Highlighting the relevance of English language courses: Two case studies

Hugh Graham-Marr

Introduction

It is far from being a new observation that students may question the relevance of what they are studying. As Frymier and Shulman (1995) write, "Frequently, students are skeptical of the significance of the material taught to them in the classroom" (40). They may be skeptical about how the material fits in with their core area of study or of how it relates to their future needs, whether personal or professional. Skeptical students may have little motivation beyond the proximal instrumental goal of gaining a mark in that course. This is perhaps a problem in particular for skills-based areas of learning such as language courses, where sustained practice that demands a relatively high degree of motivation is needed to gain any measure of proficiency, sustained practice. Further, such questions of relevance come to the forefront when the language course is a required part of the curriculum, which is, as Fryer et al (2014) note, a common situation "in numerous Asian-Pacific tertiary contexts—students' chosen department notwithstanding" (239) and indeed the situation of the two cases considered in this paper.

Motivation has long been recognized as central to language learning and much has been written about it. Researchers have focused on the reasons people study a language (Gardner, 1985; Deci and Ryan, 1985); learners and their beliefs about learning (Covington, 1998); classroom dynamics and changes in motivation through the course of learning (Dörnyei, 2001). All of this is beyond the scope of this paper. While motivation is the subtext, the thrust of the paper is far narrower: relevance, about which Kember et al. (2008) write in reference to the professional program they examined, "a failure to establish relevance… ..had a double-edged sword effect. Students enrolled in the programmes with an expectation that they would provide an education which would equip them for their future career. If it was not clear how what they were taught was relevant to future needs it was easy for morale to diminish" (260).

Case 1 investigates selecting and presenting material in a manner that emphasizes the relevance of an English language course to the students' core area of study, business administration. Case 2 examines the presentation of a general English textbook and the emphasis on more distant goals in a dentistry program.

日本大学歯学部　外国語分野（英語）
〒101-8310　東京都千代田区神田駿河台 1 - 8 -13
（受理：2022年 5 月31日）

Department of Foreign Languages (English), Nihon University School of Dentistry
1-8-13 Kanda-Surugadai, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101-8310, Japan

Case 1

This case involves first-year students in the English-stream program in the School of Business Administration at a large university in downtown Tokyo. By and large, students are quite motivated to study English as they have elected to join this English select program and are able to do so because they have a sufficient level of English. The classes in question were two Global Issues classes with a total of 61 students. The classes aim to have students learn through English and develop their facility for discussing ideas in English. One of the classes was taught by the author from the beginning of the year, and he took over the other from a colleague at the beginning of the fall semester. In the fall semester, the focus was on environmental issues, with a strong focus on climate change. The author has taught Global Issues in the past to sociology students, to English language majors, and in an English program that gathered students from different departments. This time, he wanted to introduce the concepts he had taught in previous courses while approaching them in a way that more strongly connected the course with the students' area of study, business administration. There was considerable leeway to do this as there were no set course materials, and given the relatively high level of the students the instructor was able to use a variety of realia or adapted realia: YouTube videos, newspaper articles, presentations, and interviews. The following are some of the ways in which the course was shaped to fit with the theme of business administration.

（1）We used the case study approach that is common in business schools. Environmental cases were categorized according to the success of the responses and the reasons for those outcomes were then analyzed. For example, why can our response to ozone depletion be by and large seen as a success whereas our success at combating acid rain is best described as being more mixed? What turned an initially successful policy such as the ivory ban, into a failure?

（2）Business factors were very much a part of our case study analyses. For example, concerning the response to the ozone depletion crisis and why it was successful, we considered the following four factors: (a) there were relatively few players involved in the business of making the damaging chemicals, (b) alternatives were available, albeit more expensive, (c) the switch to the alternatives did not threaten the core business of the companies involved since the same businesses were still in the business of making the coolant and propellant chemicals, just different ones, and (d) competing companies made the change at the same time so no one company was at a competitive disadvantage in making the change.

（3）We considered the business of the environment, and the failure of economics both to

account for both the input provided by the natural Commons, and to account for the cost of externalities. We all recognize the value of a living tree but we only make decisions based on what is accounted for. So a tree has no value for the maintenance activities it does as a living tree, such as providing a habitat for a great number of other organisms, maintaining local rainfall (up to 60% of rainfall in a region may be dependent on its local tree cover; the roots bring water up from the ground to transpire through the leaves to fall again as rain), maintaining temperatures, nor does it have any value for providing oxygen or for acting as a sink for carbon. However, it might be given a value as a holding for its future value once it is felled, or if its presence contributes to some other human activity such as sightseeing or maintaining a watershed for fisheries. Once the tree is felled and dead, it has immediate value. We approached this as a flaw distorting all our bottom-up business decisions.

（4）The analysis of business leaders was introduced into the course. In one assignment, students were asked to read and summarize an abridged version of an interview on climate change that Bill Gates had with *The Atlantic* magazine in which he discusses the roles of the public and private sectors in responding to the climate crisis and what he argues to be the reasons for large-scale government involvement.

