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Research Article

ENGLISH EDUCATION REFORM AND LEARNER CONFIDENCE: A SIX-YEAR REPEATED CROSS-SECTIONAL CASE STUDY, 2021–2026

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ABSTRACT

Recent English education reform in Japan has emphasized communicative competence and balanced language-skill development, yet relatively little longitudinal evidence has examined how learners' confidence and attitudes have changed during the transition between curriculum frameworks. This repeated cross-sectional case study analyzes survey data from 557 first-year students at a public nursing college in Japan across six cohorts from 2021 to 2026. Four cohorts entered college before completion of the fully revised upper-secondary curriculum sequence, while the 2025 and 2026 cohorts had completed all three upper-secondary years under the revised framework. Students reported confidence in reading, listening, writing, speaking, and grammar, together with attitudes toward English and preferences concerning English learning. Descriptive and inferential analyses showed a persistent receptive–productive confidence gap across cohorts, with comparatively low confidence in writing, speaking, and grammar. The five confidence domains showed no statistically significant omnibus differences across the six cohorts, indicating substantial stability in this pattern. In contrast, attitudes toward English differed significantly across cohorts, $F(5, 551) = 3.62$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .032$; the 2026 cohort reported significantly less positive attitudes than the 2021–2023 cohorts in Tukey-adjusted comparisons. Exploratory curriculum-period comparisons indicated lower grammar confidence and less positive attitudes among the 2025–2026 cohorts than among the 2021–2024 cohorts, with small effect sizes. Because the curriculum transition coincided with changes in cohort year and other historical conditions, these findings do not establish that the curriculum reform itself caused the observed differences. They instead provide case-based evidence that persistent productive-skill insecurity and worsening affective responses warrant attention during curriculum transition.

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1. Introduction

English education reform in Japan has progressively emphasized communicative language use across successive national curriculum revisions. The curriculum introduced

around 2009 represented an important shift toward communication-oriented English education, while the subsequent Course of Study revisions announced for junior high school in 2017 and upper secondary school in 2018 further strengthened the emphasis on using English for communication and developing language skills in an integrated manner, in alignment with the CEFR (MEXT, 2018; Counsil of Europe, 2001).

The revised standards were implemented in phases across school levels and grades, with full implementation at junior high schools beginning in FY2021 and upper secondary implementation beginning with first-year students in FY2022 and progressing grade by grade. Consequently, students entering college in 2025 constituted the first cohort in the present dataset to have completed the full three-year upper-secondary sequence under the revised curriculum, followed by the 2026 cohort.

The present study therefore compares four college-entry cohorts from 2021–2024, whose secondary education preceded full implementation of the revised upper-secondary curriculum, with the 2025–2026 cohorts, who completed upper secondary education under the revised framework.

Whether these policy aspirations are reflected in learners' experiences remains an empirical question. In Japanese educational settings, students may encounter a persistent gap between receptive abilities, such as reading and listening, and confidence in productive abilities, particularly speaking and writing. Grammar presents an additional issue: communication-oriented policy does not eliminate learners' need for linguistic foundations, and students who are uncertain about grammar may find productive language use difficult even when they value communicative competence.

Longitudinal evidence is particularly useful for examining these issues because a single cohort cannot distinguish a temporary fluctuation from a recurring pattern. The author has conducted an annual survey of incoming students at a public nursing college since 2016 using a consistent questionnaire. The present study focuses on 2021–2026, including four college-entry cohorts preceding completion of the fully revised upper-secondary curriculum sequence and two cohorts, 2025 and 2026, that completed all three upper-secondary years under the revised framework. The 2026 data therefore permit examination of two consecutive revised-curriculum cohorts rather than relying on the first such cohort alone.

1.1 Theoretical Framework: L2 Motivation and Learning Experience

The study uses Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) as an interpretive framework. The L2MSS distinguishes the Ideal L2 Self, representing a desired future identity as a language user; the Ought-to L2 Self, reflecting perceived expectations and obligations; and the L2 Learning Experience, referring to learners' situated experiences of language learning (Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Nakamura 2024). In a Japanese EFL context, Ueki and Takeuchi (2012) found that the Ideal L2 Self and positive learning attitudes were related to motivation, whereas the Ought-to L2 Self and external influence were associated with anxiety. These relationships make the framework relevant to a study in which learners may continue to value future English use while simultaneously reporting low confidence or increasingly negative attitudes.

