

# An education program for improving English language skills of Design students in Japan

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**Abstract:** This report describes the development of an education program targeted to improve English language skills of Department of Industrial Design students in Japan. Although English communication capability is essential for career development in the present day global market, university design curricula make learning English a challenge. Since most students start learning design after matriculation, they tend to give lower priority to English. Therefore, a Design English program was initiated to motivate students to continue learning English. Under the program, English presentation material was co-developed by design students and International Culture majors. Design students gave final presentations in English to a diverse audience including professional designers. We expected the following factors to heighten design students' motivation: the new experience of collaboration with students from a different department; stimulus from students more tuned to improve their English skills; confidence building through brushing up presentation materials; and communication with foreign professional designers from a corporation. Design students participated more actively in discussions when professional designers were in the audience. This result underscores the importance of connecting English studies with design education to create relevance. Design students had a heightened awareness toward the study of English, and some students substantially improved proficiency in English through continued study.

**Key words:** *Design, English, Education, Collaboration*

## 1. Introduction

Design students generally are not motivated to study English even though Faculties of Design at Japanese Universities have compulsory English requirements. This is a phenomenon that has persisted for a long time. When one of the authors of this report visited design universities in South Korea and China, she recognized a similar educational situation, with the exception of elite universities such as KAIST and SADI. One of the reasons contributing to this problem is that most design students start education on specific subjects related to design after matriculation; therefore, English is given a lower priority. This situation is reasonable because design skills are more valued than language skills even at the university recruitment stage. However, young designers who are

chosen for their design skills will have to improve their English after they start working. In recent years, not only markets but also production facilities have been located overseas. Furthermore, increased interest in design in emerging countries in Asia has led to a rise in the number of designers that may work outside of Japan. These trends make it crucial for designers to be skilled in English; in particular, product designers need skills. Under these circumstances, recent English language teaching aims at the following: 1) nurturing basic English skills, 2) improving practical English ability to cope in society, and 3) developing practical English in one's own specialized field [10]. With these points in mind, instructors at Shizuoka University of Art and Culture (SUAC) tried to emphasize items 2) and 3), which not only nurture English language skills but also enhance student motivation by giving them a deeper understanding of the purposes for learning English.

## **2. Purpose of Research**

The ultimate goal of this research is to develop an English education program that will improve the skills of design students, and to report on the results of the intermediate stages of the project.

## **3. Research Process**

In planning the program, a few assumptions were made regarding its effectiveness; interviews were conducted and a questionnaire was given during and after the program to verify the assumptions. In 2011, students of the Department of International Culture and the Department of Industrial Design were surveyed, but in 2012, only the Industrial Design students were surveyed. The results were analyzed and problems for future program implementation were deducted. The program was initiated in 2011. It was well received by students, faculty, staff, and university management. Therefore, new ideas were added in 2012. This report focuses on the results of the 2012 program.

## **4. Program Outline**

Students who are highly motivated to learn design specific subjects quite often do not show similar enthusiasm toward English learning. The authors assumed that this tendency arose from a lack of motivation, and concluded that real world experience of using English [10] would change students' way of thinking. Therefore, a decision was made to experiment with a design English program to enable design students to understand the importance of English skill improvement and consequently raise their level of motivation to study English.

Shizuoka University of Art and Culture is comprised of two Faculties: the Faculty of Cultural Policy and Management, and the Faculty of Design. The former has three departments including the Department of International Culture, and the latter has three departments including the Department of Industrial Design (Figure. 1). The design English program is a collaborative effort comprised of students enrolled in the English Diploma Course (an advanced level two-year English program for International Culture majors) and Industrial Design majors who have opted to study assigned topics taught by the Industrial Design faculty. The total number of participants were 46 with twenty-three students from each department participating.

