

Developing English language programs for students with specific needs

Clive Langham

Abstract

This paper considers provision for English language classes at a dental school in Japan. An outline of currently available English programs is given and student attitudes to types of English programs are discussed in relation to surveys of second and fourth year students. Suggestions for developing English language programs that meet the requirements of students having specific needs are made.

Key words : Student survey, English for General Purposes, English for Specific Purposes, English language programs

Background

The majority of universities in Japan require students to take classes in English and often one other foreign language. Such classes are usually part of the general education courses covered in years one and two of a four-year degree program. Students majoring in science or technology will probably find themselves in general English classes, with forty or more students, meeting once or twice a week for ninety minutes. In a previous paper Langham, (2001) the author outlined the dilemma for educators involved in developing English language programs for students with what should be very specific goals. The problem being whether to aim at English for general purposes EGP or at English for specific purposes ESP. EGP has also been called TENOR, teaching English for no obvious reason by Abbot, (1981). TENOR learners are generally classified as school students whose motivation levels are low and unclear and who have few if any specific needs. ESP learners, on the other hand, are usually found in higher education, having clear goals and higher motivation Dudley-Evans & St. John, (1998). The results of a survey carried out with second year dental students suggested that students tend to prefer EGP to ESP. A later survey with fourth year students from the same institution found, however, that attitudes had changed and students had become more aware of the direction their English studies should be taking.

English studies beyond years one and two

Students in years one and two at Nihon University, School of Dentistry attend four fifty minute classes of general English a week with a focus on communicative skills. Until recently, no provision for English classes was made beyond the second year. With the gradual internationalization of Japan and recognition of a growing need for undergraduate dental students to have a reasonable com-

mand of English, a number of curriculum changes were instituted. A course entitled 'Medical and Dental English' was introduced for all third year students. This course involves two fifty-minute classes a week, one taught by a native speaker and the other taught by a specialist in the field of dentistry. The general aim of the course was to give students the skills to be able to read medical and dental texts in English. Classes with the native speaker focused on speed-reading and vocabulary development, using general scientific texts. Classes with the Japanese teacher were conducted in Japanese and introduced technical terms, as well as trends in current research. Although no adequate survey of student attitudes to the above course has been carried out, it is thought to have been well received and after further modifications the program will enter its third year. From informal discussion with participants, it is clear that students see the increasing need to be able to read in English in their chosen field.

The need for appropriate English language instruction is being increasingly felt by universities in Japan. We find, for example, the case for ESP in Japan being put forward by Orr (1998) who states that,

"Anyone current on the latest trends in Japanese higher education knows that university administrators and faculty in Japan are very interested in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Motivated by new policies and priorities at national and local levels, Japanese universities are now in the midst of rethinking their English language curriculums and searching for better options. ESP is growing in popularity and university educators in Japan are expressing great interest in this new phenomenon since it seems to hold promise for more effective and genuinely useful English language instruction for Japanese students who increasingly need English for specific purposes in academic, vocational or professional contexts".

With this in mind, an optional class in English was introduced for fourth-year students. This was the first time an optional English class had been offered. The class was taught by a native speaker and met once a week for a fourteen-week semester. All students who elected to take the course had gone through two years of general English and one semester of Medical and Dental English. When planning the course, it was difficult to predict how many students might enrol and what their motivation would be. Experience of the student survey carried out in year two, and also of the course entitled Medical and Dental English, suggested that an ESP approach might be the most appropriate one. In year three, with a class size of over sixty, we had concentrated on reading skills, but with smaller numbers in an optional class, I considered there was more scope for a listening and discussion type class based on technical or at least semi-technical material appropriate to dental students. In the end, the course name became 'Talking about Science' and in the region of twenty students elected to take the program. Attendance over the duration of the semester was generally good, but suffered from the fact that students were pre-occupied with the core subjects of their dental studies, many of which made huge demands on their time and energy. To give readers an idea of the kind of topics covered, I have listed below the titles of the units in the course. Units

one to three of the program are attached as appendices at the end of this article in full.

1. Is the end of dentures?
2. The risks of fluoride are unknown
3. Electric toothbrush fails to impress researchers
4. New device can detect tooth decay
5. The Phelophepa healthcare train
6. Is there a solution for missing teeth?
7. Dental implants are a natural solution
8. What is a phobia?
9. Treating patients with dental phobia
10. What do we need to know about snacking?
11. Adult orthodontic patients
12. New dental implant technology
13. What is dental trauma?
14. Dental trauma : Treating a broken tooth
15. Dental trauma : Prognosis and prevention