The questionnaire used here was not designed to measure the three L2MSS components directly. Accordingly, the Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, and L2 Learning Experience are not

treated as measured constructs. Rather, L2MSS is used cautiously to interpret relationships among reported confidence, attitudes, learning preferences, and future-oriented goals.

1.2 Research Questions

RQ1. How did first-year students' self-reported confidence in reading, listening, writing, speaking, and grammar vary across the six cohorts from 2021 to 2026?

RQ2. How did students' attitudes toward English, preferences for grammar learning, and expectations for English education vary across the same period?

RQ3. To what extent did the patterns observed in the 2025–2026 cohorts differ from those of the 2021–2024 cohorts, and how might these differences be interpreted in relation to learners' future-oriented goals, confidence, and learning experiences?

Because this repeated cross-sectional case study does not directly measure L2MSS components or isolate curriculum reform from other historical and cohort effects, RQ3 is interpretive and exploratory rather than causal.

2 Method

2.1 Research Design

This study uses a repeated cross-sectional cohort design. Data were collected annually from different groups of first-year students rather than by following the same individuals over time. The analysis focuses on six cohorts from 2021 to 2026 and examines patterns during the phased implementation of the revised national curriculum framework. This design permits comparison under a consistent institutional setting but does not by itself identify curriculum reform as the cause of cohort differences.

2.2 Participants

Participants were first-year students enrolled at a public nursing college in Japan. The numbers of respondents were 94 in 2021, 93 in 2022, 89 in 2023, 95 in 2024, 93 in 2025, and 93 in 2026, for a total of 557 student records. The survey targeted incoming students and was administered before college-level English instruction could substantially influence their responses. The institution is a small regional college; consequently, the sample should be understood as a single-institution case rather than as representative of all Japanese secondary-school or university learners.

2.3 Instrument

The author-developed questionnaire examined attitudes toward English learning, self-reported confidence, learning approaches, and expectations for future English education. Confidence was assessed in five domains—reading, listening, writing, speaking, and grammar—on five-point response scales, with higher scores indicating greater confidence. Attitude toward English was also recorded on a five-point scale from dislike (1) to like (5). Grammar-learning items included attention to important sentence patterns, dictionary use, the five basic sentence structures, and use of specific grammar reference or exercise books. Expectations included priorities for language skills and grammar, preferred classroom style, and future-oriented learning goals. The core items and response scales relevant to the present analyses were retained across the study period, enabling cohort comparison.

The instrument was developed for educational survey purposes rather than as a validated psychometric scale. Therefore, individual items are analyzed as self-reported perceptions and preferences; constructs such as grammar anxiety and the components of the L2MSS are not treated as directly measured variables.

2.4 Data Collection

For 2021–2026, responses were collected through Google Forms during the first English class of the academic year. Analyses used available responses for each item; valid sample sizes therefore vary slightly where individual responses were missing (for example, speaking in 2026, n = 92, and grammar in 2025, n = 91).

2.5 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each cohort. For the confidence domains and attitude toward English, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) tested differences across the six cohorts. Eta squared (η^2) was reported as the omnibus effect-size measure. Where the omnibus attitude test was significant, Tukey HSD comparisons were used to identify pairwise cohort differences while controlling the familywise error rate.

Exploratory comparisons also contrasted the 2021–2024 cohorts with the 2025–2026 cohorts. Welch's independent-samples t tests were used because the two curriculum-period groups differed in size, and Hedges' g was reported as the standardized effect size. Ninety-five percent confidence intervals were calculated for mean differences. Because six outcomes were examined in these exploratory comparisons, Bonferroni-adjusted p values were considered when identifying results that remained significant after multiple-testing control.

The 2021–2024 versus 2025–2026 grouping reflects the phased implementation of the revised curriculum rather than an arbitrary division of cohorts. However, because curriculum exposure was determined by year of schooling, the observational design cannot separate curriculum-related differences from other changes associated with cohort and historical period. The comparisons are therefore interpreted as associations rather than estimates of a causal curriculum effect.