The procedure was as follows: Design students tackled the design topics for the first nine weeks of the spring semester, while EDC students continued their presentation skills training during the same period. On the tenth week, the design students made presentations to the EDC students. After the presentation, EDC students chose

partners for the rest of the semester. Students from both departments then joined forces to make their final presentation materials, through discussion, with occasional revisions against the original. On the 15th week, their presentation was done. It was open to university staff not directly involved in the program or education. Six presentations were picked to be shown to invited foreign designers from an international corporation. The development process throughout the semester is given in Figure 1, for 2011 and 2012 respectively. (Figure. 2) The program was run by two native English speakers responsible for EDC, two Japanese Industrial Design professors, and one design professor who volunteered to be involved. This program is still in a trial stage before the university undergoes a curriculum reform; therefore in 2011 and 2012, only the last five weeks of the semester were dedicated to the collaboration.

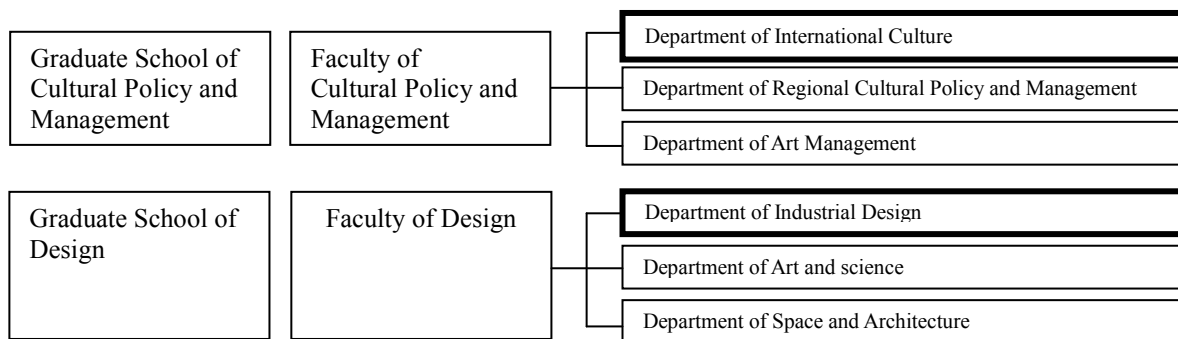


Figure. 1

## 5. Assumptions on the Program Effectiveness

The authors assumed that the program would have the following effects:

- Enhanced motivation through direct communication with students in a different department;
- Stimulation from students actively involved in English learning;
- Confidence in English through step-by-step improvement of presentation materials; and
- Real world experience of using English through direct dialogue with foreign designers.

2011		
1	Orientation	STAGE 1
2	Research presentation	
	Research & Report	
3	Idea discussion	
	Idea development	
4	Decision on ideas	
	Image of presentation	
5	Mockup planning	
	Mockup design	
6	Mockup making 1	
	Presentation plan	
7	Mockup making 2	
	Presentation design 1	
8	Mockup making 3	
	Presentation design 2	
9	Mockup making 4	
	Presentation design 3	
10	1st Presentation (in Japanese)	STAGE 2
	Refine	
11	Mockup making 5	STAGE 3
	Presentation design (English)	
12	Mockup making 6	
	Presentation design revision	
13	Mockup making 7	
	Presentation design revision	
14	Pre Final Presentation	
15	Final Presentation (All teams)	STAGE 4

2012		
1	Orientation	STAGE 1
	Research & Report	
2	Research presentation	
	Idea development	
3	Idea discussion	
	Idea development	
4	Decision on ideas	
	Image of presentation	
5	Mock up planning	
	Mockup design	
6	Mockup making 1	
	Presentation plan	
7	Mockup making 2	
	Presentation design 1	
8	Mockup making 3	
	Presentation design 2	
9	Mockup making 4	
	Presentation design 3	
10	Cancelled by Typhoon!	STAGE 2
11	1st Presentation 1 (Japanese)	STAGE 2
	Refine	
12	1st Presentation 2 (Japanese)	STAGE 3
	Refine	
13	Design revision	STAGE 3
	Design revision	
14	Presentation revision	STAGE 4
	Final Presentation (12 teams)	
15	Presentation revision	STAGE 4
	Final Presentation (11 teams)	
16	Presentation to foreign designers (6 teams only)	STAGE 5
	Discussion	

Figure. 2

## **6. Program Implementation Processes**

### Stage 1: Design proposal development by design students

Similar design development steps were taken for nine weeks. Usually, fifteen weeks are used from planning to presentation. This trial program, however, made it necessary for students to complete their proposal in ten weeks. The reduced time made students more focused, and their presentations helped to enhance their motivation. The compression of time was compensated for with various measures, including ad hoc advice to students outside of assigned class time as necessary.

