped to gain insight into the effects of English used in advertising on students of varying abilities.

The results of this study show a combination of factors contributing to an overall *negative impact* on EFL students from errors present in advertising. We will begin with an analysis of the relevant data collected from the *pre-experimental opinion survey* and then analyze the data collected from the *experimental error recognition quiz*.

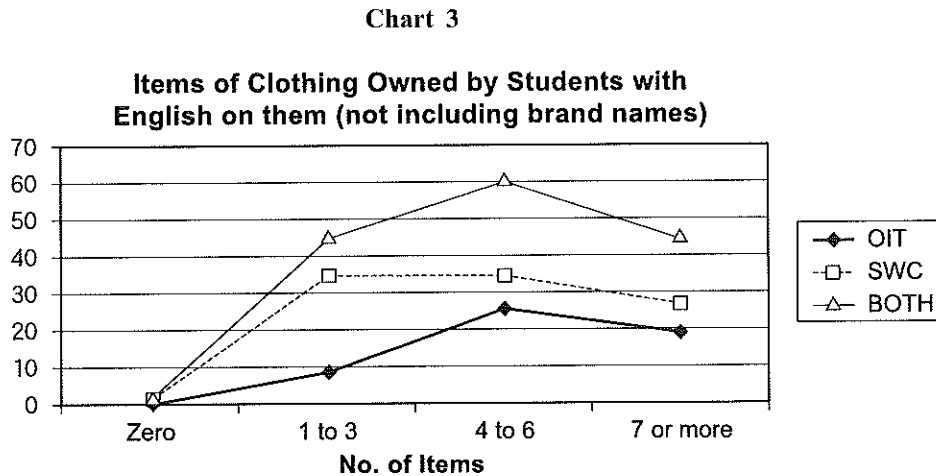
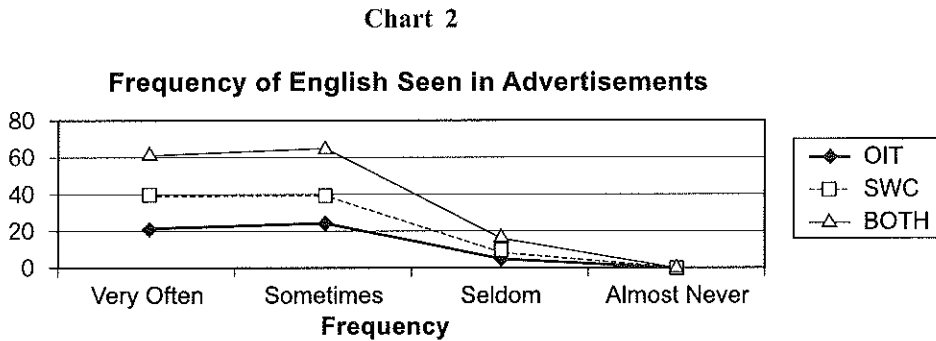
### *Pre-Experimental Opinion Survey*

The pre-experimental opinion survey was vital in helping to identify student attitudes and perceptions which assisted in clarifying the data collected through the experiment. Charts 1 through 6 and Chart 8 show information gathered through the pre-experimental opinion survey.

Chart 1 suggests that students enjoy advertising and have a positive image of advertising in general.



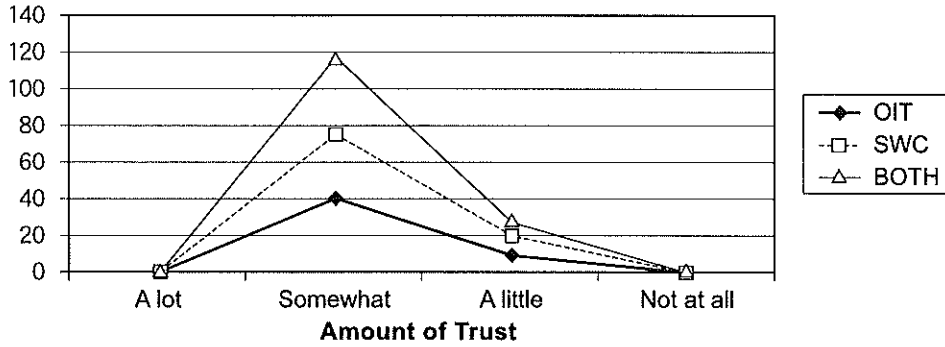
Students also indicated that they see English frequently in advertisements and on clothing in their everyday lives. Charts 2 and 3 illustrate the fact that there is a significant amount of English viewed by students in their everyday life.