3. Results

3.1 Confidence across Five Domains

Figure 1 shows self-reported confidence in reading, listening, writing, speaking, and grammar. Across the six cohorts, reading generally showed the highest confidence, whereas writing, speaking, and grammar remained comparatively low. The receptive–productive confidence gap was therefore visible throughout the study period. In 2026, for example, mean confidence was 3.17 for reading and 2.71 for listening, compared with 2.25 for writing, 1.83 for speaking, and 2.11 for grammar. Positive/negative response distributions similarly showed that low speaking and grammar confidence remained pronounced.

Figure 1. Confidence in English ability across five domains, 2021–2026

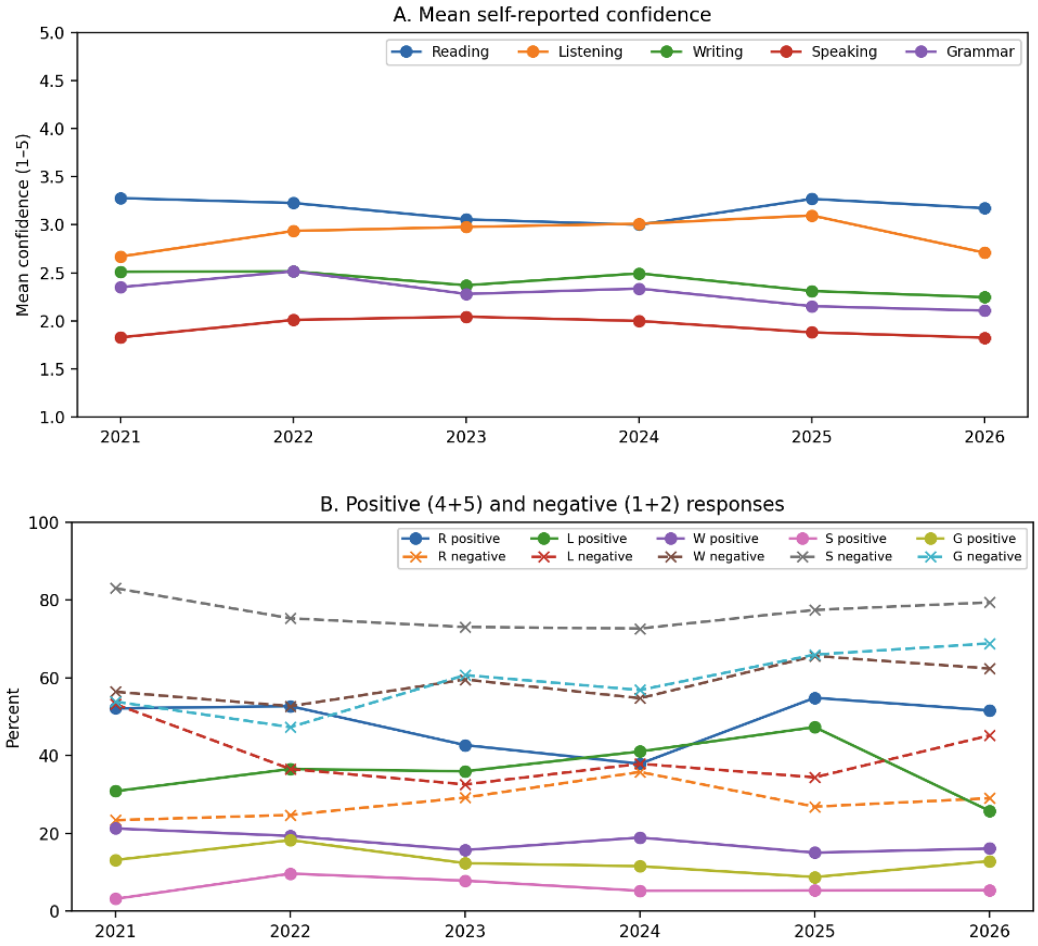


Table 1. One-Way ANOVA Results for Confidence Domains and Attitudes toward English across Six Cohorts (2021–2026)

Outcome	Valid N	F	p	η^2
Reading	557	1.08	.373	0.010
Listening	557	2.21	.052	0.020
Writing	557	1.18	.319	0.011
Speaking	556	1.05	.387	0.009
Grammar	552	1.94	.086	0.017
Attitude toward English	557	3.62	.003	0.032