Course content, methodology and approach

From the titles given above, readers will be aware that the focus was on ESP. However, all material, although specific to dentistry, was of a general nature and not derived directly from scientific journals. Class materials were sourced on-line from websites concerning dentistry and dental topics. These were easy to find on the Web, but varied in quality a great deal. Materials were modified, re-written, simplified and in some cases combined by the teacher. The format of the two-hour class was as follows. The theme of the week was introduced orally and students were encouraged to brainstorm the topic by giving examples, offering knowledge of the topic, listing pro's and con's, as well as asking questions and checking understanding. This part of the class sometimes lasted for up to 15 minutes. All necessary vocabulary was listed on the blackboard and, by the end of this section, most key vocabulary had been listed. In this way, students' existing knowledge of the topic was accessed sufficiently to maximize their comprehension. After that, a listening session was introduced. Students were provided with a worksheet containing about four or five listening comprehension questions. The teacher read out a prepared summary of the topic and students listened twice before completing the questions. Students were encouraged to check their answers together in pairs. The emphasis throughout the course was on participation and interaction, so the teacher valued this cross-checking with a partner very highly. When the listening was particularly difficult, students were allowed to listen a third and final time. All answers were then checked together as a class. As a final part of the listening, students were expected to attempt a cloze test of the same topic. This cloze test focused mostly on target vocabulary much of which was specific to dentistry. When this was checked and completed satisfactorily, students were given ten minutes to read the

completed text silently. The final part of the class was given over to discussion of the topic. It is well known that Japanese education does not generally provide students with strong discussion type skills, and for many students this was probably the most difficult part of the entire class. However, since there were only a small number of students in the class and the atmosphere was generally relaxed and non-threatening most students were able to make several comments. One or two students found it difficult and resorted to Japanese or used another student to help them. Both of these strategies were considered acceptable by the teacher and indeed encouraged. In some cases, when all of the above had been completed, there was time over at the end of the class and it became something of a problem to know how to use this time. In the end, it developed into what is commonly known as 'English conversation' in Japan. As I have shown, the aim of the program was to develop students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar in their chosen field and an ESP type approach had been adopted. So, how and why did English conversation find its way into the last ten minutes of a course entitled 'Talking about Science'? As will be seen from some of the comments made in the program evaluation, students place a lot of emphasis on the ability to speak English, somehow thinking that this skill may be considered completely independently of any other skills in English.

At the end of the last class, a student survey was conducted orally in class. Previous surveys had been written ones with students selecting from a number of multiple-choice answers as well as some open ended questions. In this case, in a class where there had been a lot of emphasis on speaking skills, it seemed appropriate to gather student comments orally. In a fairly relaxed atmosphere, the technique seemed to work well and each student was able to put forward an opinion concerning his/her experience in the class. Below is a compilation of some of the comments from students. Where the content of comments overlapped, these were combined and sometimes summarized by the teacher. It seems appropriate to use these comments, and those derived from previous surveys, as the basis for further discussion on the types of English language programs we should be delivering in Japan.

Comments derived from student evaluation

1. I think speaking and discussion are very important. I am happy because I got new information on dental topics.
2. Discussion is important. Reading, I can do alone.
3. I have no chance to speak English. I think it is very important to speak English for my future job.
4. I enjoyed the dental topics. Sometimes they linked up with lectures given by other professors.
5. The dental topics were interesting. I could learn a lot of new words that will be useful for me in the future. I also like listening to various opinions from other students and the teacher.
6. I want to hear more about English life and English culture. I also enjoyed English conversation. I want to do more. Information about dentistry in the US and the UK was also useful for me.

7. I found it difficult to speak in English and I couldn't take part in the discussion easily. But this gives me motivation to improve.

In student comment number one, the statement shows that students appreciate the importance of speaking and discussion and this kind of comment is reflected widely in similar surveys of university students in Japan. For example, Nagano (1998) reports that in surveys of attitudes to English language programs at universities in Japan,

“students have consistently placed the need for spoken communication in first place, with reading or science and technical English coming midway down the list.”

This is echoed by Matsuura et al. (2001) who state that the results of a student survey concerning learner beliefs about important instructional areas show that,

“Traditional instructional areas (reading, writing and grammar) were not considered as important as speaking and listening.”

The same student makes a comment concerning new information on dentistry topics. This is worthy of note, as it shows ESP in action and the students using English to access new information relevant to their current and future studies. Comment number two again confirms the importance that students attach to spoken English. It also suggests that students realize the importance of spending what is very limited class-time on oral/aural skills. However, whether reading skills can be relegated safely to an at home type of activity is extremely doubtful. This author's opinion is that reading skills need to be integrated into a global ESP environment with different skills feeding off each other. It is, of course, quite possible that there will be people who will argue that reading is central to ESP and that other skills will come from it naturally. Comments four and five emphasize that students had an interest in scientific topics. In comment five, an awareness of the need for knowledge of terminology is shown. Comment six is interesting in that it highlights how in many students' minds learning English is inseparable from English culture and life. This kind of attitude can be a problem for the teaching of ESP where the emphasis is not on teaching culture or life, but on equipping students with sufficient English skills to be able to access the information they need for their job. As for English conversation, the previous survey of second year students had already shown that English conversation looms large in the consciousnesses of Japanese students. The plethora of English conversation schools, TV and radio programs devoted to learning English, not to mention books and magazines bears this out. Comment seven was made by a highly motivated member of the group who performed well in reading and probably had the best vocabulary of any member of the group. When asked to comment, this particular student resorted to Japanese frequently and had to be assisted by other members of the group.

