

An integrated skills-communicative English course for university students majoring in subjects other than English

Jean-Pierre Chretien and Grant Mitchell

Abstract

This article describes a communicative English course designed for first year dentistry students at a university in Tokyo. The course aims to provide more opportunities for students to be engaged in English classroom activities. The activities are collaborative and integrate all language skills providing more practice time and creating a rewarding and efficient team teaching experience. The design process addresses constraints in the existing program that are within the control of teachers, especially with regard to methodology and use of limited instructional time. The course is a work-in-progress and there are yet to be any conclusive results. Observation, however, shows students are well engaged, attending regularly and displaying confidence and willingness to use the English they already have, possibly indicating a rise in motivation to learn more.

Key words : Improved engagement, integrated skills, collaborative activities, communicative English, team teaching.

Introduction

This article describes a communicative English course for first year dentistry students at Nihon University School of Dentistry, Tokyo, Japan. The course aims to provide more opportunities for students to become engaged in English classroom activities in which all language skills are integrated.

During the design process we addressed several constraints in the existing English program, some of which are within direct control of teachers. Although some of the constraints seemed intractable the authors found they could easily make adjustments in methodology and use of instructional time.

This description of the course, the design process and the methods employed to overcome these constraints, is intended to provide insights for other teachers facing similar challenges implementing a curriculum for non-English majors in university English programs.

Toward a new course in communicative English

The direction taken in the development of this course has several influences. In 2004 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan (Monbukagakusho) issued a call to reform English language education at the university level calling for “forward

thinking English language programs that attempt to link classroom learning and what happens in the world...producing graduates who can function in English in their chosen field.” In response to the Monbukagakusho’s call for reform, the university, in which the redesigned course is a part of an English program, enacted changes, particularly in the areas of team teaching and materials development, as described by Langham (2006). For example, dental case studies and excerpts from medical journals are now used in upper level “ESP” courses, and efforts have been made to enhance the learning experience by merging instruction from native speaking teachers with the Japanese-speaking professors.

An extensive body of classroom-centered research has investigated the types of tasks likely to stimulate interactive language that supports the development of communicative competence.

Widdowson (1990) defined the notion of communicative competence as “...an ability to interpret discourse whether the emphasis is on productive or receptive behavior.” He prescribed an approach to developing communicative competence warning that the approach “...should avoid treating the different skills and abilities that constitute competence in isolation of each other...If the aim of language learning is to develop the underlying interpreting ability, then it would seem reasonable to adopt an integrated approach to achieve it.”

Small-group work prompts students to use a greater range of language functions than whole class activities (Long 1976), and there is more negotiation of meaning in activities in which the exchange of information is essential for the successful completion of the activity (Doughty & Pica 1986). English programs should begin with some review and practice of previously learned English skills to build confidence and better prepare learners for ESP content (Evans & Squires 2006).

Agreeing that a communicative English course model would best help students to review and build confidence while practicing communication skills, the next step is to better understand particular characteristics of the students in the program, then address existing constraints that are within our control.

Student characteristics

Two characteristics of the students are crucial to appreciating the teaching challenge faced:

1) The students are not majoring in English but are enrolled in a rigorous dentistry program featuring technical lectures, laboratory work and high stakes testing,
and

2) Hailing from all over Japan, the students bring with them a diversity of preparation and experience in English; mostly grammar-translation classes in high school. The dentistry program also attracts older students returning to school after involvement in the workplace who may have been away from English for some time.

These characteristics affect motivation, confidence, readiness and ability to participate in a communication-oriented course. Acknowledging these descriptors modified the teacher’s

expectations and guided the design of appropriate materials and activities.

Constraints

We identified seven constraints that impede student progress in developing English communicative skills. They are listed in Table 1 in order of the degree of control teachers have to act on the constraint. On the right is a list of actions to address the constraint.

Table 1 : Constraints and proposed actions for change

Constraints	Actions
Teachers working independently	Collaboration in planning & teaching
Ineffective or inappropriate textbooks	Innovative materials design
Limited instructional time	Create cycles around universal topics
Examination requirements	Recycle activities in testing
Translation oriented students	Design collaborative & multi-modal activities
Diversity of students' backgrounds	Design collaborative activities
High university expectations	Integrate & scaffold skills

Constraints within the control of teachers

Three of the seven constraints are within the control of the teachers :

- 1) The manner in which teachers are used
- 2) The type of instructional materials used
- 3) The way instructional time is used

Addressing these constraints in this university setting is reliant on forming an effective teaching team, designing innovative instructional material and using the limited class time efficiently and creatively.