As shown in Table 1, none of the five confidence domains showed a statistically significant omnibus difference across the six cohorts: reading, $F(5, 551) = 1.08$, $p = .373$, $\eta^2 = .010$; listening, $F(5, 551) = 2.21$, $p = .052$, $\eta^2 = .020$; writing, $F(5, 551) = 1.18$, $p = .319$, $\eta^2 = .011$; speaking, $F(5, 550) = 1.05$, $p = .387$, $\eta^2 = .009$; and grammar, $F(5, 546) = 1.94$, $p = .086$, $\eta^2 = .017$. Thus, the dominant feature of the confidence data is persistence rather than substantial year-to-year change. In particular, the curriculum transition had not, by 2026, been accompanied by a clear improvement in perceived productive confidence in this sample.

3.2 Grammar Learning and Expectations for English Education

Figure 2 summarizes four grammar-learning approaches. Across cohorts, students continued to report attention to important sentence patterns, the five basic sentence structures, and specific reference or exercise books, while reported dictionary use declined in the later cohorts. These patterns indicate continued engagement with explicit grammatical resources even within a communication-oriented policy context.

Figure 2: Approaches to grammar learning (mean self-reported ratings)

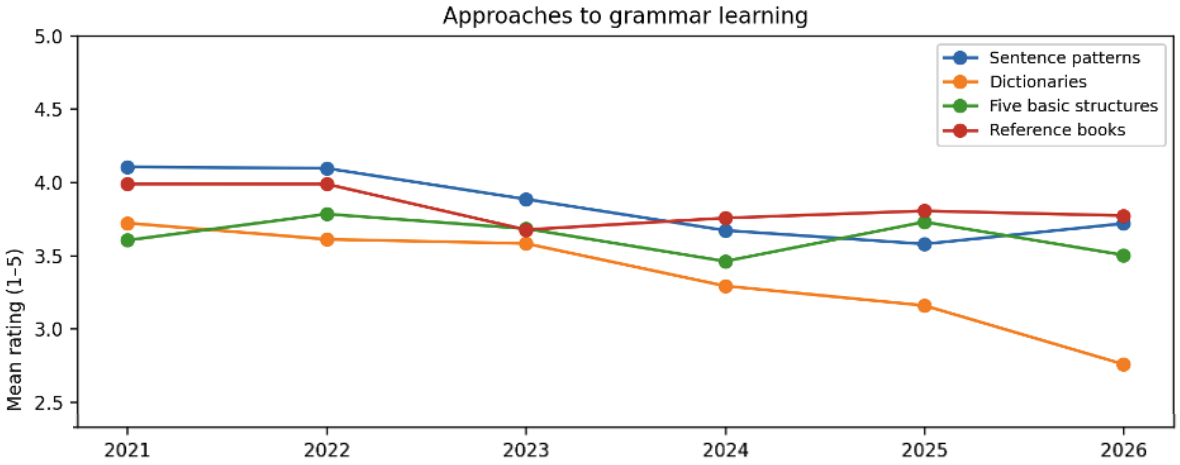
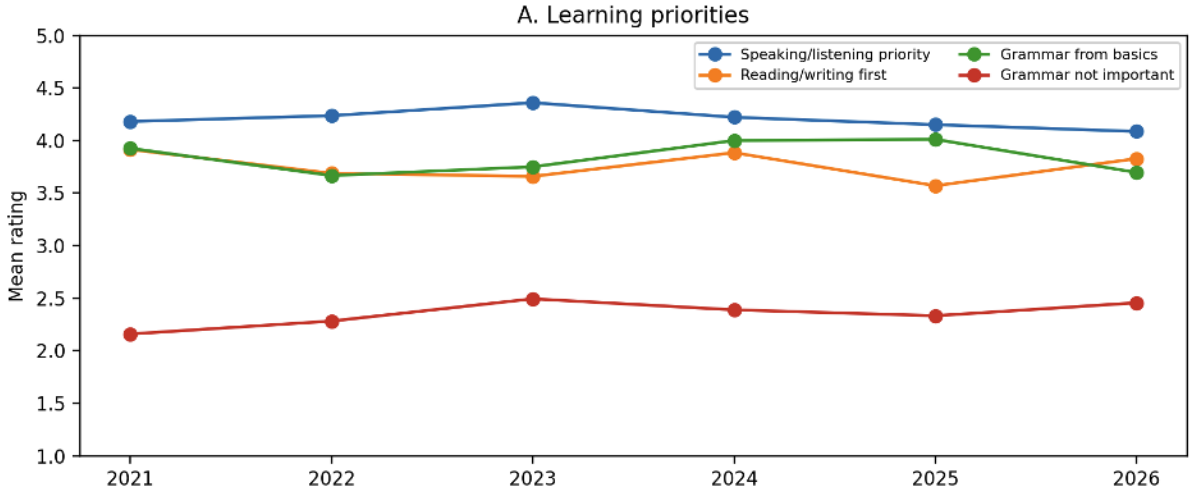


