

**An Investigation into the Safe Use of Foreign Languages
for the Sales of OTC Medicines by Registered Salesclerks:
Survey Results of Registered Salesclerks after Seminars on Using
English with Non-Japanese Customers in OTC Environments**

Eric M. Skier^{1*}, Akiko Tomizawa², Katsuei Watanabe³, Koji Narui²

In the summer of 2019, three days of training seminars were held to help improve the ability of registered salesclerks to communicate with non-Japanese patients in English when selling OTC medicines. After each seminar, a survey was given and a total of 583 registered salesclerks responded to it. The purpose of our study 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.

While 202 (34.6%) of the 583 seminar participants had no experience using a foreign language with a non-Japanese customer in a work environment, the remaining 49.9% had. Next, we asked about the content of the seminars and while 180 participants (30.9%) said the level of the presented English content was difficult, the remaining 67% of the participants found the content to be a little difficult (57.8%), pretty simple (8.1%), or simple (8.1%). We next asked if they felt the seminar content would be useful for them in communicating with non-Japanese customers and 472 of the participants (80.9%) replied that the English presented would be useful or might be useful. In comments from the participants, they often mentioned that the need for greetings “May I help you?” or “Get well soon.” was new to them. As was the need for polite English, e.g. using please, thank you, and excuse me.

Our results showed that a majority of registered salesclerks are already using foreign languages with non-Japanese customers. Having said this, the responses to the level of the English presented in the seminars also show that many of the registered salesclerks may not be doing an appropriate job when communicating with non-Japanese customers leading to fears of safety. Furthermore, general comments shared on the survey showed that many of the salesclerks wish to improve their ability to communicate on the job in a foreign language and as such we look forward to helping registered salesclerks in the future with more seminars.

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

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¹English 2 Laboratory, School of Pharmacy, Nihon University ²Department of Self-Medication and OTC, School of Pharmacy, Tokyo University of Pharmacy and Life Sciences ³Tokyo Metropolitan Druggist Association
*Corresponding author: Eric M. Skier Narashinodai, Funabashi-shi, Chiba, 274-8555 Japan.
Phone: 047-465-7976 E-mail address: eric.m.skier@nihon-u.ac.jp

1. Introduction

The latest government figures on visitors to Japan show that in the first half of 2019, over 16.6 million people had visited Japan for an increase of 4.6% from the same period in 2018.¹⁾ In addition, the number of foreign visitors is expected to continue to grow as people from around the world will come to Japan to attend the Tokyo Olympic Games that will be held in the summer of 2020.

In 2018, a survey of registered salesclerks was carried out by Ujiie, et al²⁾ and it was found that 337 participants of their study (51.9%) had experience responding to non-Japanese customers in a foreign language. The foreign languages varied from English (86.4%) to Chinese (70.0%) to Korean (25.8%) to others (26.7%). Ujiie, et al then further questioned those 337 participants and found that many of them, 228 (67.7%) were somewhat able to comprehend what the customer was saying, but were unable to express what they wanted to say and this led to some issues. The next question of their survey asked, “What sort of preparation/tools do you think would be useful to respond to questions or consultations in a foreign language?” and 253 of the 649 participants (39.0%) responded that they would like to learn how to better communicate with non-Japanese customers in a seminar environment. With these responses in mind, the Tokyo Metropolitan Druggist Association decided to offer English language seminars to its members in the summer of 2019 as English was the language that the registered salesclerks in the study by Ujiie, et al had used the most. Between the instructor, the head of the Druggist Association, and others, it was decided that the material of the seminars would

focus on topics such as greeting customers, talking about patient symptoms, giving simple directions on how to take a medication, giving precautions, and asking for a simple patient history. The instructor also presented examples of polite English and other strategies for communicating in an appropriate manner in English with a non-Japanese customer. The purpose of our study 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

2. 1. Seminars and Survey

In the summer of 2019, three days of seminars were held at Akabane Hall on July 5, 13, and 14, respectively. In this study, all 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 (2019-011).

2. 2. Seminar Content

Each seminar was three hours long and consisted of the following:

- An introduction to natural English with a focus on pronunciation.
- An introduction to using English in an appropriate manner.
- Simple gestures and other ways to communicate with non-Japanese customers.
- Example dialogs (in Japanese and English)

in drugstore settings.

