

《 Original Article 》

A Follow-up Survey of Registered Salesclerks after Seminars on Using English with Non-Japanese Customers in OTC Environments

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Based on the findings of a report on registered salesclerks in Tokyo in 2018, training seminars were planned and held in July 2019 to help improve the ability of registered salesclerks to communicate with non-Japanese customers in English when selling OTC medicines. After the seminars, the participants were surveyed about what they learned and their use of foreign languages when counseling non-Japanese customers on the buying and use of OTC medicines.

Three months after these English seminars, a follow-up survey was conducted and the participants were almost the same as the those who took the English seminars (86.5%). Our objective was fourfold. Did the participants find the English seminars meaningful? What influence did the English seminars have on the participants in terms of their language studies and/or usage, and if so, how? We also wanted to learn if there were any changes made in work environments to better communicate with non-Japanese customers. And lastly, did the participants want to continue to study English in a seminar format?

Key findings of the follow-up survey showed that 80% of the participants found the English seminars meaningful to one extent or another. Second, there was a positive effect in terms of motivating a majority of the registered salesclerks to think about their English skills to communicate with non-Japanese customers. Furthermore, there were also actual changes made by some of the participants in their workplaces. Finally, many participants (71.9%) responded that they wanted to participate in more English seminars to help them sell OTC medicines to non-Japanese customers.

Key words; registered salesclerks, foreign languages, OTC drugs, English education

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of non-Japanese visitors to Japan has increased steadily. Government figures on visitors to Japan show that in the first six months of 2019, over 16.6 million people had visited Japan for an increase of 4.6% from the same period in 2018¹⁾.

In 2018, a survey of registered salesclerks in Tokyo by Ujiie, et al. showed that a majority of them (51.9%), had experience responding to non-Japanese customers in a foreign language and a vast majority of the clerks, 86.4%, were trying to use English²⁾. Further results of the same survey also showed that only 67.7% of the clerks were somewhat able to follow what customers were saying in English but were often unable to express themselves well, i.e. speak English.

Based on those results, a series of three seminars were then planned by the Tokyo Metropolitan Druggist Association and held in July of 2019 to help the registered salesclerks to improve their English skills – the language that was most often being used by the previously surveyed druggists. At the end of each seminar, the participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire and the results were published in a report by Skier, et al³⁾.

Therefore, in this study, three months after the English seminars, we conducted this follow-up survey to investigate what effect, if any, the seminars had on the registered salesclerks. In particular, we wanted to see whether our English seminars had been meaningful or not. Next, we wanted to see if their thoughts on communicating in English had changed. Thirdly, we wanted to learn if there had been actions taken, i.e. implementation of

tools to help communicate with non-Japanese customers or if the registered salesclerks had been motivated to study English. Lastly, we asked them whether they wanted to participate in future English seminars to further improve their skills.

In the end, the purpose of this study, as well as the previous one, is to investigate the ability of registered salesclerks to provide information in a foreign language so non-Japanese customers can use OTC medicines properly and safely.

2. Methods

1. Seminars and Survey

Three months after the English seminars, in October of 2019, the Tokyo Metropolitan Druggist Association held a series of seminars unrelated to the English ones. These seminars presented us the opportunity to conduct a follow-up survey of the registered salesclerks. All of the participants had the freedom to participate by filling out the survey or not and this was explained to them prior to the beginning of the seminars. The present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board for Utilization of Human Tissue, Etc. for Research of Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life Sciences (2019-019).

2. Overview of the questionnaire content

We first asked the participants to provide some personal information, i.e. work history, sex, and age. To protect the participants' private information, we did not ask questions that could be used to identify individual respondents. We explained that the results of the survey would be published in an academic journal, individuals would not be identified, and the subjects could respond only after

giving consent.