Figure 3: Expectations for English education: learning priorities, classroom style, and learning goals



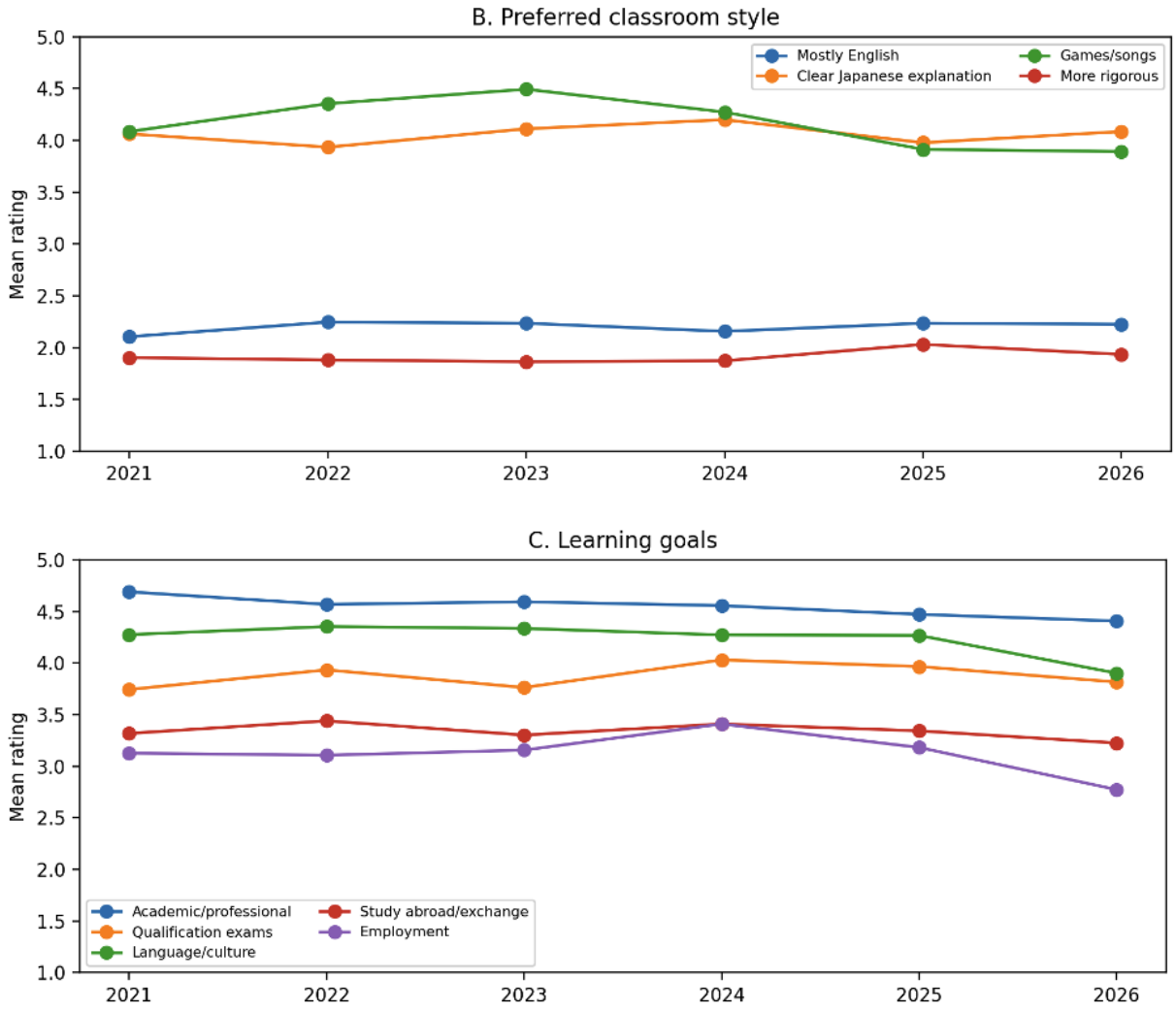
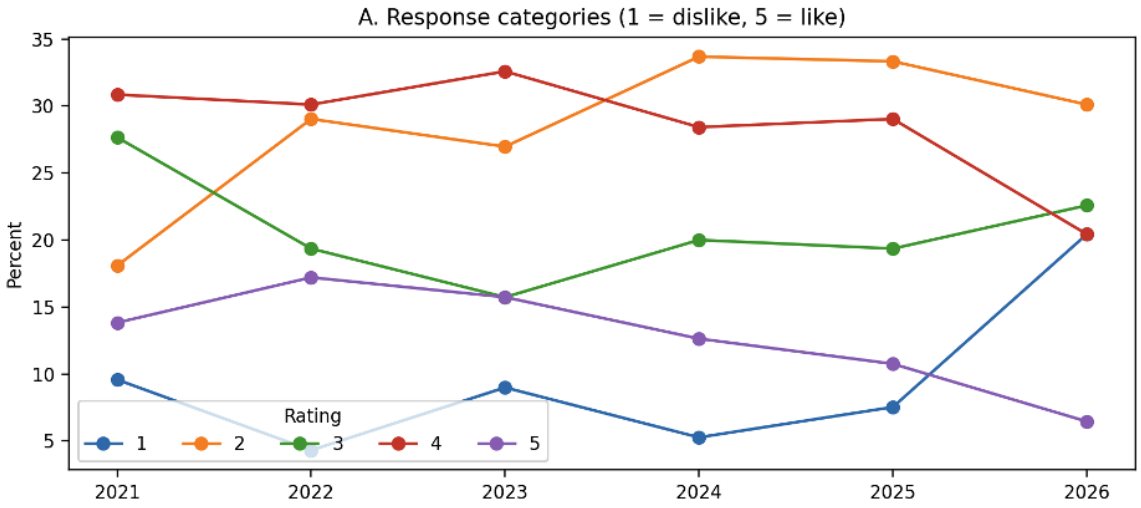