（5）We looked at the final case study, climate change, in terms of a business SWOT analysis where O refers to opportunities and T refers to threats. Elon Musk's solar roof venture was introduced as a business response to the opportunity of climate change.

In other words, while the author introduced the same underlying issues of environmental problems as he had with different previous groups of students, with descriptions of the issues, of policy responses and of policy possibilities, the approach was modified to match the core focus of the study of the students. Apart from this, no overt mention was made of the connection between environmental challenges and business.

At the end of the course, two questions were asked of the students. The numbers of students answering, "Yes" or "No" were as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 : Student perceptions of content relevance

	QUESTIONS	YES	NO
1.	At the beginning of the course, did you feel that Global Issues were connected with your field of study, Business Administration?	32	29
2.	At the end of the course, do you feel that Global Issues are connected with your field of study, Business Administration?	60	1

The survey showed a marked increase in students' perception of the relevance of the course to their main focus of study. However, in asking students to reflect back on their prior beliefs rather than asking them about them at the time, it may be that some error was introduced.

Case 2

This case involves second-year students in the School of Dentistry at another large Tokyo-based university. They were enrolled in a compulsory course designed to develop their communication skills. In this course, there seemed to be a wide variation in motivation levels. Many students did not necessarily envision using English in their future practices or in other areas of their professional or personal lives. They also felt a great demand to spend as much time as possible on the courses at the core of their studies. A general English textbook chosen by the author was used for the portion of the course he taught, which focused on listening and speaking. The author felt this text could most immediately help students develop their English communication skills. The text focused on helping students better use English in situations where they have imperfect understanding, and to better utilize some of the language they already have. A major focus of the listening portion of the text was to draw students' attention to connected speech. In speaking, the focus was on introducing and practicing speaking strategies that can be used when a student has an imperfect understanding of the language: strategies such as checking or confirming understanding; asking for help from the other speaker in a conversation; and asking questions to show interest and move a conversation forward. However, the text did not have any reference to dentistry or examples of the sorts of conversations a dentist might have in English with a patient. Therefore, a student might not immediately see the relevance of their studies in this class to their core area of study. To help with this, the author undertook some steps.

（1）In each class an aspect of connected speech was presented. This was drawn from the main listening of the text unit and the sentences demonstrating the aspect reflected that content. This might be, for example, something like assimilation, wherein a final 'd' sound + an opening 'y' sound in the following word, combine to make a 'j' sound. The text gives examples such as 'second year' becoming 'seconjear.' At the end of such an activity, it was easy enough to add dentistry-specific examples, so students could see the connection between the aspect being presented in the text and how they might encounter it in their world. Thus, for example, an added example of assimilation of the type described might be "Could you open your mouth?" where the "d" in "could" and the "y" in "you" combine to make the "j" sound. Similarly, a presentation of the liaison seen between consonant-ending and vowel-starting words, could end with additional examples, such as "Rinse out your mouth."

（2）In each class as well, a speaking strategy was introduced with tasks in the text designed for the students to practice it. Here too, it was often easy enough to add a dentistry-specific example. So, for example, after students completed an activity where they were given objects that they did not know the names of and had to describe, the author repeated the activity with the whole class, describing some of the tools that dentists use in their practice. In this way, again, a connection was made between the students' core area of study and the skills being shown in the different settings offered by the text, by demonstrating how that skill could be used in the setting of their area of study.

（3）Dentistry-specific examples were introduced in quizzes, once again emphasizing the application of what was being taught in a setting that was more the focus of the students. For example, a portion of a quiz asking students to complete a conversation using an appropriate strategy is shown below.

    B. I have a sore tooth on my lower left side
    A. _____
    B. Yes, the lower left. Here.
    A. I see. And how long has it been hurting …

The two case studies introduced quite different situations: the first, a class of more motivated students who had chosen to be part of an English-stream program and who could easily envision themselves using English in their careers in the future, the second, a class of students, many of whom did not envision themselves using English in their professional futures, taking a compulsory class that they did not necessarily see as relevant. In different ways though, measures can be taken to bring the content closer to the worlds of the students. Although a great many other potentially demotivating factors remain at play, perhaps content-relevance is not one of them.

References

Covington, MW, *The Will to Learn: A Guide for Motivating Young People*, 1998 Cambridge Cambridge University Press

Deci EL, Ryan RM, *Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behaviour*, 1985 New York Plenum

Dörnyei, Z, *Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom*, 2001 Cambridge Cambridge University Press

Fryer, LK et al (2014) Instrumental reasons for studying in compulsory English courses: I didn't come to university to study English, so why should I?, *Innovation in Language Learning and*

Teaching 8:3, 239256, DOI: 10.1080/17501229.2013.835314

Frymier, AB, Shulman, GM (1995) "What's in it for me?": Increasing content relevance to enhance students' motivation, *Communication Education* 44:1, 40-50, DOI: 10.1080/03634529509378996

Gardner RC. *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*, 1985 London Edward Arnold

Kember, D, Ho, A, Hong, C. (2008) The Importance of Establishing Relevance in Motivating Student Learning, *Active Learning in High Education* 9:3, 249-263 DOI: 10.1177/1469787408095849 249-263