The follow-up questionnaire style allowed for the participants to circle their response or write a free response. Question C is novel to this report, “Do you think it is necessary to use a foreign language when selling OTC drugs?” but Question D is the same as Question A of our previous report³⁾ (Fig. 1). Questions E and F were directly related to the previous English seminars of July 2019. They were, “Do you think the previous series of English seminars had meaning?” And “After the English seminars, on a personal level or at work, was there an increase in your thoughts about how to communicate in English?” Questions G-J then asked about what changes were made, if any, at the participants’ workplaces. Question G was, “Presently, what skills development seminars or tools is your drugstore or pharmacy offering to help you learn how to communicate with non-Japanese patients?” Question H was, “After the English seminars, have you introduced any skills development seminars or tools?” Question I was, “In the future, what preparations or tools are you planning to introduce?” And Question J was, “In the future, do you want your drugstore or pharmacy to hold a seminar on OTC medicine sales in foreign languages?” There was one last question (K) that was partially related to the previous seminars and it was, “In the future, what kind of content do you want in your OTC medicine sales seminars?” As in the first questionnaire, we also allowed for the participants to write freely on two occasions. The first was in response to Question E and the second was at the end of the survey where we allowed the participants to, “Write freely about using a foreign language to communicate with non-Japanese customers.”

3. Results

1. Background of the participants

In the follow-up survey, 689 questionnaires were distributed. We collected 668 responses with two of them being returned blank for a total of 666 valid responses for a response rate of 96.7%. When asked if they had participated in the English seminars in July 2019, 576 (86.5%) replied, “yes.” The work history of the participants (total experience as a pharmaceutical product seller or registered salesclerk) was an average of 11.9 years. The participants were mostly female 422 (73.3%) with the remaining 148 male (25.7%) and six no answers (1.0%). The breakdown of the participants by age was as follows: in their 20s, 9 people (1.6%); 30s, 92 people (16.0%); 40s, 158 people (27.4%); 50s, 170 people (29.5%); 60s, 96 people (16.7%); 70s, 35 people (6.1%); 80s, 2 people (0.3%); and no response, 14 people (2.4%). These results were similar to those of our first survey³⁾.

2. Necessity of using a foreign language when selling OTC drugs

In response to Question C, “Do you think it is necessary to use a foreign language when selling OTC drugs?” we received 576 responses: 15 participants (2.6%) responded “It is not necessary.” Thirty-six (6.3%) responded “It is a little unnecessary.” After that, the rest of the respondents replied that it was necessary to some degree or another with 253 responses (43.9%) saying, “It is a little necessary.” And 264 responses (45.8%) saying, “It is necessary.” Only eight participants (1.4%) had no answer.

Your cooperation in responding to this questionnaire to enhance future lifelong learning workshops and improve the skills of registered salesclerk is appreciated. To help inform others, the results of the questionnaire will be published in an academic journal "Pharmaceutical" magazine issued by the Tokyo Prefecture Registered Pharmaceutical Product Salesclerk Association, or used in lifelong learning workshops, academic papers, or conference presentations; because data will be collectively processed using statistics, individuals will never be identified. Please respond with a relaxed mind.

- A. Did you participate in the previous English seminars?
1. Yes
 2. No
- B. How long have you worked as a pharmaceutical product seller? Registered salesclerk?
- What is your gender?
1. Male
 2. Female
 3. No answer
- What is your age?
1. 20s
 2. 30s
 3. 40s
 4. 50s
 5. 60s
 6. 70s
 7. 80s
 8. No answer
- C. Do you think it is necessary to use a foreign language when selling OTC drugs?
1. It is not necessary
 2. It is a little unnecessary
 3. It is a little necessary
 4. It is necessary
 5. No answer
- D. Do you have experience using a foreign language when selling OTC drugs?
1. Every day
 2. A few times a week
 3. A times a month
 4. A few times a year
 5. In my work experience, only a few times
 6. Never
 7. No answer

Fig. 1 Follow-up Survey of Registered Salesclerks (1/3)

- E. Do you think the previous series of English seminars had meaning?
 1. There was no meaning.
 2. There was not much meaning.
 3. There was some meaning.
 4. There was meaning.
 5. No answer