Figure 3 shows expectations concerning learning priorities, classroom style, and future goals. Students consistently valued speaking and listening, but they also expressed a strong desire to relearn grammar systematically from the basics. They preferred clear explanation in Japanese to classes conducted mostly in English. Future-oriented goals remained comparatively stable, with English for academic or professional purposes receiving particularly high ratings. These findings show that communicative aspirations coexisted with demand for explicit linguistic support.

3.3 Attitudes toward English Learning

Figure 4 shows a marked shift in attitudes toward English. In 2021, 44.7% of students gave positive responses and 27.7% gave negative responses. By 2026, only 26.9% were positive, whereas 50.5% were negative; negative responses therefore exceeded positive responses by 23.7 percentage points. The mean attitude score declined from 3.21 in 2021 to 2.62 in 2026

Figure 4: Attitudes toward English learning, 2021–2026



The six-cohort difference in mean attitude scores was statistically significant, $F(5, 551) = 3.62$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .032$. Tukey HSD comparisons showed that the 2026 cohort reported significantly less positive attitudes than the 2021 cohort (adjusted $p = .010$), 2022 cohort ($p = .003$), and 2023 cohort ($p = .017$). Differences between 2026 and 2024 ($p = .075$) or 2025 ($p = .205$) were not statistically significant after Tukey adjustment. The effect size for the omnibus test was small, indicating a statistically detectable but modest cohort effect.

