

Meeting Student Needs: Steps towards Curriculum Renewal

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Introduction

No university course or departmental curriculum is perfect. Various conflicting perceptions of the requirements of a course mean that any curriculum will, inevitably, be the product of compromise. This in itself is not necessarily a bad thing; colleagues need to work together, and we benefit from listening to and learning from each other. More serious are the effects of time. A curriculum that once met the expectations and needs of students, teachers, and the wider society may with time become outdated and cease to do this as these expectations and needs change. The goal of this paper, then, is to consider afresh the needs of English Department students and to propose changes in the curriculum that may benefit these students.

From anecdotal evidence gained through discussions with students and general observations of the curriculum, we gained the impression that opportunities for language production, such as target-language focused speaking and writing activities, were insufficient. We felt that there was inadequate time allotted in the curriculum for developing students' ability and confidence in producing English for communicative purposes. A consequence of these circumstances is that only a small proportion of English Department students from the 1st to 4th year would be willing to, and capable of, using English beyond the classroom, either while still at university or following graduation. We feared that such circumstances may in some respects be replicating, or extending, the environment found in many junior and senior high schools, in which using English, particularly speaking anything other than "katakana English", is felt to be too difficult, to be embarrassing, or to be showing off (Brown, 2004). Finally, although from the 3rd year some students take advantage of the various 'active English' classes that are available to them (including *Presentation and Discussion*, *Project Work*, and *Advanced English* classes), by this stage of their time at university many of the English Department students already feel that they are not capable of becoming proficient English users, and that the

demands of these classes would be beyond them.

The above description of our impressions of the English proficiency levels of students in the English Department, and of related causes to be found in part in the current departmental curriculum, has made us aware of the need to gain a deeper understanding of the curriculum as seen from the students' perspectives. By doing this we hope to be better informed to make proposals to develop the curriculum, specifically concerning opportunities for language input and production on the part of the students. We recognize that there are various demands upon the curriculum, but feel that there is a need for a larger number of classes that would allow students to put their language skills into practice.

This paper will continue by giving some background information concerning the circumstances of the English Department and of the Department's students, both while at university and following graduation. We will then describe our survey of 1st and 2nd year students, highlighting points in the data worthy of consideration, and then go on to make recommendations, concerning both the curriculum and the students' wider learning environment while at Hiroshima Shudo University.

Background

The goals and aspirations of the English Department of Hiroshima Shudo University may best be understood from the perspective of a Liberal Arts tradition rather than that of a technical college. As such, a large proportion of the classes that students take is not directly focused on improving their English proficiency, but aims to provide students with some understanding of English literature, of culture, of linguistics, and of broader humanities-related fields such as sociology, psychology, and education. At the same time, there is a clear expectation or hope, among both teachers and students, that students will be able to graduate from the English Department with the ability to use English, and in many cases reach a level of proficiency high enough to conduct basic research and write a graduation thesis in English in their final year at university. However, both this shorter term goal, and many of the goals that students might aspire to on graduating, are typically out of their reach: to be part of the global workforce; to be an English-using staff member in local companies; to be an English teacher; or going on to postgraduate studies.

A more detailed consideration of employment opportunities may help clarify the circumstances of English Department students. In 2012, out of 228 students who

graduated into employment from the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences at Hiroshima Shudo University, the majority (31.2%) went into wholesale and small business companies. The next largest employment sector was the service industry (19.3%), followed by manufacturing (10.7%) and finance (9.4%). From the English Department, employment destinations in the same year for graduating students included JTB (travel agency), Panasonic Home Engineering (technology/manufacturing), Daiichi Seimei Hoken (insurance) and Toyoko Inn (hotel). It is clear from this data that the large majority of graduating students, not only from the Humanities Faculty but the wider university in general, are finding employment in the area of business; such as in sales, finance and tourism. Considering that a primary focus of a university curriculum is on equipping students with the skills and abilities that foster successful participation in the world of work (Hatakenaka, 2010), it seems self-evident that these skills and abilities should be in accordance with the requirements of businesses into which the students graduate.

In the current climate of increasing globalisation, economic instability and a rapidly diminishing Japanese population, the Japan Business Federation, an organisation of 1,300 Japanese companies, 121 industrial associations and 47 economic organisations throughout Japan (called 日本経済団体連合会 or 'Keidanran' in Japanese) has continually called for Japanese education to foster 'creative human resources' and "global talents who can take leadership roles in the international business and who can drive innovation not bound by stereotype notions" (Keidanren, 2013, para. 1). The education minister for Japan, Hakubun Shimomura, supports such views when he states that, in order to prepare Japanese students for interaction in a globally-focused world, there needs to be the development of "diverse talents, leadership skills and human empathy" (Tanikawa, 2013, para. 14). In order to work towards such aims there has been significant injections of government funding into reforming educational policies, especially at the university level, with efforts to "increase the number of international faculty, raise the number of classes conducted in English and introduce standardized tests such as TOEFL as a means to lift English skills" (2013, para. 9).