- F. After the English seminars, on a personal level or at work, was there an increase in your thoughts about how to communicate in English?
 1. There was an increase.
 2. On a personal level there was an increase but not at work.
 3. There was no increase.
 4. No answer

- G. Presently, what skills development seminars or tools is your drugstore offering to help you communicate with non-Japanese customers?
 1. None
 2. We have English seminars or classes to learn how to simply communicate in a foreign language.
 3. On the shelves, we have signs in foreign languages on drug efficacy and products for sale.
 4. On the products, we have pictures or symbols in foreign languages on drug efficacy.
 5. On the products, we have pictures or symbols in foreign languages on drug efficacy.
 6. We have smartphones or tablets to help communicate in foreign languages.
 7. We have patient surveys in foreign languages.
 8. We have drug explanations in foreign languages.
 9. We have a translation device.
 10. Other
 11. No answer

- H. After the English seminars, have you introduced any skills development seminars or tools?
 1. None
 2. We have English seminars or classes to learn how to simply communicate in a foreign language.
 3. On the shelves, we have signs in foreign languages on drug efficacy and products for sale.
 4. On the products, we have pictures or symbols in foreign languages on drug efficacy.
 5. We have cards with various languages for customers to point at to confirm the purpose of their visit, their symptoms, etc and to counsel them on taking medicines.
 6. We have smartphones or tablets to help communicate in foreign languages.
 7. We have patient surveys in foreign languages.
 8. We have drug explanations in foreign languages.
 9. We have a translation device.
 10. Other
 11. No answer

Fig. 1 Follow-up Survey of Registered Salesclerks (2/3)

I. In the future, what preparations or tools are you planning to introduce?

1. None
2. We have English seminars or classes to learn how to simply communicate in a foreign language
3. On the shelves, we have signs in foreign languages on drug efficacy and products for sale
4. On the products, we have pictures or symbols in foreign languages on drug efficacy
5. We have cards with various languages for customers to point at to confirm the purpose of their visit, their symptoms, etc and to counsel them on taking medicines
6. We have smartphones or tablets to help communicate in foreign languages
7. We have patient surveys in foreign languages
8. We have drug explanations in foreign languages
9. We have a translation device
10. Other
11. No answer

J. In the future, do you want your drugstore or pharmacy to hold a seminar on OTC medicine sales in foreign languages?

1. I don't think so
2. I kind of don't think so
3. I kind of think so
4. I think so
5. No answer

K. In the future, what kind of content do you want in your OTC medicines sales seminars?

1. The same as was held before (English)
2. Any kind of seminar (like one on Chinese herbal medicines)
3. No answer

Fig. 1 Follow-up Survey of Registered Salesclerks (3/3)

3. Frequency of using a foreign language when selling OTC drugs

Our next question, D, was, "Do you have experience using a foreign language when selling OTC drugs?" Here, too, we received 576 responses. Thirty-eight participants (6.6%) responded "Every day." 42 (7.3%) responded "A few times a week."

After that, the frequency of foreign language use declined to "A few times a month" with 81 responses (14.1%) to "A few times a year." with 146 responses (25.3%) to 100 responses (17.4%) with "In my work experience, only a few times." And the largest group had 163 responses (28.3%) with "Never".