3.4 Exploratory Comparison of Curriculum-Period Cohorts

Table 2. Exploratory Comparisons of Confidence and Attitudes between 2021–2024 and 2025–2026 Cohorts

Outcome	2021–24 M	2025–26 M	Difference	95% CI	p	Bonf. p	Hedges g
Reading	3.14	3.22	+0.08	[-0.11, +0.27]	.415	1.000	+0.07
Listening	2.90	2.90	+0.01	[-0.20, +0.21]	.956	1.000	+0.01
Writing	2.47	2.28	-0.19	[-0.38, -0.01]	.035	.210	-0.19
Speaking	1.97	1.85	-0.12	[-0.28, +0.04]	.155	.932	-0.13
Grammar	2.37	2.13	-0.24	[-0.42, -0.06]	.008	.048	-0.24
Attitude toward English	3.19	2.82	-0.37	[-0.58, -0.16]	< .001	.004	-0.31

Exploratory comparisons indicated lower writing confidence, grammar confidence, and attitudes toward English in the 2025–2026 group before adjustment for multiple testing. After Bonferroni adjustment across the six outcomes, grammar confidence (unadjusted $p = .008$; adjusted $p = .048$; $g = -0.24$; mean-difference 95% CI [−0.42, −0.06]) and attitudes toward English (unadjusted $p < .001$; adjusted $p = .004$; $g = -0.31$; 95% CI [−0.58, −0.16]) remained statistically significant. The writing difference did not remain significant after adjustment. These effect sizes were small. Thus, the exploratory comparison identified lower grammar confidence and less positive attitudes among the 2025–2026 cohorts relative to the 2021–2024 cohorts.

4. Discussion

4.1 Persistence of the Receptive–Productive Confidence Gap

The first major finding is the persistence of the receptive–productive confidence gap. Across all six cohorts, students reported greater confidence in reading—and generally in listening—than in writing and speaking. The absence of statistically significant omnibus differences in the five confidence domains reinforces the interpretation that the underlying structure of confidence was relatively stable. In other words, policy change did not coincide with a broad shift in how these cohorts perceived their productive abilities.

This finding should not be interpreted as evidence that the curriculum had no effects on objective proficiency, which was not measured. It instead shows that the transition to a curriculum emphasizing communication had not, by 2026, been accompanied by a clear increase in students' confidence in speaking or writing at this institution. The distinction between policy goals and learner self-perceptions is important because learners' willingness to use English may depend partly on whether they experience themselves as capable language users.

4.2 Grammar Confidence and Learner Needs

Grammar presents a particularly important pattern. Students expressed continuing interest in systematic grammar learning while grammar confidence remained low. In the exploratory period comparison, grammar confidence was lower in the 2025–2026 cohorts than in the 2021–2024 cohorts, and this difference remained significant after multiple-testing adjustment, although the effect size was small. The finding does not show that students reject communication-oriented learning. Rather, it suggests that some learners may view explicit grammatical knowledge as a foundation needed to participate confidently in communication.

The earlier version (Nakamura, 2025; Nakamura, 2026) of this study described this pattern as 'grammar anxiety.' The present analysis uses more cautious terminology because the questionnaire did not include a validated anxiety measure. Low grammar confidence combined with a strong desire for systematic instruction may indicate grammar-related insecurity or anxiety, but anxiety itself was not directly measured. Future research should include validated measures of language anxiety and self-efficacy to test this interpretation.

4.3 Learner Goals and the L2 Learning Experience

The L2MSS offers one way to interpret the coexistence of future-oriented goals and low present confidence. Students continued to value English for academic and professional purposes and to express a desire to improve communicative skills. Their future reasons for learning English therefore did not disappear. At the same time, many students reported low confidence in productive language use. This may create a tension between the English user learners would like to become and their current sense of competence.

From the perspective of the Ideal L2 Self, motivation may be strengthened when a desired future identity feels attainable. The L2 Learning Experience further emphasizes the importance of learners' immediate and accumulated experiences of instruction, success, difficulty, and classroom participation. Ueki and Takeuchi's (2012) findings in a Japanese EFL context similarly connect the Ideal L2 Self, learning attitudes, self-efficacy, anxiety, and motivation. The present study cannot test these causal relationships, but its pattern is consistent

with the possibility that persistent productive-skill insecurity makes future communicative competence feel less attainable for some learners.