- Lastly, participants were given 20-30 minutes to complete an English quiz of 10 comprehension questions based on the seminar.

The instructor used both English and Japanese throughout the seminar and made the seminar interactive by using a shadowing method, participants would try to repeat what the instructor said to help the participants improve both their listening comprehension and pronunciation skills. An example of a dialog presented can be found in Fig. 1.

2. 3. Overview of the questionnaire content

We first asked the participants to provide some personal information, i.e. work history, sex, age. To protect the participants' private information, we did

not ask questions that could be used to identify individual respondents. Moreover, at the beginning of the questionnaire, we explained that the results of the survey would be published in an academic journal, individuals would not be identified, and subjects could respond only after giving consent.

The questionnaire style allowed for the participants to circle their response or write a free response (Fig. 2). The first question was, "How often have you used a foreign language when speaking with a customer?" (Question A) Next we asked them to evaluate the content of the seminar (Question B), in particular we asked them the following five questions: Was the content of the seminar difficult or not? Was the content of the seminar enough or too little? Did the purpose of the seminar meet your needs? Do you think the content presented will be useful to you soon? In general, how satisfied were you with the seminar? Questions

1

OTC 薬の販売

OTC Medicine Sales

かぜ薬: 解熱
 Cold Medicine: Fever Lowering

薬 いらっしゃいませ。	May I help you?
客 バファリンが欲しいのですが。	I would like some Bufferin.
薬 どうされましたか？	What brings you here?
客 かぜだと思いますが、熱があります。	It seems like he has a cold and a fever.
薬 かぜをひかれているのは、どなたですか？	Who's sick?
客 私の子供です。	My child.
薬 何歳ですか？	How old is he?
客 10歳です。	He is 10 years old.
薬 分かりました。これは、 小児用バファリンですが、 一度に4錠以上は飲ませないでください。 空腹時を避けて、 服用間隔は4時間以上あけてください。	I see. This is children's Bufferin. Do not give more than four tablets at a time. Avoid giving it on an empty stomach. And wait four hours between giving him the medicine.
客 分かりました。ありがとう。	I understand. Thank you.

Fig. 1 Example Dialog Presented in the Seminar

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	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.	
=====

◆◆◆ Please Tell Us about Yourself ◆◆◆

Please tell us how long you have worked a pharmaceutical product seller or registered salesclerk, your gender, and age.

Years experience as a pharmaceutical product seller:
Years experience as a registered salesclerk:
Gender:
Age in terms of decade:

A. How often have you used a foreign language when speaking with a customer?
1. Every day
2. Several times per week
3. Several times per month
4. Several times per year
5. Several times during my career (years)
6. Never

B. In regards to this English seminar, please answer the following questions:

I. Was the content of the seminar difficult or not?
1. Difficult 2. Not very difficult 3. Pretty easy 4. Easy

II. Was the content of the seminar enough or too little?
1. Too little 2. Not enough 3. A little too much 4. Too much

III. Did the purpose of the seminar meet your needs?
1. Not at all 2. Not enough 3. Well 4. Yes

IV. Do you think the content presented will be useful to you soon? If so, please write below.
1. Not at all 2. Not really 3. I mostly agree 4. I agree
Comment in particular:

V. Were you satisfied with the seminar? Please write below and explain your answer.
1. Not at all 2. Not really 3. Pretty satisfied 4. Satisfied
Reason:

Fig. 2-1 Questionnaire

C. In your pharmacy, what tools do you presently have to help you communicate in a foreign language?

Please circle all of the answers that apply.

1. None. If so, please go to Question F.
2. We have had seminars on how to use foreign languages with customers.
3. We have signs in the drugstore in foreign languages.
4. Medicines are described in foreign languages.
5. We have directions on how to take meds in foreign languages.
6. We have smartphones and 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 machine.
10. Other. (Please write below.)

D. In regards to Question C, what tools do you think are useful? More than one answer is acceptable. Please write the numbers from above.

E. In regards to Question C, what tools do you think were not useful? More than one answer is acceptable. Please write the numbers from above and explain what issues you had.

Example: 8 -- With too much of a variety of medicines to sell, it is difficult to have explanations for all of them in foreign languages.

