

## Trends in Japanese University Students' Interests as seen in Graduation Thesis Topics

### 卒業論文のテーマに見る日本の大学生の興味・関心の傾向

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#### Abstract

本研究では、日本の大学生が文学よりも、文化的な話題や英語コミュニケーションに重点を置いた勉強に興味を持つようになってきているという傾向を検証するために、2011年から2021年までの日本の大学4年生277名分の卒業論文のテーマについて調査をした。論文のテーマを「文学」「文化」「言語学」の3つに分類し、その傾向を時系列で把握した結果、2011年と2012年は、文学に焦点を当てたテーマと文化に焦点を当てたテーマの数はほぼ同じであった。しかし、2013年以降は、文化に焦点を当てたテーマが多くなっていることがわかった。これは、文学から文化やコミュニケーションに焦点を当てたプログラムへの体系的な移行が影響しているものであり、本研究で明らかになった傾向は今後も続くと思われる。

#### Introduction

It has become a commonly agreed upon sentiment that Japanese university English major students' interests have shifted away from the formerly mainstream interest in English literature toward an interest in more general, culturally focused topics. Despite this common understanding, there has been little research to formally quantify this shift. One prime example of this trend is in an internet search of websites about Japanese university students and literature, only one student voice page on the Toyo University's website from 2013 was found. On that page, the student interviewed expressed that, "They feel the fun and difficulty of studying literature and exchanging one's opinions." However, this student admitted that their studies focused more on short stories and anime than on western literature.

One reason for this perceived shift in interest may be due to institutional changes that have been enforced by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). In 2015, MEXT pushed national universities to decrease the number of humanities departments (Grove), which focused on teaching literature. However, this effort by MEXT was rebuffed and has since slightly reversed (Grove), but its effects are still being seen in today's university students. This shift is not new, as Tatsuki and Zenuk-Nishide observed that, "Teaching and learning literature in English has devolved from being a core part of the English language curriculum to near non-existence" (40), and that this is in sharp contrast from decades before when learning literature was at the core of English language teaching in Japan. Kurotani also documented the shift in students' interests from theoretical or esoteric studies toward more professionally oriented majors primarily due to financial considerations for university and thereafter in the workforce. This paper attempts to codify Japanese university students' shift in interests away from literature toward more general culture by examining the self-selected topics of graduation theses by 4<sup>th</sup> year English major students at a private university in northern Japan over an 11-year period.

## Literature Review

Burton's beginning statement about English-language literature study in Japan captures the current state quite well: "The current state of English-language literature teaching within tertiary education in Japan is seemingly a precarious one" (112). In their qualitative study of Japanese lecturers' and university students' opinions about the teaching of literature, Burton stated that one cause of the decrease in students' interest in studying literature is the decrease in the numbers of humanities departments within which literature is a main focus of study. Also, an overall decrease in Japanese university students' English proficiency is noted as a cause for fewer students wanting to engage with literature that is by definition, complex and difficult to understand for non-native speakers—and often for native speakers as well.

Fraser agreed that MEXT's recent changes to the Courses of Study which provide guidance for primary and secondary education have focused more on improving learners' communication skills to the detriment of the study of literature. This change in focus is even more prevalent in the requirements for educating future English teachers which have advocated for focusing on developing future teachers' communication abilities over knowledge of deep culture such as literature and philosophy (Fraser, 20). Despite these systemic changes, Fraser's quantitative study of Japanese university students about their reading beliefs and habits, found that three quarters of the participants stated a liking of reading books in Japanese or English (24). But two thirds of the respondents also admitted to reading rarely or never (24). Fraser's findings indicated that Japanese university students are not entirely opposed to studying literature, but that they are not exposed to the study of native language literature. Instead, students were more often reading texts that were graded for English learners (25) because of the perception by educators that the students' language abilities were insufficient to fully understand a study of literary works (23).

Like Burton, Yahya also explained the downward trend of English proficiency levels among Japanese university students as a strong factor in the decline of students wanting to study about English literature (26). Another cause for this decline in students' interest in literature is the most common method in which it is taught in both secondary and tertiary education: by using the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) (Yahya). GTM teaches literature primarily through sentence-by-sentence translation from English to Japanese, thereby leading students to learn about English literature in their own Japanese language. Doing so hinders students from developing a direct connection with the literary work, so the interest in the works of literature is not easily developed or nurtured. Burton also found that both students and teachers dislike the currently used GTM when teaching literature, but neither group feels empowered to change the system.

