

# Comprehensive Survey of Requisites and Trends of Language Training in the COVID-19 Era

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This study examined the evolving need for language instruction in the commercial sector during the global pandemic. Having surveyed over 300 Japanese professionals, we discovered that 72.6% used AI/Web services to improve their language skills and 74.5% reported a significant decline in linguistic challenges. Notably, 60% of the respondents were satisfied with their current corporate language programs, but the majority expressed a desire to expand the programs for specific business-related language skills in their organizations. The results indicated a variation in the perceived importance of language training in specific skills based on age group. This finding highlighted the necessity of tailoring training programs to the specific skills required by different age groups, rather than offering generic training programs based solely on proficiency levels. This finding also emphasized the increasing significance of AI in language services and the critical need for advanced English communication skills in the business sector.

## 1. Introduction

The global pandemic has deeply affected work patterns and business communication. Traditionally, expatriates took time to build trusting relationships with their counterparts and functioned as hubs to bridge the gap between their domestic teams and overseas offices. For many companies, the number of visits and the time spent on entertainment are considered important. However, business cannot be suspended because of travel restrictions or difficulties with face-to-face communication due to the pandemic. The Japanese government's endorsement of remote work, bolstered by subsidies, has prompted companies to invest in online meeting technologies <sup>[1]</sup>. Previously, only a few employees had engaged in international projects. Currently, even new employees engage in remote meetings with global colleagues and clients <sup>[2]</sup>. This has shifted communication to digital platforms such as online meetings and email. This transition led to and necessitated the distribution of agendas and documents beforehand, thereby facilitating lucid communication. This transition challenges the earlier notions that, by working on-site, language barriers would naturally dissipate, and that showing Japanese hospitality and pairing communication with entertainment would be adequate.

For businesses with vast international operations, ceasing operations due to the pandemic is not workable. Although hiring interpreters is not feasible for all companies, firms are adjusting by recruiting multilingual personnel and using AI and automated translation solutions <sup>[3]</sup>. This study delves into the changing language training requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, the equilibrium between personal and group sessions, and the efficacy of language assistance tools, including AI.

## 2. The purpose and hypothesis of this study

### 2-1. Purpose

Considering the pandemic's impact on work methodologies and the swift integration of communication tools, this study aims to reassess language training methodologies in line with changes in business efficiency and linguistic interactions.

### 2-2. Hypothesis

AI and Web services offer limited assistance for global assignments. Nonetheless, technological solutions that address specific shortcomings will further propel business. Underlying language training demands differ among age demographics, and customizing training modules based on age can amplify cost benefits.

### 2-3. Method

We conducted an online survey from September 30, 2021 to October 8, 2021, using a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions to validate the hypotheses of this study. We reached 54,149 people based on the following three conditions: (1) they worked for companies or organizations with over 300 personnel; (2) they worked remotely; and (3) they had knowledge of overseas work activities in their workplace. In total, 8,734 respondents qualified for the survey. To avoid age and gender bias, we set equal numbers of age groups in which the genders were equally distributed. Those aged 18 to 19 years and over 50 years were eliminated because the gender distribution differs from other age groups. As a result, a group of 355 respondents was selected by dividing them into eight age groups ranging from 20 to 50 years old in 5-year increments. This study included 351 valid respondents.

### 3. Results and analysis

#### 3-1. Shifts in International Business Practices Owing to Remote Work Integration

The escalation of remote work has intensified English interaction in global ventures. According to our survey, more than 62.7% of enterprises have integrated online conferencing tools for international interaction. Major corporations, particularly those with high headcounts and large staff, have incorporated online conference solutions to counteract business interruptions (See Figure 1).

After a pandemic, how often would you or your workplace communicate online with overseas offices or customers? (N=351)

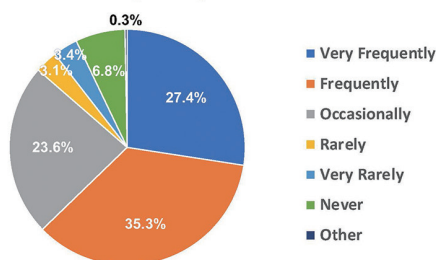


Figure 1 : Trends in communicating with overseas following the pandemic

The swift adoption rate of virtual meeting platforms, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, indicates this trend. The broad acceptance of these instruments has transformed business discussions and infiltrated domains such as education [4]. What changes have led to the expansion of remote work in operations? As shown in Figure 2, the number of tasks related to meetings increased, including online meetings (65.2%), responding to e-mails (56.8%), and writing reports (53.8%). This confirms that, even during the period when overseas travel was restricted, respondents continued to perform international business tasks (See Figure 2).