F. In the future, what tools would you like to use to help communicate in foreign languages?

1. None.
2. We have had seminars on how to use foreign languages with customers.
3. We have signs in the drugstore in foreign languages.
4. Medicines are described in foreign languages.
5. We have directions on how to take meds in foreign languages.
6. We have smartphones and 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 machine.
10. Other. (Please write below.)

G. Feel free to write about anything related to using foreign languages with non-Japanese customers when selling OTC medicines.

Fig. 2-2 Questionnaire

C, D, E, and F were, “What tools have you prepared for communicating with non-Japanese customers?” “What tool(s) were useful?” “What issues did you encounter with the tools you used?” “In the future, what tools would you like to use to help communicate in a foreign language?” We finished the questionnaire with, “Write freely about using a foreign language to communicate with non-Japanese customers.”

3. Results

3. 1. Background of the participants

Of the 672 questionnaires that were distributed, 607 surveys were returned (response rate: 90.3%), however not all of the questionnaires were returned with responses or some were returned but without the sufficient profile information of the respondent. As such, there were 583 valid responses (valid response rate: 96.0%). The work history of the survey participants (total experience as a pharmaceutical product seller or registered salesclerk) was an average of 10.9 years. The participants were mostly female 417 (71.5%) with the remaining 156 male (26.8%) and 10 no answers (1.7%). The breakdown of the participants by age was as follows: in their 20s, 11 people (1.9%); 30s, 104 people (17.8%); 40s, 164 people (28.1%); 50s, 171 people (29.3%); 60s, 89 people (15.3%); 70s, 23 people (3.9%); 80s, 5 people (0.9%); and no response, 16 people (2.7%).

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

In response to Question A, “How often have you used a foreign language when speaking with a customer?” we received 583 responses: 27

people (4.6%) responded "every day," 50 people (8.6%) responded "several times per week," 72 people (12.3%) responded "several times per month," 142 people (24.4%) responded "several times per year," 83 people (14.2%) responded "several times during my career," 202 people (34.6%) responded "never," and 7 people (1.2%) did not respond. Thus, it was found that 291 people (49.9%) had experience in using a foreign language when selling an OTC drug. The participants who replied "several times during my career," in “Had experience in responding to foreign language inquiries when selling an OTC drug.” were not included as we considered the possibility that some of the participants had careers of over a decade while others had been working for only a few years.

3. 3. Evaluation of the seminar content

Next, we asked the participants to evaluate the seminar content. For the sake of comparing each survey result, we are providing averages. Answers to the first question, “Was the content of the seminar difficult or not?” on a scale of 1-4 had an average score of 1.79. With one being “difficult” and four being “easy” (Fig. 3). As for the amount of material presented, there was an average score of 2.77 on a scale of 1-4 with one being “too little” and four being “too much”. Responses to “Did the purpose of the seminar meet your needs?” had an average of 3.18 on a scale of 1-4 with one being “not at all” and four being “yes”. In regards to the usefulness of the English presented in the seminar, there was an average score of 3.12 on a scale of 1-4 with one being “not at all” and four being “I agree”. As for satisfaction with the seminar, the average was also 3.12 on a scale of 1-4 with one being “not at all” and four being “satisfied”.