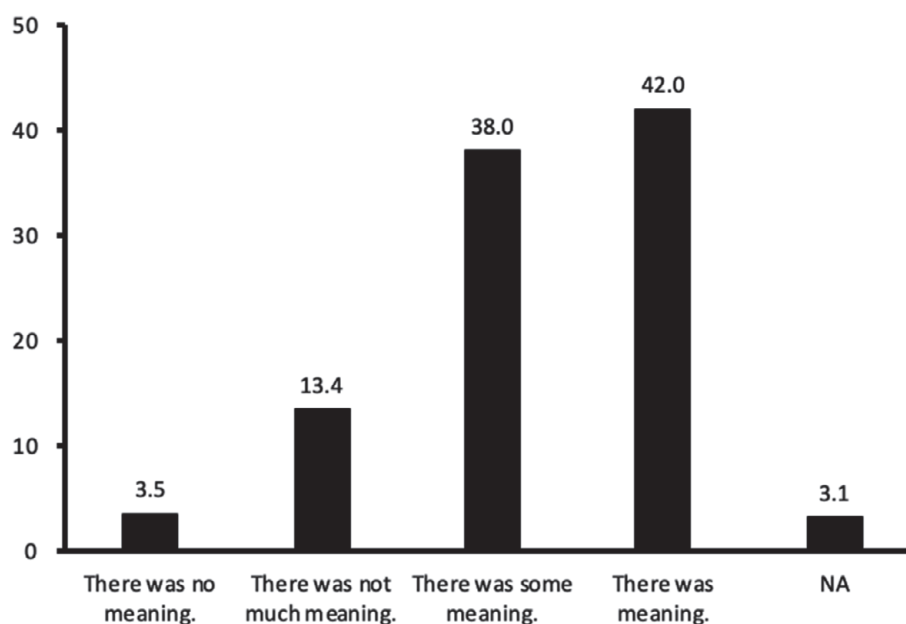


Fig. 2 Results of Question E: Do You Think the Previous Series of English Seminars Had Meaning?

4. Reflections on the English seminars

Three months after the English seminars, we wanted to know what the participants thought about them in retrospect and asked Question E, “Do you think the previous series of English seminars had meaning?” The results were positive with 80% of the participants saying they were meaningful of somewhat meaningful. The exact numbers were 242 participants (42.0%) saying, “There was meaning.” And another 219 (38.0%) saying, “There was some meaning.” The remaining responded either, “There was not much meaning.” with 77 replies (13.4%) and 20 participants (3.5%) saying, “There was no meaning.” There were 18 no answers (3.1%). (Fig. 2)

As stated previously, participants were also allowed to write freely about their responses to Question E. The comments for the 20 participants who responded, “There was no meaning.” could be divided into two groups: “There are no foreigners

who come to our drugstore/pharmacy.” and “The content of the English seminars was too difficult.” In regards to the 77 replies “There was not much meaning.” many were comments the same as those above, i.e. they have no non-Japanese customers or the content was too difficult.

Comments to the more positive replies “There was some meaning.” and “There was meaning.” centered on two themes, too. Many participants replied that they met non-Japanese customers on a regular basis and that the English that was presented to them helped them learn many things. The feedback in regards to “There was meaning.” also mentions non-Japanese customers coming to their drugstore or pharmacy and that the English presentation and the communication strategies (using polite English and tools for communication such a patient survey in English) were very useful.

When asked Question F, “After the English seminars, on a personal level or at work, was there

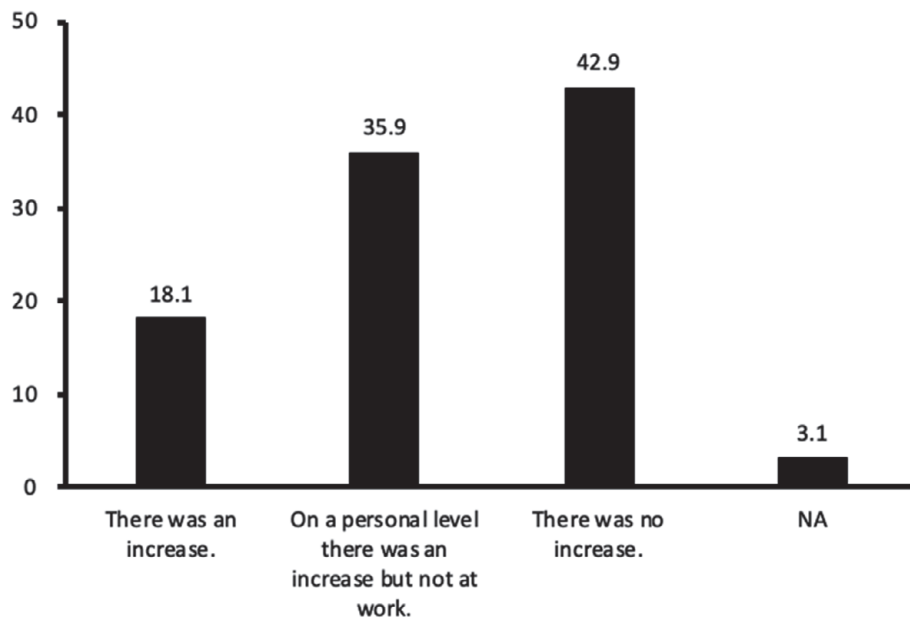


Fig. 3 Results of Question F: After the English seminars, on a Personal Level at Work, Was There an Increase in Your Thoughts about How to Communicate in English?