Which specific international business tasks have become more frequent for you since the pandemic? (Multiple answers)

	Responses	(%)
	n	132
		100.0%
Responding to e-mails	75	56.8%
Online meetings (business negotiations, presentations, etc.)	86	65.2%
Preparation and presentation of reports	71	53.8%
Procurement-related (purchasing, buying, and selling)	45	34.1%
Responding to information inquiries and queries	44	33.3%
Overseas projects (preparation, implementation, supervision)	34	25.8%
Service deployment overseas (preparation, implementation, research)	30	22.7%
Participation in international conferences (online/offline)	29	22.0%
Recruitment interviews (online/offline)	33	25.0%
Participation in exhibitions (online/offline)	34	25.8%
Recruitment interviews (online/offline)	36	27.3%
M&A	30	22.7%
Import/export	23	17.4%
None applicable	1	0.8%

Figure 2. Changes in the need to perform specific international business tasks.

In many cases, owing to rapid changes, it is not possible to develop language skills over time. To accomplish this, changes in thinking and methods are required. For example, by changing from an individual-based system to a team-based system, we can reduce individual workload while creating results through collaboration. By making the best use of available tools and resources, respondents were able to overcome these difficulties.

#### 3-2. Evolution of Business Operations and Hurdles

A 2019 IIBC poll revealed that 61% of the TOEIC exam participants employed English when collaborating on international projects. This percentage is projected to be 38.8% in the next three years [5]. The impact of the pandemic has accelerated the transition to more frequent online negotiations, agreements, presentations, and email communications. However, challenges persist in speaking and comprehension (See Figure 3).

Which online meeting tasks do you find difficult in English? Multiple answers (n=327)

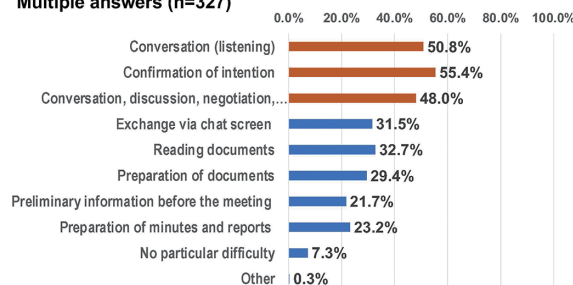


Figure 3. Difficulties found in online meetings.

While online conference tools can transcribe discussions, meeting participants often misinterpret non-native English. This situation emphasizes the need for training in initial listening and comprehension skills (See Figure 4).



Figure 4.1 Most respondents wanted corporate language training programs,

According to the survey results, "Business English Conversation" ranked first overall, with 62.1% of respondents wanting to see it added to training programs within their organizations. The second was "Presentations" at 50.5%, and third was "Negotiation" at 40%. The difference between the first- and third-place items was approximately 22%.

With the increase in participation in online meetings, there is a high demand for programs related to skills, such as presentations and meetings, which are directly related to work. Interestingly, many companies had been offering the above programs before the pandemic, but this survey item lists the programs that they would like to see in addition to their existing curricula.

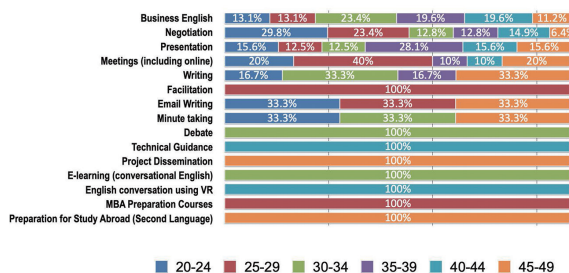


Figure.4.2 Most respondents wanted corporate language training programs organized by age group.

As Figure 4.2 shows, there is strong demand for business English across all age groups, while other skills such as facilitation, debate, technical guidance, and project dissemination were dominant only for certain age groups. Reflecting on active participation in online business activities for those aged 20 to 29, results showed interest in writing emails, taking minutes, and negotiating Business English.

New employees and those in the early stages of their business careers in business typically take CEFR-based Business English training programs that focus on situational business communication in general. However, they often find themselves regularly arranging online meetings with agendas and minutes attached to emails as well.