4.4 Affective Change during Curriculum Transition

The strongest statistically detectable change concerned attitudes toward English. The 2026 cohort reported significantly fewer positive attitudes than the 2021–2023 cohorts, and the exploratory period comparison also showed less positive attitudes in 2025–2026 than in 2021–2024. The effect sizes were small, but the descriptive change is educationally notable: in 2026, negative responses accounted for just over half of the cohort, while positive responses accounted for only about one quarter.

This result suggests that affective engagement deserves attention alongside skill development. Importantly, the finding should not be reduced to a claim that students simply 'lack motivation.' Their future-oriented goals remained relatively strong. A more plausible interpretation to investigate is whether learners perceive an increasing mismatch between what they are expected or hope to do with English and the competence or support they experience in reaching those goals.

4.5 Alternative Explanations and Structural Context

The timing of the observed differences makes the curriculum transition a relevant context for interpreting the findings. The 2025 and 2026 college-entry cohorts had completed the revised upper-secondary curriculum introduced progressively from FY2022, whereas the 2021–2024 cohorts preceded its full implementation. Nevertheless, the observed differences cannot be attributed uniquely to curriculum reform. Because implementation occurred over calendar time rather than through experimental assignment, curriculum exposure coincided with cohort-specific and historical conditions. These include the COVID-19 pandemic, changes in entrance-examination preparation, digital learning environments and generative or translation technologies, teacher practices, and broader cohort differences. None of these factors was measured directly in the present survey.

These confounders do not make the longitudinal case evidence uninformative; rather, they define what the evidence can support. The study documents changes and continuities in learner perceptions during a policy-transition period under relatively stable institutional data-collection conditions. It generates hypotheses about curriculum implementation and learner experience that should be tested with multi-institutional designs capable of measuring classroom practices, prior learning conditions, and objective proficiency.

4.6 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations constrain interpretation. First, participants came from a single regional public nursing college, so the findings are not nationally generalizable and may reflect characteristics of nursing students or this institution's applicant population. Second, the data are self-reported perceptions rather than objective proficiency measures. Third, the questionnaire was author-developed and was not designed as a validated psychometric measure of L2MSS constructs, anxiety, or self-efficacy. Fourth, different students were surveyed each year, making this a repeated cross-sectional rather than individual longitudinal design. Fifth, only two cohorts are currently available that completed the full upper-secondary sequence

under the revised curriculum, and curriculum exposure cannot be separated from cohort year or other historical influences.

Future research should therefore replicate the survey across multiple institutions, include validated measures of motivation, anxiety, and self-efficacy, add objective measures of language proficiency, and continue data collection across additional post-reform cohorts. Linking learner perceptions with information about classroom practice and assessment would also help clarify why confidence and affective responses develop as they do.

5. Conclusion

This six-year repeated cross-sectional case study examined learner perceptions during the phased implementation of Japan's revised national English curriculum framework. The most consistent pattern was a persistent imbalance between receptive and productive confidence: students generally reported greater confidence in reading and listening than in writing and speaking, while grammar confidence also remained comparatively low. Inferential analyses showed no significant omnibus cohort differences in the five confidence domains, suggesting that this structure was relatively stable rather than substantially transformed during the study period.

At the same time, grammar confidence and affective attitudes warrant particular attention. Grammar confidence was lower in the 2025–2026 cohorts than in the 2021–2024 cohorts in the exploratory comparison, despite continuing demand for systematic grammar instruction. More importantly, attitudes toward English differed significantly across the six cohorts, with the 2026 cohort reporting less positive attitudes than several earlier cohorts.

Viewed through the L2MSS as an interpretive framework, these findings point to a possible tension between learners' future-oriented aspirations and their present learning experiences. Students continued to recognize the academic, professional, and communicative value of English, yet many did not feel confident in productive language use and the most recent cohort reported markedly negative attitudes. Communication-oriented reform may therefore need to attend not only to opportunities for language use but also to learners' experiences of progress, competence, explicit support, and attainable success.

The study does not establish that curriculum reform caused these patterns. It provides case-based evidence from one institution during a period in which curriculum transition coincided with pandemic-related disruption, technological change, and other cohort-specific influences. For teachers and curriculum designers, the practical implication is therefore not to choose between grammar and communication, but to consider how explicit linguistic foundations and supported productive practice can work together. Future reform should ask not only what learners are expected to do with English, but also whether their learning experiences help them feel increasingly capable of becoming the English users those reforms envision.

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