an increase in your thoughts about how to communicate in English?” the answers could be divided into four groups with a majority of the participants (54%) saying that they had thought more about how to use English to communicate. Two hundred and seven participants (35.9%) responded, “On a personal level there was an increase but not at work.” Another 104 (18.1%) replied, “There was an increase.” The remaining responses were, “There was no increase.” mentioned by 247 participants (42.9%) and another 18 (3.1%) responded, “No answer.” (Fig. 3)

5. Communication tools used in drugstores and pharmacies

Next, we asked about tools for helping communicate in foreign languages with non-Japanese customers, but this time we asked in the present tense. We did this to see if the English

seminars had in fact motivated any change. We started with Question G, “Presently, what skills development seminars or tools is your drugstore or pharmacy offering to help you learn how to communicate with non-Japanese patients?” Multiple answers were allowed and so the breakdown is based on the following: from the 576 responses we received 829 answers and we then calculated our percentage of responses based on the total answers received minus the 278 participants (48.3%) who replied, “None.” As there were 25 “No answers,” we also deducted these for a total of 525 answers from 273 responses about tools in the workplace.

The most commonly used tool for communication with non-Japanese customers was, “We have smartphones or tablets to help communicate in foreign languages.” with 123 replies (45.1%). This was followed by “We have

patient surveys in foreign languages.” with 96 replies (35.2%), “We have drug explanations in foreign languages.” with 73 replies (26.7%), and “We have cards with various languages for customers to point at to confirm the purpose of their visit, their symptoms, etc and to counsel them on taking medicines.” with 69 replies (25.3%). There was one other response, “We have a translation device.” with over 20% and that had a response total of 59 (21.6%). The remaining replies were under 20% and they consisted of: “On the shelves, we have signs in foreign languages on drug efficacy and products for sale.” with 43 replies (15.8%), “On the products, we have pictures or symbols in foreign languages on drug efficacy.” with 34 replies (12.5%), and “Others” with 18 replies (6.6%). The least common response was “We have English seminars or classes to learn how to simply communicate in a foreign language.” with 11 responses (4.0%).

6. Implementations after the English seminars and future plans (if any)

After having participated in the English seminars, we wanted to know whether the participants had been motivated to further improve their communication skills in foreign languages. In order to learn so, we asked two questions in particular. Question H was written to see whether there had been workplace changes made over the previous three months, while Question I was about hitherto future plans. As in Question G, multiple answers were allowed and we calculated for this in the same manner as above.

Question H was, “After the English seminars, have you introduced any skills development seminars or tools?” The vast majority of participants

responded “No answer” with 517 (89.8%) replies. As we had 623 answers from the 576 total responses, we subtracted the 517 from the number of responses and answers in addition to the seven participants (1.2%) that replied “None” in response to this question. This left us with a total of 99 answers from 52 responses. As in the responses to Question G, the most common one was, “We have smartphones or tablets to help communicate in foreign languages.” with 24 (46.2%). The next most common responses were more or less the same with between 11-13 responses. “We have cards with various languages for customers to point at to confirm the purpose of their visit, their symptoms, etc and to counsel them on taking medicines.” had 13 responses (25%). This was followed by the responses “On the shelves, we have signs in foreign languages on drug efficacy and products for sale.” and “We have patient surveys in foreign languages.” both with 12 responses (23.1%), respectively. The next two also had the same number of responses at 11 (21.2%): “On the products, we have pictures or symbols in foreign languages on drug efficacy.” and “We have a translation device.” Eight responses (15.4%) were “We have English seminars or classes to learn how to simply communicate in a foreign language.” This was followed by six responses (11.5%) of “We have drug explanations in foreign languages.” The final two responses (3.8%) were “Other.”