Those in middle management, aged between 30 and 40, aim to acquire Business English as their primary skill. However, their responses also show a competitive demand for presentation and meeting skills over Business English. Middle managers require practical Business English skills, such as the ability to engage in complex and lengthy discussions that build on their knowledge of human resources and management.

This indicates that a simple scene-by-scene study like a traditional coursebook would be insufficient. Therefore, the language education programs that are now being sought after are those that focus on skills for analyzing issues encountered in modern work situations, accurately interpreting messages, and sending messages that effectively communicate the learners' intentions.

Based on the available data, it can be inferred that the existing business English courses are effective in teaching fundamental language skills in professional settings. However, to further enhance the practicality of the learners' experience, it is crucial to explore the most effective methods of catering to their needs and preferences.

### 3-3. AI/Web Services Utilization

Advanced linguistic competencies are crucial in digital discourse. To mitigate language proficiency deficiencies, 72.6% resorted to AI or Internet-based language aids, with 74.5% confirming a decline in language obstructions (See Figure 5).

Do you feel that your own work has eliminated language barriers in your business by using AI and web-based automated translation, automated summarization, and automated sentence elaboration (grammar, style, and rewriting)? (n=255)

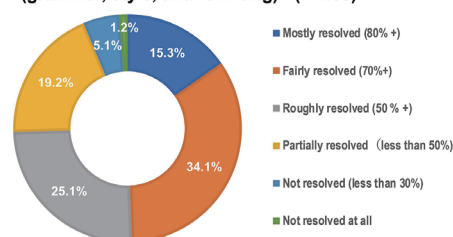


Figure 5. Utility of AI and web-based language assistance in reducing language barriers at work

Responses to the survey highlighted specific difficulties in translating specialized terms, with 78 respondents expressing this concern. The comments indicated a deficiency in vocabulary related to industry-specific, legal, and association terms. The accuracy of the translation remains a significant issue, with a notable demand for tools that can capture and represent nuances, particularly in Japan.

As we reviewed the responses, it became apparent that an overreliance on literal translations has resulted in the mistranslation of industrial jargon and technical terms, with consistent feedback suggesting a lack of contextual understanding of the tool. There is a need for the tool to be more human-like in its understanding and interpretation of content, especially in negotiations and with colloquial terms. Some users reported the tool taking liberties with translations without their command, leading to unintended translations. The survey results also indicated that 40% of respondents used free translation tools, suggesting room for improvement if more specialized or paid tools are used. However, further improvements in translation accuracy are still expected, as highlighted (See Figure 6).

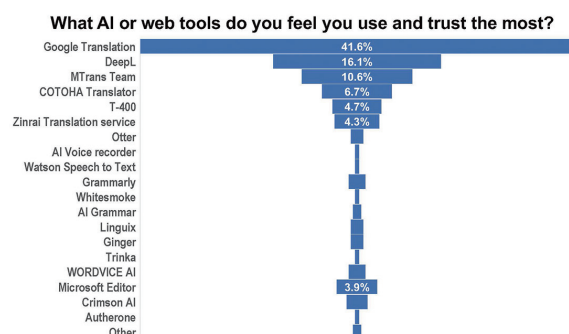


Figure 6. Preferences for AI and web-based automation tools on the job/at work

While these tools are appreciated for their current functionality, there is considerable scope for improvement, especially in terms of specialized terminology and nuance. Addressing these areas will greatly benefit users and enhance their experience. Thus, it is imperative to remember that, for the foreseeable future, human beings must evaluate and refine the output of AI based on their respective expertise.

#### 4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a paradigm shift in business operations and heightened the demand for industry-specific language proficiency. Our research indicates that Japanese professionals are increasingly utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) and web-based language tools to enhance their communication skills. As AI linguistic models advance and specialized vocabulary expands, their commercial utilization will become more widespread. Therefore, customized business English training that is tailored to the age and proficiency levels of individuals is crucial. Specifically, individuals in their twenties may benefit from training in email communication and minute-taking, while those in their thirties may focus on presentations and negotiations. Proper customization based on needs analysis can lead to increased cost efficiency for language training and better business outcomes.

Furthermore, as the role of AI in global communication continues to expand, it is increasingly critical to understand cultural nuances and value intercultural communicative expertise. While AI can assist in overcoming linguistic barriers, individuals must also rely on their intellect and specialized business communication knowledge to avoid an over-reliance on AI.

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