The way forward

The results of the two surveys of second and fourth year students suggest that over time dental students become increasingly aware of the need to be able to function in English, particularly where it is relevant to their field. Anecdotal evidence from post-graduate students in the same institution

suggests that this feeling increases to include the skills required to write and comprehend scientific papers and make presentations. Yet, the problem remains for the teacher of whether or not EGP can or should be gradually phased out in favor of a totally ESP type approach. In the context of English language education in Japan, it is probably inevitable that many teachers involved in the production and teaching of English programs at first and second year university level will go down the road of EGP. However, the opinion of this author is that classes of this kind are a disservice to students with specific needs. There is considerable scope, if not for hard-line ESP, for an integrated approach. In other words, meeting the students' demands for 'English conversation', but also helping students to develop the skills they need for their future careers. Programs need to help students become more sophisticated consumers and make more informed choices about what they want to study and how.

Appendix

The following are examples of units 1 to 3 of the course.

TAS 1

Is this the end of dentures?

Answer these questions.

1. What are dentures?
2. What are they made of?
3. What were they made of before?
4. What problems do people have who wear dentures?
5. Look at the title and try to predict the content of the story.

Vocabulary

1. General words

spark, revolution, breakthrough, replace, identical, to form
regenerate, specific,

2. Scientific words

X was treated with Y, enzymes, cell clusters, tissue, to implant, tooth crowns enamel, dentin, dentures, bridges, crowns

Listening

1. What did the doctors grow? Where?
2. In the future, how can a person replace a lost tooth?
3. How many weeks did it take to form tooth crowns containing enamel and dentin?
4. When will it be possible to regenerate human teeth?

Dictation

Their work could ____ a dental ____ and bring an end to the need for _____. The advance could one day allow a person to ____ a lost tooth with an ____ one grown from his or her own cells. The researchers ____ them into the abdomens of rats.

Discussion

1. Talk about the topic with the person next to you.
2. Write a short comment on the topic.

TAS 2

The risks of fluoride in water are unknown

Answer these questions

1. What is fluoride?
2. What does it do?
3. What risks might it have?

Vocabulary

widespread, exposure, rise, contradictory, evidence tooth decay, fluoride toothpaste, toxic effects, osteoporosis, mottling of teeth

Listening

1. According to research done in the 1960's by how much was tooth decay reduced in children using fluoride?
2. What do we know about the use of fluoride toothpaste today?
3. How many problems might be caused by fluoride?
4. List the problems.
5. How many people in England drink fluoridated water?

Dictation

For a long ____ scientists have ____ that fluoride ____ tooth ____ in children. However, today the use of fluoride in toothpaste is now so ____ that people's ____ ____ to fluoride is no longer known. It ____ that use of fluoride toothpaste ____ ____ so much in the last twenty years that ____ research is now _____. Anti-fluoride campaigners say the MRC report ____ to look at the ____ of other chemicals used in water fluoridation.

Discussion

1. Talk about the topic with the person next to you.
2. Write a short comment on the topic.

TAS 3

Electric toothbrush fails to impress researchers

1. Do you have an electric toothbrush?
2. What are the advantages of electric toothbrushes?
3. Can you think of any disadvantages?

Vocabulary

experts, split into, trials, remove, manual, short term, long term, borderline, effective

Listening

1. How many people were in the trial?
2. How many types of toothbrush were there in the trial?
3. How much more plaque did electric toothbrushes remove?
4. How much less gum disease was there?
5. What are the long-term benefits?

Dictation

A group of independent ____ carried out research ____ electric toothbrushes. They ____ results from 29 clinical trials of electric toothbrushes involving 2,500 people. Electric toothbrushes were ____ 5 types depending on the action of their heads. After the trials, it was found that electric toothbrushes ____ 7% more plaque and ____ 17% less gum disease than ____ toothbrushes. However, these were only short-term results and the ____ are probably borderline in the _____. Of the five kinds of action, it was ____ that the rotation-oscillation type was the most _____. Dr Gordon Watkins, the Chairman of the British Dental Association, said "Which toothbrush you use is a matter of personal choice. Electric toothbrushes are at least as effective as manual toothbrushes."

Discussion

1. Talk about the topic with the person next to you.
2. Write a short comment on the topic.

Bibliography

1. Abbot, G. (1991) Encouraging communication in English: a paradox ELT Journal 35(3)
2. Dudley-Evans, T., & St. John, M. J. (1998) Developments in English for Specific Purposes—an interdisciplinary approach. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press
3. Langham, C. S. (2001) English language programs at Japanese universities and the case for English for Specific Purposes Transactions of Nihon University School of Dentistry, General Studies, No. 29 (2001)

Developing English language programs for students with specific needs

4. Matsuura, H., Chiba, R. & Hilderbrandt, P.(2001) JALT Journal Vol. 23. No. 1 May 2001
5. Nagano, R.(1998) Approaching EST through abstracts. The language Teacher Online 22. 11.(1998)
6. Orr, T.(1998) ESP for Japanese universities : A guide for intelligent reform. The Language Teacher, 22 (11) : 19-21