In Question I we asked the participants, “In the future, what preparations or tools are you planning to introduce? We received 622 answers from 576 responses. As mentioned above, we subtracted the “No answers” which had a total of 503 (87.3%) from the number of responses and answers, respectively. There were also four answers, “None.”

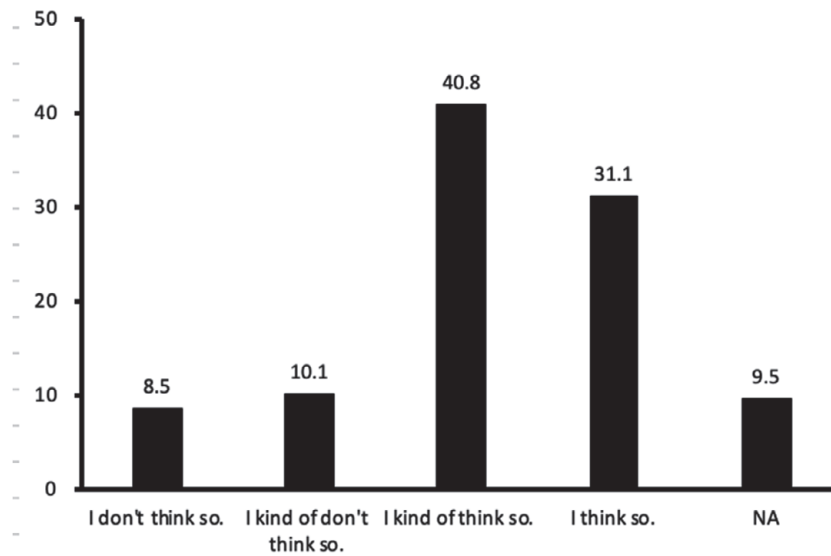


Fig. 4 Results of Question J: In the Future, Do You Want Your Drugstore or Pharmacy to Hold a Seminar on OTC Medicine Sales in Foreign Languages?

and these were also subtracted. This left us with a total of 115 answers from 69 responses. The most common response was, “We have smartphones or tablets to help communicate in foreign languages.” with 25 (36.2%) followed by “We have a translation device.” with 18 (26.1%). The next four responses were between 14 and 16 in number. “On the products, we have pictures or symbols in foreign languages on drug efficacy.” had 16 responses (23.2%) followed by “We have patient surveys in foreign languages.” with 15 (21.7%). Both “We have cards with various languages for customers to point at to confirm the purpose of their visit, their symptoms, etc and to counsel them on taking medicines.” and “We have drug explanations in foreign languages.” had 14 responses (20.3%), respectively. “On the shelves, we have signs in foreign languages on drug efficacy and products for sale.” had eight responses (11.6%) and the remaining five responses (7.2%) were, “We have English seminars or classes to learn how to simply communicate in a foreign language.”

7. Future plans for seminar content

The last two questions of our survey (related to this study) were J and K, “In the future, do you want your drugstore or pharmacy to hold a seminar on OTC medicine sales in foreign languages?” and “In the future, what kind of content do you want in your OTC medicine sales seminars?”, respectively.

For Question J, we received 576 responses for a 100% response rate. A large majority of the responses (71.9%) were positive and fell into two categories: 235 (40.8%) who replied, “I kind of think so.” and 179 (31.1%) who answered, “I think so.” Fifty-five (9.5%) of the participants replied, “No answer.” And 49 (8.5%) replied, “No.” Lastly was “I kind of don’t think so.” which received 58 responses (10.1%). (Fig. 4)

For Question K, we received 414 responses (71.9%) and of these 314 (75.8%) responded, “The same as was held before (English).” Eighty-two (19.8%) responded, “Any kind of seminar (like one on Chinese herbal medicines)” with the remaining 18 (4.3%) saying, “No answer.”