Previously, the first year curriculum was taught by two teachers as two independent courses, usually employing separate materials, requirements, goals and methodology. After a 50-minute class, the students moved to another classroom and, on the whole, the two teachers did not coordinate to control for redundancies in material covered, nor for gaps in skills practice. The redesigned course allows the students to work on a single topic for both 50-minute periods, without the need to move to another classroom, with the teachers exchanging classrooms to continue the process of guiding students through activities. Where there was separation there is now complete integration. Between each class the topics are consistent and the material coordinated so there are no overlaps or gaps.

To maximize the use of limited instructional time the semester is organized into topic cycles of 2 to 3 weeks, with each divided into activity segments. The material for each cycle is

centered on a current global “issue” and all activities are carefully designed to be student-focused, communicative, collaborative and integrating all language skills. The curriculum aims to create a learning environment that resembles more the dynamism of an interactive laboratory of language experiment and discovery than a lecture hall.

Cycles & Segments

The course is designed to give equal weight to all language skills. Each segment of a cycle emphasizes a single skill while each activity within that segment allows the student to incorporate practice of all language skills.

The first Reading segment of every cycle is an introduction to the topic’s key vocabulary. In this segment students are required to practice brainstorming, scan for vocabulary in an article, gather and share information from the article, and take notes using a graphic organizer. For example in the cycle on Waste & Recycling students use a simple graphic organizer to list the kinds of garbage they personally produced in a week and how they think that garbage is ultimately disposed of. In groups of 4 they receive 3 pertinent vocabulary words and asked to find a relationship between the words relying, not on dictionaries, but their own (and their group’s) background knowledge. Then they scan the provided text looking for the words in context, confirming meaning and viewing usage of the vocabulary within grammatical structures. Finally, they share their findings with other groups, taking notes along the way. In this way we reinforce collaboration, prediction, scanning and natural acquisition of vocabulary in context with authentic texts.

In the following Speaking segment students draw on the vocabulary acquired in Reading to discuss the issues surrounding the topic, taking additional notes in their notebook binders. The style of the speaking activity varies. For example in the cycle about Energy students were given a list of 20 alternative energy sources, both imaginary and actual. In groups of 4 they then identified the actual alternative energy sources, then separated and prioritized the list into three categories: low environmental impact, efficiency and suitability for Japan, using a graphic organizer. Then the groups compared results with other groups.

In both cases, the activities give students opportunities to draw on prior and peer knowledge, negotiate meaning between fellow interlocutors, all the while building a corpus of topic related vocabulary in context. We found this to be an effective method for overcoming the physical constraints of time and space that they, and most other teachers, have had to deal with (short class times, large classes) by utilizing students prior knowledge, abilities and desire to express ideas about global issues that matter to them, and to be teaching tools for others in the group. Furthermore when the teaching activities are student-focused, the majority of the learning will be student-led.

Guidelines are given to the students to help them extend the topics outside of class and to review the vocabulary in more meaningful ways. Whenever possible students are directed to

relevant websites. Extending the learning to non-class settings contributes to negating the effect of the constraints mentioned above.

The following week, in the third Listening segment the activity extends the discussion and reinforces listening skills, question formation and clarification of understanding. For example, a listening activity on Endangered Animals featured a Bingo game in which the game board consists of 10 endangered animals students had previously read about and discussed. In groups of 4, members take turns as the “caller” reading out a short description of the animal. If they recognize the animal they place a marker on the game board and can acquire an additional clue from the teacher.

This type of listening activity incorporates characteristics of real life listening characterized by certain features. The Bingo game described above is a “problem solving” exercise in which students hear the information relevant to a particular problem and then set themselves to solve it through group discussion. Students control the amount of repetition and seek advice from the teachers by asking pertinent questions. A graphic representation helps hearers to grasp the information to resolve the problem more easily (Ur 1992).