### Stage 2: Presentation of Design Proposal to EDC Students

The first stage of the collaborative program starts with design students presenting their outcomes to EDC students. EDC students then chose which presentation is to their liking, and a partnership is formed. The Design students were more attentive in their preparation because they knew that the presentation was to students who are not familiar with technical design terms and methodology, and they were keen to be chosen for the partnership. Some of the students realized issues they had forgotten when some EDC students asked questions from a lay person's viewpoint.

### Stage 3: Improvement of Presentation through collaboration

Each pair worked hard to improve their ideas and the way they are presented. EDC students occasionally made revision to design proposals, and both students proceeded toward better presentations. At this stage, everyone was in one lecture room, and teachers from both faculties gave their advice from their area of specialty. They also assisted students to finalize their presentation scenarios.

Some EDC students had the impression that efforts to convey the key concept of proposals are difficult but worth trying. Design students who have been hesitant to speak English because they are not good at English were given stimulation through evidencing the EDC students' positive attitude in communication with non-perfect English. They say they were motivated.

### Stage 4: Presentation in English to faculty, students, and university staff

Design students made the presentation, and questions and answers were handled by both students. The presentations were open to the university community and the schedule was publicly announced. It drew an audience not only from within the Faculty of Design but also from the other Faculty and the university administrators, which evidenced the high level of interest from teaching staff and the management. On the other hand, very few students came.

Before the presentation, design students were encouraged to prepare questions in English. Students, therefore, exchanged their predetermined questions and answers with each other, which unfortunately led to rather awkward discussions. On the other hand, EDC students quite often raised appropriate questions, and EDC students sometimes responded on behalf of design students who were not good at English.

### Stage 5: Presentation in English to foreign designers

After the presentations in Stage 4, six proposals were chosen to be presented to two foreign designers (one from

France and the other from Denmark) currently working at a Japanese corporation. In order to allow frank and informal discussion to happen, the presentation session was only open to students and teaching staff. The presentation scenario was already at an adequate level as a result of advice from the native faculty, but six pairs of students conducted further revisions with the assistance from other teaching staff. During the presentation to the foreign designers, design students seemed to be more positive in their effort to answer questions. Four students asked the foreign designers questions during free discussion after the presentation session, and three were design students. Furthermore, many design students eagerly continued talking with the foreign designers after the session (Figs. 3 & 4).



Figure. 3



Figure. 4

## 7. Outcome of the Program Implementation

A questionnaire was distributed to design students six months after the program concluded to learn about their impressions of the program and any changes they adopted with regards to the study of English and level of motivation after the program concluded. Nineteen students out of twenty-three replied. The items on the survey are listed below followed by results and comments.

Q1: Are you studying English outside of the university curricula? Do you plan to start English learning?

Among the 19 students, 12 replied that they started something. The other 7 gave reasons for not studying English (see figure 5). Half of them cited a lack of time (there are other things with a higher priority). It means that if English learning is recognized as a thing-to-do with higher priority, learning motivation will increase.

Q2: Why did you choose this topic?

Only 11% (i.e., 2 students) replied that they were interested in English presentation. All others chose the program because of the topic or the specialty of the teaching staff (see figure 6).

Q3: Did you wish to make an English presentation to foreign designers?

Although only a few students were interested in English presentation at the beginning, 13 students (68%) replied that they wanted to present. All of them replied that they would like to make an English presentation if they had another chance (see figure 7).

Q4: Did this collaborative program help decrease the hurdle toward speaking English?