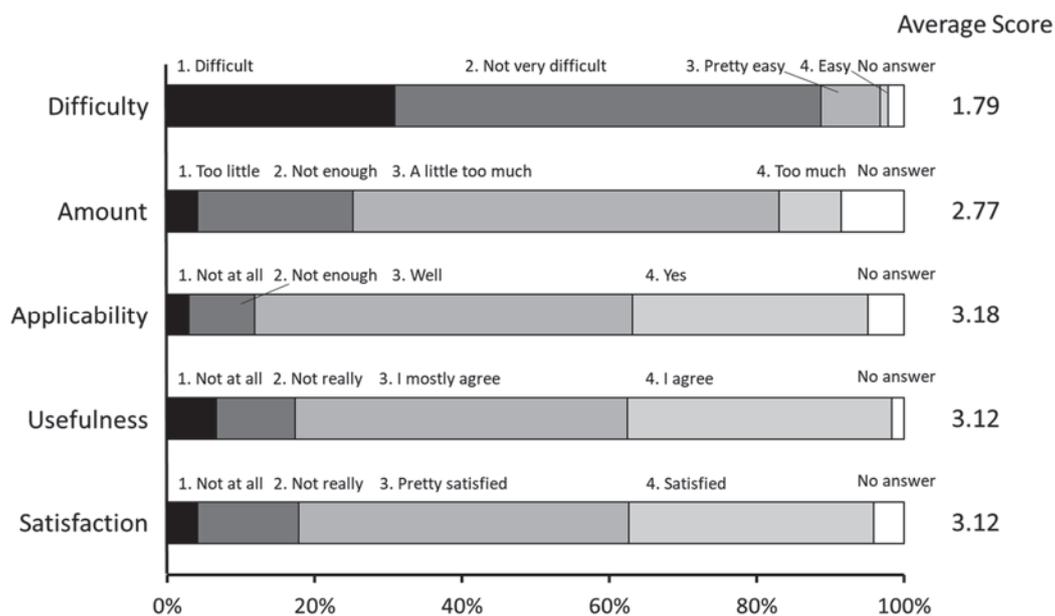


Fig. 3. Results on the Difficulty, Amount, Applicability, Usefulness, and Satisfaction with the Seminar Content

Table Breakdown of Communication Tools Used in Drugstores, Their Usefulness, and Future Plans

Questions		Breakdown of Responses			
Choices	C	D	E	F	
C In your pharmacy, what tools do you presently have to help you communicate in a foreign language?					
D In regards to Question C, what tools do you think are useful? More than one answer is acceptable.					
E In regards to Question C, what tools do you think were not useful? More than one answer is acceptable.					
F In the future, what tools would you like to use to help communicate in foreign languages?					
1 None.	51.6			17.5	
2 We have had seminars on how to use foreign languages with customers.	2.2	4.9	9.5	20.6	
3 We have signs in the drugstore in foreign languages.	2.4	8.9	9.5	19.4	
4 Medicines are described in foreign languages.	2.2	9.8	9.5	19.4	
5 We have directions on how to take meds in foreign languages.	7.5	21.1	11.9	19.6	
6 We have smartphones and tablets to help communicate in foreign language.	15.3	48.8	14.3	28.1	
7 We have patient surveys in foreign languages.	13.2	39.8	14.3	13.7	
8 We have drug explanations in foreign languages.	10.8	30.9	35.7	16.5	
9 We have a translation machine.	8.6	22.0	26.2	18.9	
10 Other.	2.7	3.3	2.4	0.7	
11 Not applicable.	11.5			16.0	
Number of Responses	747	233	56	1109	
Number of Respondents	583	123	42	583	

3. 4. Communication tools used in drugstores

“What tools have you prepared for communicating with non-Japanese customers?” Of the 583 responses, 301 (51.6%) replied that they had no tools prepared to help with communication.

Having said that, the top three responses for tools prepared were: smartphone/tablet, 89 (15.3%), patient questionnaire in a foreign language, 77 (13.2%), and drug explanation sheets in a foreign language, 63 (10.8%) (Table).

We next asked about which tools they used and thought were useful (more than one answer was allowed) and the same top three as above were mentioned: smartphone/tablet, 60 (10.3%), patient questionnaire in a foreign language, 49 (8.4%), and drug explanation sheets in a foreign language, 38 (6.5%) (Table).

On the other hand, when asked what was not useful as a tool for communication (more than one answer was allowed), the number one answer was drug explanation sheets in a foreign language, 15 (2.6%). The next most common answer was translation machine with 11 answers (1.9%) and there was a tie between smartphone/tablet and patient questionnaire in a foreign language with six mentions each (1.0%) (Table).

The last question was about tools, “In the future, what tools would you like to use to help communicate in a foreign language?” The most common response was smartphone/tablet, 164 (28.1%), followed by seminars, 120 (20.6%), and directions on how to take a medicine in foreign languages, 114 (19.6%) Directions on how to take medicine in foreign languages was closely followed by signs in foreign languages in the drugstore and medicines described in foreign languages with 113 responses (19.4%) each (Table).

3.5. Comments about the seminar

We finished the survey with two questions: “What did you learn today that would help you immediately?” and “Please comment on why you were or were not content with today’s seminar.”