In the final Writing segment of the cycle, information gathered on the topic is shared through various writing related activities. We ask students to “free write” and use class time as a writing clinic in which students, writing in pairs, can freely seek advice from the teacher and other students. We do not restrict “writing” to topic summaries, but include the making of visual aids and preparing for presentations as part of the writing segment. For example, in the cycle about Dental Health, students composed and illustrated dental health pamphlets aimed at teaching dental health practices. The pamphlets are a good example of portable visual aids made for use in short presentations. Again, guidelines are given for extending the topic outside of class and reviewing the vocabulary and whenever possible students are directed to relevant websites.

Evaluation & Assessment

Evaluation of students is ongoing and based primarily on the students’ notebook binders which become valuable “artifacts” showing a student’s effort and revealing “the insight and transformation of the student’s ideas” (Lyons & La Boskey 2002). The notebooks are physical evidence of a student’s commitment and achievement in synthesizing information. In the middle of the semester, and again near to the end, students share and criticize the notebooks in small groups using a graphic organizer to help record achievements and organize comments. The information is reported to the teachers who found that, on the whole, the students gave each other critical, honest and supportive comments. As with “portfolio assessment,” typically used in writing courses, we gathered a collection of other material from the students including a writing sample, collaborative posters, hand made pamphlets and other visual aids used in presentations.

Additionally the university requires a paper examination given after the last class of each semester and which must account for at least 60% of their total assessment for the semester. For this we attempted to design tests of some validity that recalled and mimicked the content of the activities in class, but being large-scale paper tests, with both the setting (50 min) and marking constrained in time, we were limited to creating gap filling and multiple choice exercises. We don't feel this approach is entirely successful in assessing the communicative abilities (with the exception of reading), which the students had been working so hard to improve and we feel that the current examination system, as a valid assessment tool, proved to be the weakest part of the course design. Moreover, during a make up class for those who failed, it was evident that many students were not applying scanning skills practiced in class, and they were not using time efficiently. We believe that this difference was because, in a paper examination, students must work alone on an activity that essentially measures only reading, decoding and memory skills, while in a communicative class, students work collaboratively practicing, perfecting and supporting each other in developing skills. We hope to partly resolve this conflict between the administrative requirements of the school and the goals of the course in the final tests. In a retest, held one week after the make up class, all of the students succeeded in passing the examination. While it was pleasing to see this positive result, we remained concerned that the achievements are somewhat hollow.

Constraints beyond the control of teachers

Four constraints are beyond the control of teachers. A discussion of the nature of these constraints is beyond the scope of this paper, but we simply highlight them to show how they affect the progress of students in acquiring facility and fluency in English.

Two of the constraints are concerned with the diversity of the students' past experiences in English. Most had years of exposure to passive classrooms using grammar-translation methodology. Few have traveled abroad and for many it is the first time they have interacted directly with English native speakers. Since this is primarily a program in dentistry there is little motive to excel in English in spite of the stated goals of the university.

Yet, the diversity of students' backgrounds can actually drive more communication of a certain kind since collaboration makes every student a potential teacher. Multi-modality in activities allows students to transform information into "...a range of modes-into a new sense, their sense, representing their interests in their world." (Kress 2000) by stimulating language development in different parts of the brain. Activities allow students the chance to acquire knowledge and language skills in ways other than through memorization and translation.

University expectations and practices

The other two constraints stem from university expectations and practices. Some of the aims of the English program at the university are to produce graduates who are able to read and

contribute to research in dentistry, to comfortably participate in international conferences, seminars and symposia, and to succeed in post-graduate study in dentistry at English medium universities.

But students, interested in graduate study overseas, would need to perform well on the TOEFL, especially the newer, internet based format (iBT) which measures an applicant's ability to perform effectively in simulated university classroom activities, requiring the test taker to integrate skills. In order for our students to be able to read a text, listen to another text, and prepare an oral response in less than a minute, without benefit of a dictionary would require several years of practice in integrated skills courses.

The university English program includes ESP courses given in the second and third year. At least some of the ESP courses focus on articles from medical journals—reading that is technical and demanding and would require considerable vocabulary and experience to process smoothly. While the academic expectations are admirable they may be unrealistic and out of range for most of the students given the limited instructional time and the varied backgrounds of the students. The few for whom these aims are within reach would have already possessed considerable skill in English before entering the dentistry program.