About a half of the students replied positively (see figure 8). Free answers included such comments like: English skill of EDC students was fascinating; or, EDC students' efforts toward English made me reconsider my own attitude. There was a comment during the semester by design students that they were surprised to know that EDC students were struggling to communicate in English even though they were not perfect. This fact persuaded them to try the same.

Q5: Was this collaborative program worthwhile?

About three quarters of the students answered definitely yes. If we add those answers with yes, 85% were positive (figure 9). It was evidenced by free answers like "I had no command of English, but collaboration with EDC students gave me confidence to tackle the task."

Q6: Are you willing to participate in a similar collaboration program?

Compared to the previous question, positive answers to this item dropped to 69% (figure 10). The authors assume

the reason was that the design process was compressed into ten weeks compared with the usual design proposal studio activities, which uses a full fifteen weeks. It was definitely a hard schedule for students to finish. There was another factor: in 2011, only eleven teams participated, but in 2012 there were twenty-three teams. It led to the presentation extending for two weeks instead of one. Besides, bad weather conditions due to a typhoon forced the cancellation of one week's studio activity, which also resulted in tight scheduling.

Since questionnaires were not distributed to EDC students in 2012, we have only the responses in 2011, but the positive results of 92% to Q5, and 85% to Q6 suggest the effectiveness of the program for them as well.

**Q7: Free Comments:**

Most comments are positive, including two students reporting that they started learning English after the program and their TOEIC score jumped up by about 100 points. However, one student was not satisfied because s/he cared too much about the English presentation and could not think about design as desired. Another design student was unhappy because s/he could not make a good working relationship with his/her EDC partner.

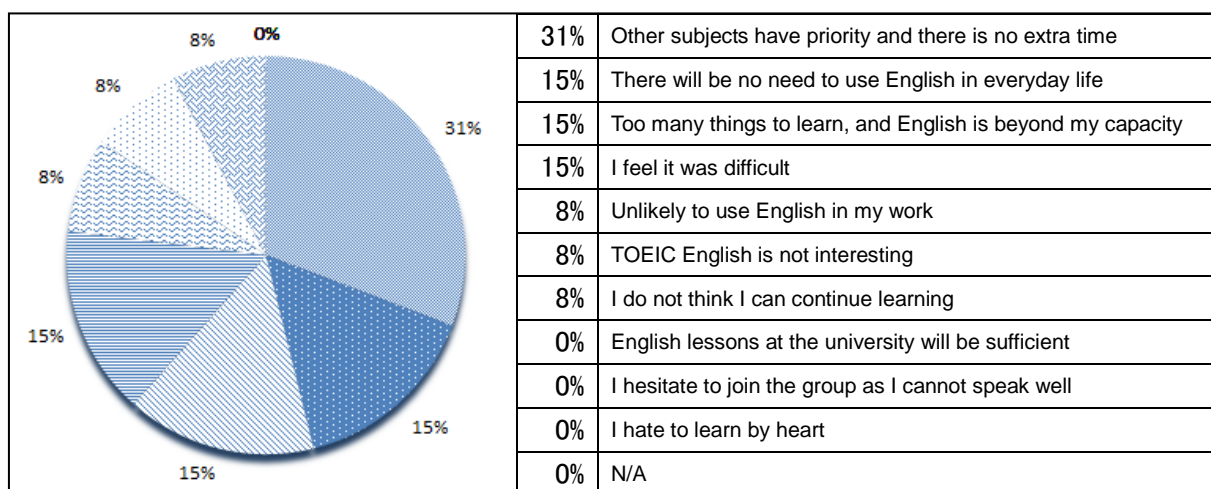


Figure. 5 Reason for not studying English for now (Multiple answers allowed).