The first question had many replies that participants were looking forward to using the polite English that had been presented to them. This included greetings, such as “Good morning.” and

“May I help you?” Many commented that they learned the need to avoid using impolite English. To do so, this included learning to use “please, thank you, and excuse me” more often when communicating in English. Another aspect of the seminar content mentioned was the focus on naturally spoken English where “Nice to meet you” is actually pronounced “Niketameetcha” by many native speakers. Another comment frequently shared was about using the pain chart presented in the seminar materials to ask customers about their pain. In this pain chart, English is not actually required to communicate, but customers can point to a variety of faces with differing expressions to show how bad their own pain is or is not.

On the other hand, not all comments were positive. Participants shared many issues they had with the seminar. The main one being the level of the English presented. Even though the dialogs also had Japanese translations and the instructor used Japanese to explain the English content, there were still times when participants were unable to understand what was being shared. Comments included: “I am very poor at English and could not understand anything.” “I wish there had been more katakana to help with the pronunciation.” “Just one seminar won’t be enough to help me improve my English. I want to study more.” “There was too much content. There should be less content in the future.” “The speed of the presentation was too fast.”

4. Discussion

Over the three days of seminars, there were close to 700 participants and we received feedback from 607 of them. Of the 607 respondents, there was little difference in terms of gender, age, and

experience using a foreign language with customers from abroad as found in a previous study in similar settings by Ujiie, et al.² In the study by Ujiie, many of the registered salesclerks expressed a desire to study English in a seminar and thus we held this series of them. Comments from the participants of our study included ones such as: I enjoyed myself, I learned a lot, and I will be able to use some of the English presented in the seminar upon my return to work.

Having said this, not all of the feedback on our survey was positive. We also learned that the English knowledge of the registered salesclerks was not as high as we expected and many of the participants commented that they could not follow the English presented – even with Japanese translations to help them. Participants also shared that the content of the seminar was too much and the speed too fast. With a focus on shadowing of the natural English pronunciation presented, it was apparent to the instructor that many of the participants had little experience speaking English and various comments on the survey support this. In fact, this seminar included a quiz of 10 comprehension questions (in English) and even with 20 minutes to answer them, many participants commented that there was not enough time and that they could not answer the questions because they had been written entirely in English. As such, in the second and third seminars that were held, the comprehension questions were translated orally by the instructor into Japanese and the participants were given 30 minutes instead of 20 to answer them.

Even with the negative comments, many of the respondents included positive feedback that while the content was too difficult, they still enjoyed themselves and learned some important things

about communicating in English with non-Japanese customers when selling OTC medicines.

We also asked about what tools for communication with customers from abroad the registered salesclerks were using and we received mixed results. First, 51.6% of the salesclerks replied on the survey that they were not using any tools for communication in their work environment. On the other hand, the registered salesclerks who used tools for communication used three main types of them: translation machines, tablets/smartphones, and drug explanations on paper. Smartphones were the most commonly used tool for communication and were mentioned to be the most useful of the tools for communication shared.

One of the most common comments was that not all of the customers from other countries are able to understand English. Many participants expressed a need for communication tools for languages other than English. Furthermore, as English used for describing medicines can be technical at times, there are limits to their use and they may not be useful when helping with the sale of OTC medicines. Respondents also shared their worries about the translations from the machines or smartphones they were using as they lacked the English ability to confirm whether the English produced was correct or not leading to fears about the safe usage of the medicines sold. As such, the registered salesclerks mentioned that the least useful tools for communication with customers were drug explanation sheets in English and translation machines.

In conclusion, we found that registered salesclerks were interested in improving their English skills in a seminar setting as more and more foreigners are visiting and deciding to live in Japan

and going to drugstores for OTC medicines, etc....

While there are some tools available to help communicate with customers, the registered salesclerks in our study accepted a need to improve their own English communications skills for fear that smartphones, translation machines, or translations on paper are not helping meet the needs of customers in a safe manner. As such, we feel there is a need to continue to hold English communication seminars to further help improve the skills of registered salesclerks in Japan. Lastly, we look forward to seeing whether the English presented in these seminars was actually useful or not and this will be the theme of our next investigation.

Conflict of Interest: There are no conflicts of interest.

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