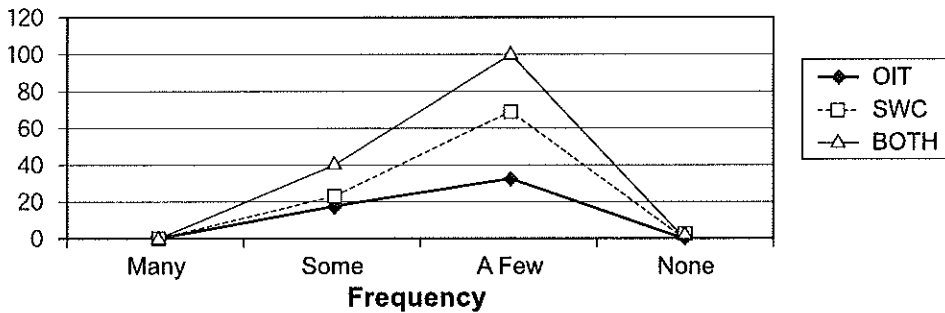
The effects of non-standard English in Japanese advertisements on Japanese EFL students.

Charts 4 and 5 show a general trust or belief in advertising and, by extension, its content. Chart 4 shows an overall trust and Chart 5 indicates the students' general belief that relatively few advertisements using English contain errors.

**Chart 4**  
**Trust in Advertising**

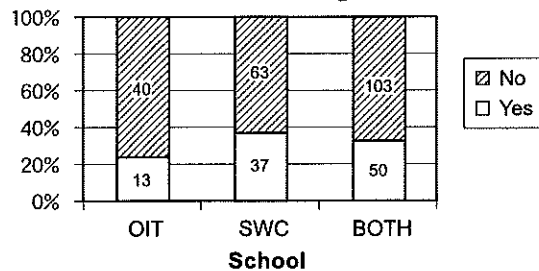


**Chart 5**  
**Frequency of Errors in Advertising**



In addition, only about a third of students at SWC and about a quarter of students at OIT reported having ever seen an error in an advertisement (as shown in Chart 6).

**Chart 6**  
**Past Experience of Error Recognition in Advertising**



This seems to indicate a low level of recognition among students of the errors that are present in advertising. Once again, this doesn't give us any indication of the actual frequency of errors present in advertising and on products in Japan, though this may be an area worthy of further research. It is possible, of course, that the number of errors may be so few that the low frequency of error recognition is caused by lack of opportunity rather than the viewing of English advertising with an uncritical eye. Here I will use my own experience viewing English errors in Japanese advertising to dismiss the low frequency argument and assume the students have had significant opportunities to come in contact with errors in advertising. Assuming this, **Chart 6** seems to indicate that these errors are often missed. Proving or disproving this point beyond a doubt would require further research into the frequency of English errors in Japanese media. The objective of our current study, however, is to prove whether any such errors have a negative impact on the students' ability to learn English.

*Experimental Error Recognition Quiz*

Thus far we can conclude that students are interested in advertisements, see English frequently in advertisements, and generally trust in the accuracy of these advertisements. The experiment isolated

the experience of viewing erroneous advertisements and measured the effect on the students' English ability. The experimental group saw five common errors concealed within 10 advertisements as part of the experiment while the control group did not. Both groups later took the error recognition quiz which contained five errors of the same type present in the advertisements. The quiz was scored on a scale from 1 to 10. A full correction of any of the five experimental errors had a value of two points and a partial or attempted correction a value of 1 point. The criteria for these two scores was applied equally to both the experimental and control groups. Students who did not attempt to correct an error received zero points. In this way, a score of ten indicated that the student noticed and corrected the errors in all five sentences involved in the experiment. A score of zero indicated that none of the errors were noticed or corrected. The results of the experiment show an overall difference of 13% between the quiz scores of the control groups and the experimental groups with the control groups scoring higher. (see **Table 1**) The experimental group of 74 students had an average score of 3.6 indicating a low level of error recognition. The control group of 79 students averaged 4.1 points, still fairly low, but significantly higher than the experimental group average.