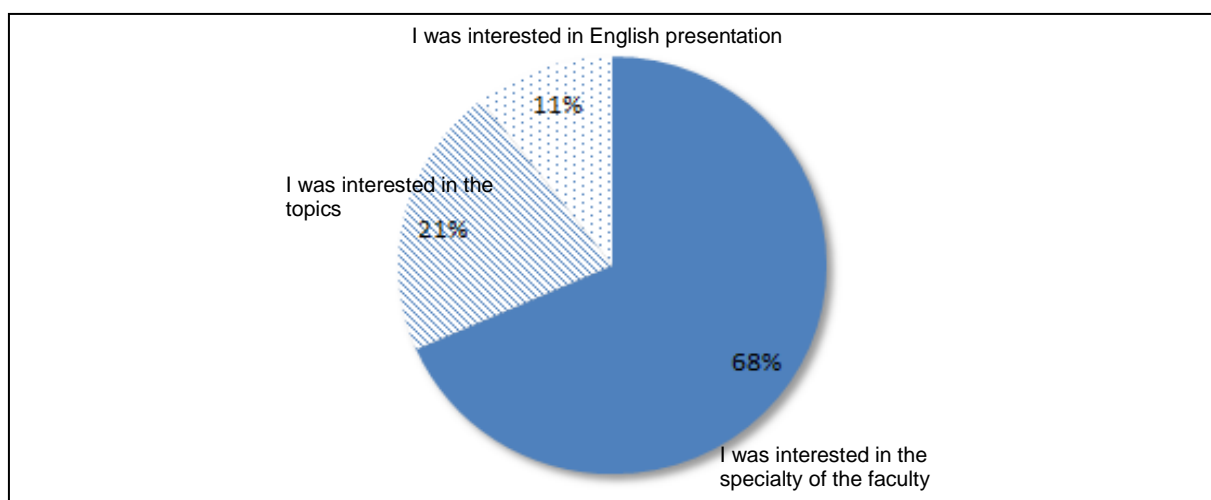


Figure. 6 Why did you choose this topic?



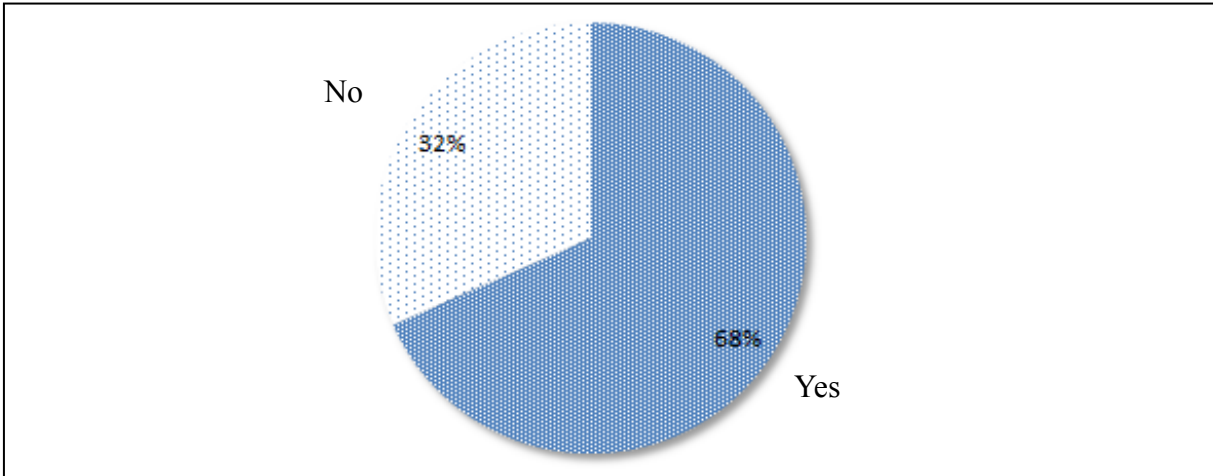


Figure. 7 Did you wish to make an English presentation to foreign designers?