To perform well in the stated aims requires a student to be well rounded and an effective communicator, a person who can ask thoughtful questions, participate in class discussions, and write coherent arguments. To achieve these skills our students would need a great deal more time, practice, information and confidence to develop “schemata” described in Nunan (1989) as “the mental structures that store our knowledge.” There may also be cultural differences that affect how the university views communicative English classes and how it perceives the development of the skills necessary to attain its stated aims.

Summary of the course design

The purpose of this article is to provide insight into the process of developing a communicative English course that can help non-English majors to develop skills in English and be prepared for future challenges. The article does not attempt to analyze the effects of the changes made to the course at this time. Instead it offers a template for teachers operating under similar constraints who wish to introduce similar innovations to their respective teaching situations. This summary of what we achieved in redesigning a portion of a university's English program includes actions and beliefs, all of which we hope will encourage further discussion and action research.

In our redesign we embraced the notion that all students be given the opportunity to reach their potential, to develop skills in which they may be lacking, at their own pace, through guided practice in collaborative activities. We believe that a communicative and collaborative approach is beneficial in preparing these students for the ESP courses they will take in the future, and helping them develop the communication skills they will need attending conferences,

in reading and publishing research or attending graduate study overseas. We aimed to influence the behavior of students, which in turn might influence university expectations and practices by modeling success in creating students who can successfully function in English communication.

Throughout the process, we changed what was within our control—improving team teaching coordination, replacing textbooks with innovative original materials, integrating all language skills in every activity, and combining instructional time and reducing disruptive student movement between classrooms. We altered the timetable, and created cycles, which permit regular opportunities to start anew. The topics we chose for these cycles were of universal interest, recognizing that awareness of meaningful topics helps develop “schemata” as an integral part of being a good communicator. We ‘scaffold’ the skills of each student by allowing time and space for natural development, drawing on the skills and confidence of stronger students during small group exercises. The text and activities were organized into single sheet folded booklets that become a part of the students’ notebook binders. The booklets were designed this way to reduce the wasteful creation of multiple handouts, as well as to help students to stay organized and minimize student loss of materials.

We found that working in collaboration as a teaching team was not always easy—there may be as many conceptual differences as there are practical hurdles—but has been professionally rewarding due to the sharing of ideas. Yet we discovered it is important to acknowledge from the outset that the task of redesigning a course takes time and will face certain intractable constraints. Identifying specific roles for each teacher, capitalizing on an individual’s expertise, makes the design process more productive. Perceiving the task of redesigning the course as “action research,” with the goal of publishing the results or presenting the results of our efforts at a conference provides additional motivation for introducing innovations.

The choice of global issues topics of international and local importance as a base for the curriculum was informed by both the topic’s inherent interest, but also with eye on the school’s general educational philosophy which aims to expose students to a wide variety of intellectual ideas and encourage them to view these ideas in relation to dental treatment and society as a whole. Therefore we hope to be encouraging the development of well-rounded students who can communicate fluently in English and serve the needs of dental patients, not only in Japan, but worldwide, and creating graduates who can participate on the world stage through participation in medical aid associations and attending conferences where they will be able to read, understand and contribute to international dentistry research.

Also we are sharing our work with our colleagues by documenting and photographing some of the activities and informally showcasing active, enthusiastic students who are engaged in activities and are effective communicators. We do this by extending invitations to colleagues to visit our classes and, quite literally, by keeping our doors open allowing the noise and activity to spill out of the classroom attracting observers and visitors. There is nothing more impressive to an observer than to watch a group of student excitedly using the target language actively and

effectively.

It is our intention to continue the course in much the same style next year, but with minor adjustments in content and delivery, reflecting our own course evaluation and student feedback. It is our hope to move most of the materials online and create an interactive 'blog' to encourage additional student contributions and therefore to offer students greater opportunities to extend their learning and production outside of traditional classroom contexts.

Conclusion

In redesigning the English course for first year non English majors, a communicative approach, in which all language skills are integrated in activities oriented around meaningful topics, has shown students who are engaged in the class activities, and who display confidence and willingness to use the English they already possess. Collaborative activities use limited instructional time more efficiently, provide more practice time for students, allow for blending a variety of student levels and create a rewarding team teaching experience.

This course is a work-in-progress and has yet to yield conclusive results in regards to improvements in L2 competence, especially with regard to achievement on a university mandated paper-based examination. Observations of the students in class activities, however, is encouraging, showing active engagement with and use of English, and possibly indicating a rise in motivation.

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