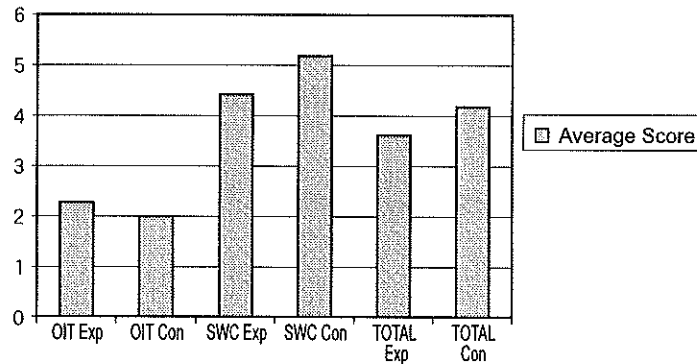
**Table 1**

School				
OIT	No. of Students	Score	Average Score	%age Diff.
Experimental	28	63	2.25	-12.5
Control	26	52	2	
<b>SWC</b>				
Experimental	46	204	4.4348	14.5296
Control	53	275	5.1887	
<b>Total</b>				
Experimental	74	267	3.6081	12.8316
Control	79	327	4.1392	

The control groups scoring higher as a whole generally supports our theory that the advertisements had a negative impact on the experimental group students who recognized fewer of the grammatical

errors due to their peripheral viewing of similar errors in the experimental advertisements. **Chart 7** graphically represents the differences in the quiz scores.

**Chart 7**  
**Difference in Quiz Scores**

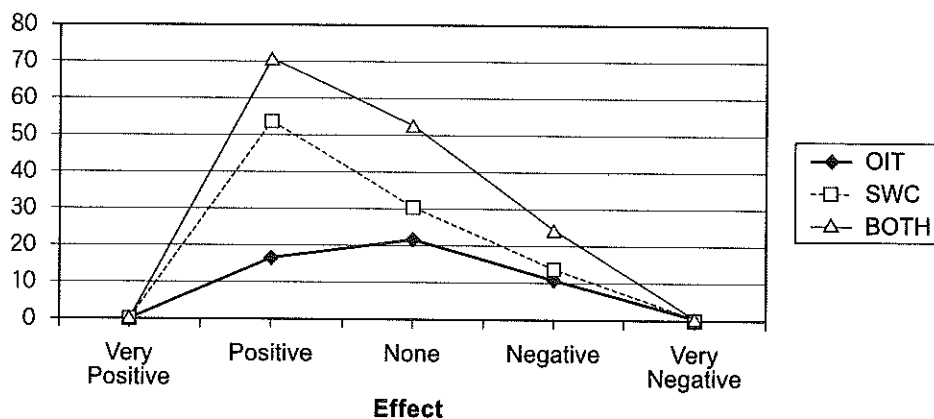


We can see immediately that the SWJC English majors scored much higher than the OIT technical majors on average. The experimental group at OIT actually scored higher than the control group which would seem to refute the hypothesis that the advertisements had a negative impact. There is, however, a possible explanation for this. The English majors at SWJC probably view advertisements

which contain English more carefully and less peripherally and are thus affected to a greater degree by the errors. This is supported by the fact that SWJC students overwhelmingly felt that advertising in English had a positive impact on their English ability while OIT students were much more sceptical. (see **Chart 8**)

**Chart 8**

**Effect of Advertising in Your English Ability**





This trusting belief, combined with a much higher level of ability in English may have increased the negative influence of the erroneous advertisements on SWJC students. The results of the experiment show a 15% difference in the score at SWJC in support of our theory. (see **Table 1**) In contrast, OIT students were much more evenly balanced between their positive and negative views of the impact of advertising on their English ability. This balance combined with a lower level of ability may have eliminated any negative influence caused by the advertisements. The student's differing attitudes toward English and the study of English may help explain these diverse outcomes.