8. Comments in general

The last part of the survey allowed for the participants to write freely about their experience. Many comments shared that English was not the only foreign language they needed to study to meet the needs of their customers as some customers from Asia were unable to understand either Japanese or English. Languages mentioned were: Chinese, Thai, and Korean. Other feedback specific to the English seminars was that participants hoped the seminars would be held again or on a yearly basis and that the seminars were fun and interesting. Other comments mentioned that the materials from the English seminars were very useful. And lastly, there were even a few comments that mentioned the seminars were a little too easy and that the content should be a little more difficult to better meet the needs of the non-Japanese customers.

4. Discussion

This follow-up survey of the registered salesclerks three months after the English seminars allowed us to see what if any effect our English seminars had on them personally or in terms of their work. As our results show, we had access to more or less the same participants and that they cooperated by answering this second survey.

Some of the notable results were the responses to Question C with almost 90% of the registered salesclerks saying that there is some need or a need to use foreign languages when selling OTC drugs. Yet many of the participants (28.3%) responded to Question D of this report that they had never used a foreign language when selling them. However, this was a decline from the results of the same question in our previous report, Question A, where 34.6%

responded they had never done so³). So, it seems that over 5% of the participants, after the English seminars, attempted to use English at work for the first time.

The responses to Question E showed that 80% of the participants had positive feelings about the usefulness of the English seminars three months later. When planning the July 2019 English seminars with the Tokyo Metropolitan Druggist Association, we purposely made the seminars bilingual (English and Japanese) and focused on the sales of OTC medications and tools (patient surveys in English, charts with body parts, flowcharts with yes/no questions, etc...) that would help the registered salesclerks in their workplaces. The feedback in the comments section showed that the participants appreciated these aspects of the seminars though there were some who mentioned that the English was too high-level or the Japanese of the instructor was not easy to understand. Two points that we will keep in mind in planning any future English seminars.

The feedback to Question F also showed that a majority of the participants (54%) had thought more, to one extent or another, about their use of English either in the workplace or in their everyday lives. We feel this is a positive effect from the English seminars. A minority of the participants (42.9%) had no increase in their thoughts of using English after the seminars and this is something we will keep in mind in planning future English seminars.

In regards to the implementation or use of tools to communicate with non-Japanese customers, Question G, there was still a large minority (48.3%) who replied that their workplaces had done nothing. As we did not further investigate as to why this was the case, it is hard to tell, but reasons could be that

the drugstore or pharmacy rarely has non-Japanese customers or that the registered salesclerk, not being an owner of the place he or she works at, is unable to implement new policies. In contrast, the remaining 50% of the responses showed there was a high reliance on smartphones or tablets (45.1%). These technologies were mentioned in our previous report³⁾ and were thus expected. Furthermore, being small and portable, it makes sense for smartphones and tablets to be used with non-Japanese customers. We also feel it is a positive sign that other responses showed foreign languages being used on patient surveys, on signs on shelves, and with cards for patients to point to to help communicate with the registered salesclerk.

But not everything was positive. Responses to Question H showed that almost 90% of the participants had not implemented any skills development seminars or tools in the three months after the English seminars had been held. And this applied equally to the responses to Question I about future plans with 87.3% of the participants saying they had none. On the other hand, the positive feedback highlighted the desire to use technology, e.g. smartphones, tablets, or translation devices to help communicate with non-Japanese customers. Lastly, the responses to Questions J and K and the comments written in the general feedback showed that many of the registered salesclerks look forward to more English seminars in the future—a result we will keep in mind when planning future seminars for registered salesclerks.

In conclusion, the results of this follow-up study show that the English seminars held in July 2019 had various positive influences on the participants. First, they found our English seminars had been

meaningful. Second, they were motivated to think more about their English communication skills both personally and/or at work. Next, there were actual changes made by some of the participants and efforts to use English. And lastly, the participants look forward to studying more English and this means there is a need for more English seminars in the future. As such, we look forward to using these findings to continue and improve our future English seminars.

Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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