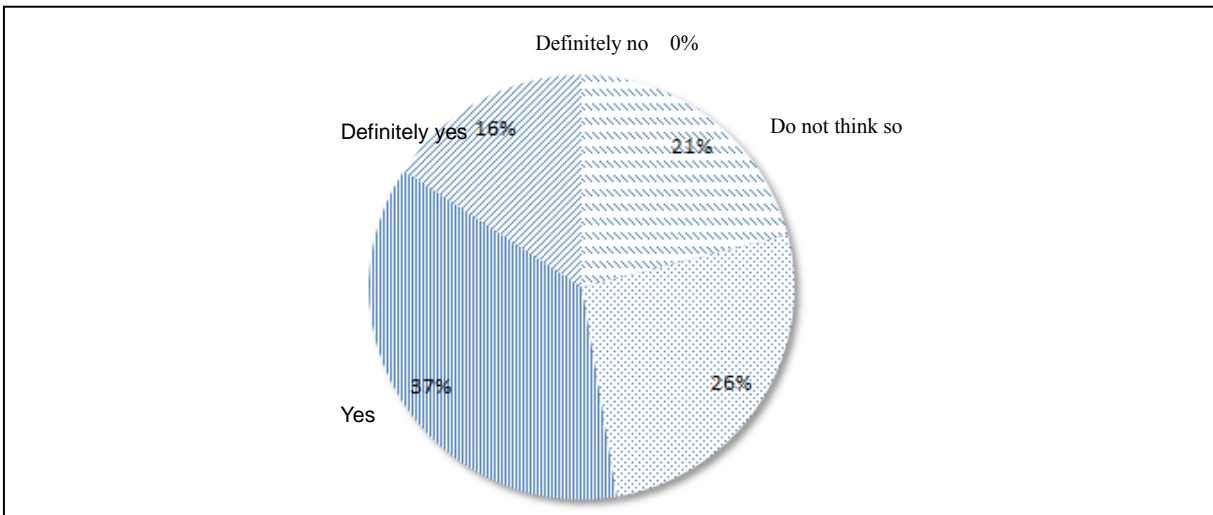


Figure. 8 Did this collaborative program help decrease the hurdle toward speaking English?

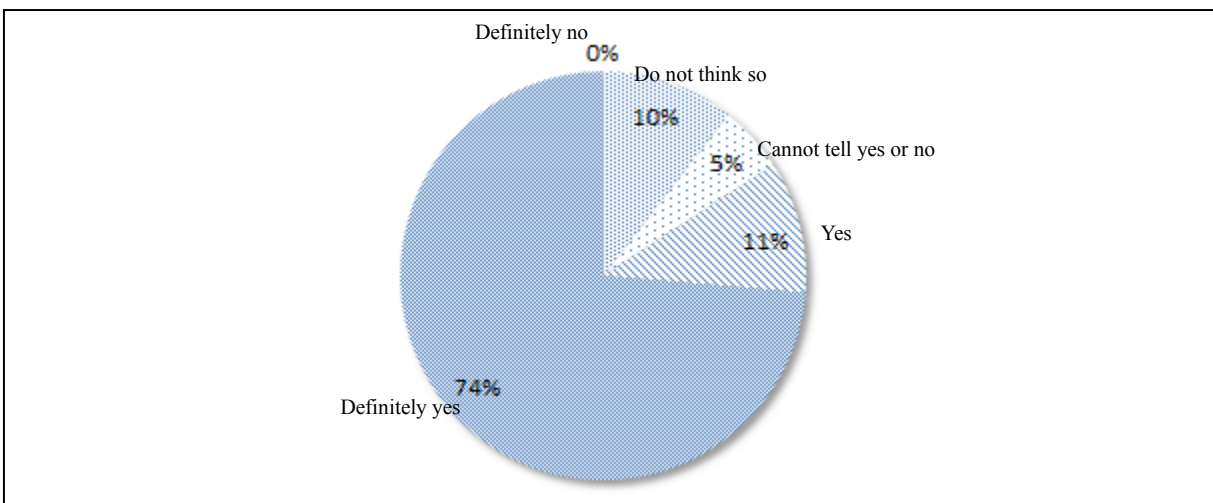


Figure. 9 Was this collaborative program worthwhile?