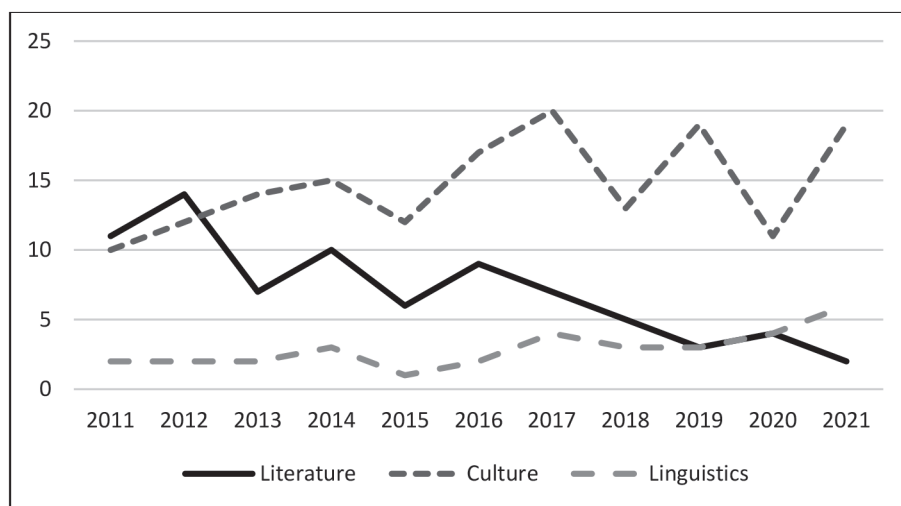
Finally, Japanese university students have changed their reasons for learning English from a desire for general knowledge in English that included understanding of classic literature, to more practical English skills which focus more on intercultural understanding and communication skills (Morita). In their quantitative study of Japanese public university students, Morita found that students' conceptualization of English focused on English as an international language (32), and their perception of a strong need for English communications skills to be able to work in the future (36). Morita's study found that Japanese university students see intercultural communications skills as necessary for Japan to integrate into the international community (39), so their interests turn more toward intercultural studies that will give them improved employment prospects in meaningful careers (Kurotani).

## Method

Due to the lack of previous research into changing trends in Japanese university students' interests, there were no previous studies to replicate in this study. So the author chose to review students' self-selected graduation thesis topics as a way to observe what the students' interests were. The population observed were 4th year English major students at a private university in northern Japan. Graduation thesis topics (n=277) from 2011 through 2021 were reviewed and categorized into three interest areas: literature, culture, and linguistics. An example of a literature-focused thesis is, "Supernatural Beings in British Literature" (Kabutomori). An example of a culturally focused thesis is, "Japanese and Foreigner's National Character and Cultural Difference as Seen from the Differences of Gesture" (Nara). An example of a linguistically focused thesis is, "Consider the difference between Japanese and English communication style from the viewpoint of politeness" (Tonosaki). In the instances where the categorization was difficult—such as with the title, "The Life of Agatha Christie" (Hanada), the text was reviewed to establish the content of the thesis, in this case the thesis was more about the author's life than their literary works, so it was categorized as a culturally focused thesis. The thesis titles and abstracts are openly available on the internet and no data were collected directly from students, so no informed consent was necessary and there were no ethical concerns involved in this study.

## Results and Discussion

The line graph below (Figure 1) shows the changes in interests as demonstrated by the graduation thesis topics over the course of the 11 years' worth of data reviewed.



**Fig. 1.** Line graph showing the numbers of theses in each category from 2011 to 2021.

Figure 1 shows that in 2011 and 2012, the number of culture and literature topics were roughly the same (literature=11 and culture=10), however starting from 2013 the numbers diverged, and culturally focused graduation thesis topics became more preferable to the sample population. This trend continued in 2021 with 19 cultural topics being chosen to the 2 literature-focused topics.

Given the decline in Japanese university students' actual experience in reading literature (Fraser), and the decline in general shift of the focus of education from literature toward more

culturally centered, communications-oriented goals (Burton; Kurotani), this trend can be expected to continue into the near future. One factor that Fraser suggests might reverse this trend is the recent growth in the use of Extensive Reading—a language learning approach in which “learners read extensively, they read very easy, enjoyable books to build their reading speed and fluency… students learn to read by actually reading” (ER-Central). However, Extensive Reading is not strongly practiced in this study’s environment, so its effects may not have a strong influence on the given population sample.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research** In this study, the data were only coded by one researcher, so for clearer analysis, future research in this area should include coding by a second researcher. Also, this study focused solely on the population of English-major students at a private university; future research could also explore whether similar trends are seen in populations with other majors.

## Conclusion

In order to verify a trend noticed by the author that Japanese university students were becoming less and less interested in English literature and more interested in studying cultural topics and focusing on English communication, this study reviewed the self-selected graduation thesis topics of 277 Japanese university 4th year students from 2011 to 2021. An exploration of the literature in the field yielded minimal existing research into this area, so this pioneering research reviewed the thesis topics and categorized them into three focus areas: literature, culture, and linguistics, in order to detect any trends that developed over time.

The data revealed that in 2011 and 2012, the numbers of literature-focused and culturally focused thesis topics were about the same, but that they diverged thereafter and have continued to grow further apart until today with culturally focused topics being vastly preferred in recent years. This supports trends in Japanese university education that show systemic moves away from literature toward culture and communications-focused programs (Burton; Fraser; Kurotani). Given the current educational trends focusing less on literature (Fraser), the trend of students’ interests moving away from literature and toward interest in cultural topics identified in this study would be expected to continue.

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