## Conclusion

It appears that the harder a student works to achieve a level of fluency and grammatical accuracy in English, the more that the occasionally careless use of English in Japanese advertising negatively impacts their ability. Teachers of English should make students aware of this potential obstacle to their progress and encourage them to view English in Japanese media positively, but with a critical eye. This can be done through interactive activities and homework assignments that train students to become active learners of English in their everyday lives. Whether riding the train, shopping, watching TV or just walking down the street, students who have received this valuable insight will have a better chance of successfully navigating the difficult path to English proficiency.

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## **Appendix A      (Experimental Advertisement Slogans)**

1. We make the best burgers in town!
2. The music will move you!
3. Do you know what time it is?
4. Let's driving!
5. Excited skates!
6. A picture is worth a thousand words.
7. How about this sunglasses?
8. More cheap and better quality.
9. Give her diamonds.
10. I feel Cola!

**Appendix B (Quiz)**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

次の英文を見て間違った箇所を見つけ、正しい英文を下線部に記入しなさい  
ただし、間違いのない文章は記入する必要はありません。

1. I has two sisters and a brother.

\_\_\_\_\_

2. How much gasoline do you need?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Let's shopping this afternoon.

\_\_\_\_\_

4. I woke up when the clock struck midnight.

\_\_\_\_\_

5. This rollercoaster is excited!

\_\_\_\_\_

6. This green sweater is more beautiful and more cheap than that blue one.

\_\_\_\_\_

7. The Hawks are a good team, aren't them?

\_\_\_\_\_

8. A: What do you think of this jeans ?

B: Pretty nice.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

9. He presented me a bracelet for Christmas.

\_\_\_\_\_

10. You had better go to the hospital immediately!

\_\_\_\_\_

11. I love hot dog.

\_\_\_\_\_

12. A: What would you like to drink?

B: I feel coffee.

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix C Opinion Survey (English)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

Circle the best answer. Answer each question before moving on to the next one.

1. Do you enjoy TV, poster and magazine advertisements?

A lot                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

2. Do you feel advertisements reflect the truth?

A lot                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

3. How often do you see English on advertisements or products in your day-to-day life?  
(not including brand names)

Very Often                  Sometimes                  Seldom                  Almost never

4. How many pieces of clothing do you own with English words or phrases written on them?  
(not including brand names)

0                  1-3                  4-6                  7 or more

5. Have you ever noticed an advertisement or product with an error in English language on it?

Yes                  No

6. How many advertisements or products that use English do you think contain errors?

Many                  Some                  Few                  None

7. What effect do you think English used in advertising and on products has on your English ability?

Very positive                  Positive                  None                  Negative                  Very negative

### Appendix C Opinion Survey (Japanese)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_

次の質問に最も適当だと思われる答えに丸をつけなさい。

前の質問に答えなければ次の質問に進んではいけません。

1. あなたは、テレビのコマーシャル、電車やバスの中に掲示してある広告や雑誌に掲載されている広告を、どの程度楽しんで見えていますか。

非常に楽しんで見ている      ある程度楽しんで見ている      あまり楽しんで見えていない      全く楽しんで見えていない

2. あなたは、広告の内容がどの程度正しい情報を伝えていると思いますか。

ほとんどが正しい情報を伝えている      ある程度は正しい情報を伝えている      あまり正しく伝えていない      全く正しく伝えていない

3. 広告や製品に使用されている英語を日常生活の中でどの程度目にしますか。  
(ブランドの名前は含みません)

よく目にする      時々目にする      あまり目にしない      ほとんど目にしない

4. 英語のフレーズや単語のプリントが入った衣服を何着ぐらい持っていますか。

0着      1-3着      4-6着      7着以上

5. 広告や衣類に使われている英語の何らかの間違いに気付いたことがありますか。

はい      いいえ

6. どの程度、広告や製品に使用されている英語に間違いがあると思いますか。

非常にある      よくある      たまにある      全くない

7. 広告や製品に使用された英語があなたの英語能力にどんな効果を及ぼすと思いますか。

非常に良い影響を与える      なんらかの良い影響を与える      何も影響がない      悪い影響を与える      非常に悪い影響を与える