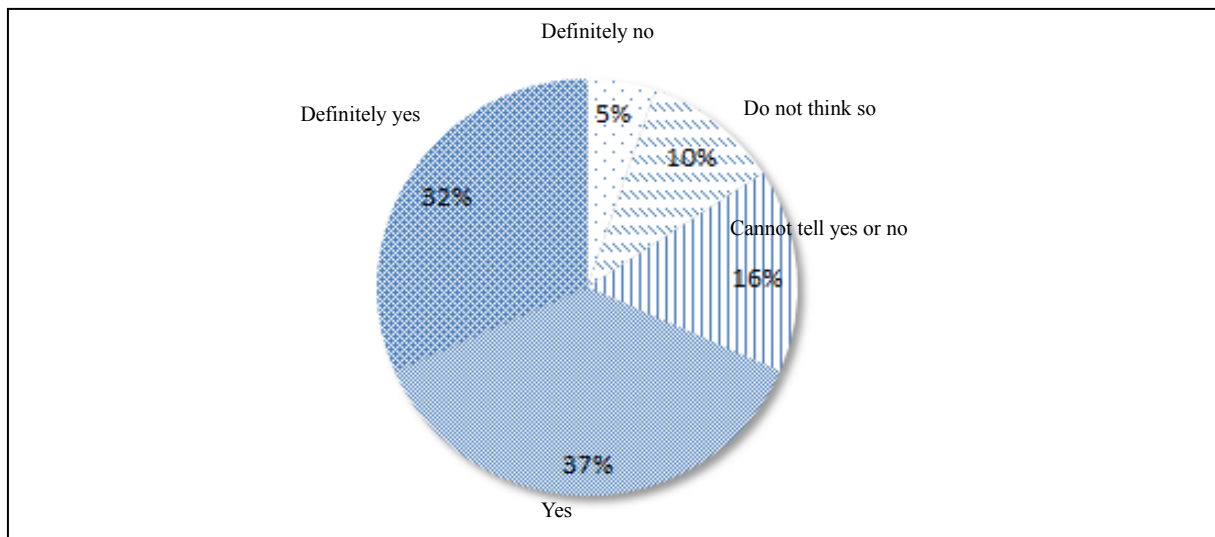


Figure. 10 Are you willing to participate in a similar program?

## 8. Conclusion

The above results suggest that the expected targets of this trial educational program were reached. Collaboration with students specializing in English, teamwork, step-by-step improvement, and presentation to foreign designers, all of these experiences will contribute to increased motivation among design students.

## 9. Perspectives for the future

The program was in its trial stage in 2011 and 2012, and had to comply with the existing time frame, which resulted in a very tight schedule. The number of students participating fluctuated from 11 to 23, since there was no official way to control enrollment in the program. For effective guidance to occur, the number of students has to be limited, including the number of EDC students. Furthermore, the current business environment in Japan might lead to difficulty in recruiting foreign designers to join presentation sessions in the future. If such is the case, the authors have to find some alternatives to raise students' motivation.

The program asks students to make a presentation in English. However, the authors would like to include other types of practical English study, including scenes such as brainstorming, negotiation, and discussion being done in English in the future. It would require upgrading the overall English skills of design students and raising motivation to a higher level so that students can persevere through these difficult learning stages.

## 10. Summary

This collaboration program raised the motivation of design students to study English, and some students continued to improve their English skills after completion of the program.

Design students' hesitance to use English was eased, and motivation heightened, through cooperation with EDC students, with repeated presentations, and the prospect of possible discussion with foreign designers. EDC students, who were generally asked to learn English without active involvement, were given a practical occasion of business settings where they can experience quasi-real world settings. Collaboration with students from a different department gave them an opportunity to reconsider their specialties, and to some extent gave them

confidence in their own abilities. It is perhaps one of the merits of studying in a university with diverse departments (as compared to design specific colleges). The questionnaire results clearly showed that this cooperative learning [7] proved to be worthwhile for all parties involved.

## 10. Acknowledgments

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## Note

This is an expanded version of a paper titled “Design English Collaboration and Presentation: Developing International Designers at a Japanese University (Mark D. Sheehan, et al.)” to be presented at The 2nd International Conference for Design Education Researchers, with further analysis on the outcome of the second year of the project.

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