Against this backdrop of an observable mismatch between the kind of education which Japanese students are seen to be receiving and the kind which businesses increasingly seem to require, we felt it necessary to examine the curriculum offered in our university's English Department. It was considered important and timely, in the light

of a nationwide government push to reform educational practices in Japan (Hongo, 2013) to take a more critical look at how we were preparing students for their eventual participation in society beyond the university classroom. Our investigation into the curriculum was driven by three related concerns: 1) that we needed confirmation that the students' speaking classes were fulfilling their purpose, as far as the limitations of a once a week class may do this; 2) that we needed a better understanding of the contents of the English Department Speaking course, in particular as seen from the students' perspective; and 3) that English Department students, whether in first or second year Speaking classes or in their final two years, did not appear accustomed to using English in class. This latter issue, that students may not be receiving ample opportunity to practice their English skills, was of major concern to us. We were worried that there was an imbalance in the curriculum with a heavier weighting towards knowledge about the language rather than an ability to use it. We felt that if the curriculum is to 'foster people who can excel in the global arena', as suggested by the Japan Business Federation, or even in the 'local arena', there need to be more opportunities for the students to work in the target language to develop their ability in using English, such as through reading and discussing texts, and debating local and global issues.

Aims

To this end we administered a survey to every student in the 1st and 2nd year of the English Department in order to gain and share an understanding of the current curriculum that would, in turn, help us gauge the language needs of the students. We would then be in a position to consider how the curriculum could best be renewed, with the specific goal of making a language learning-and-using environment in which students could reasonably expect to develop their productive language abilities, and to graduate as the kind of proficient language users and globally-minded students necessary for the future development of Japanese society.

Methodology

The initial step in the creation of the survey involved a brainstorming session of what areas of the curriculum we wanted to investigate. From the ideas collected during this

session, we narrowed our focus to four specific areas of analysis, formulated as the following questions:

- a) Are the speaking classes fulfilling their primary purpose?*
- b) What activities are being conducted in the speaking classes?*
- c) Is there agreement between the activities being conducted and the students' preferences?*
- d) Looking at the wider curriculum in the department, to what extent do students have the opportunity to practice their English skills throughout their week's schedule?*

We then generated four specific survey questions focusing on each of these areas:

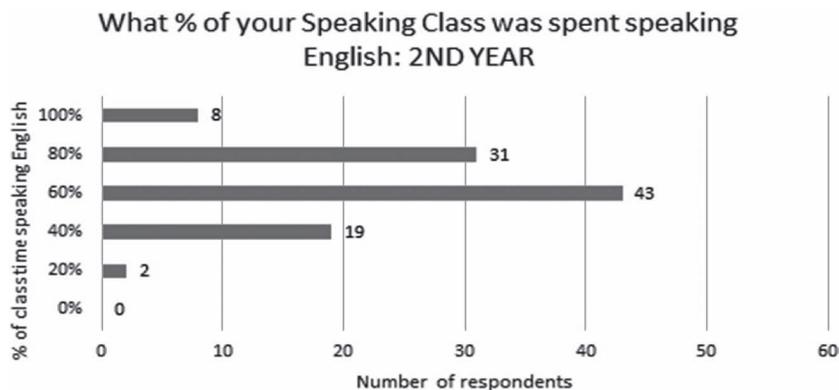
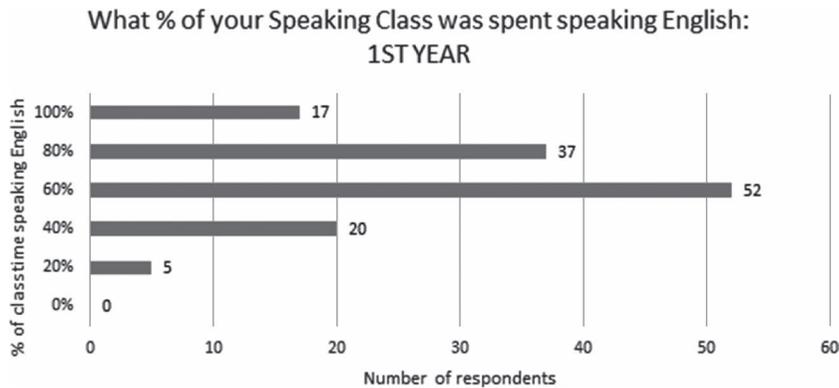
- 1) What percentage of your Speaking Class is spent speaking English?*
- 2) What activities do you currently do in your Speaking Class?*
- 3) What activities do you want to do in future Speaking Classes?*
- 4) How many classes do you have a week when you 'actively' use your English?*

These questions were initially sent to all teachers involved in the Speaking Class program for feedback and consensus. Teachers were invited to suggest any changes and/or propose additional or alternative questions which could be added to the survey. However, because this survey was being administered in addition to a university-wide survey focusing on the specific details of how the classes were being implemented (materials, scheduling, assessment etc.), it was felt by the teachers on the Speaking Class program that these four questions were sufficient. The questions were then translated into Japanese in order to allow a bilingual survey to be administered; an important consideration when the language level of the students may not be sufficient to allow them to fully understand the questions (Brown, 2001, p. 52). The survey was then distributed to all the 1st and 2nd year Speaking class teachers for distribution in the last two weeks of the spring semester, in July, 2013. The results were collected, analysed, written up, and initially presented at a departmental meeting where the focus of the discussion was on the implications of the results for curriculum renewal over the coming two to three years. The survey data was then distributed to all of the Speaking Class teachers in order for it to be used to not only guide pedagogical decisions in the remainder of the second semester, but also to contribute towards syllabus design for the following academic years.

Results

The results of the survey are presented below. For the answers to each of the four questions, the data are shown in graph form for the 1st year and 2nd year Speaking classes. Although data are available for each of the classes, and will be referred to on occasion, only data concerning whole department years will be shown as these are of greatest importance to the questions being addressed. Each graph is followed by a short description of the data.

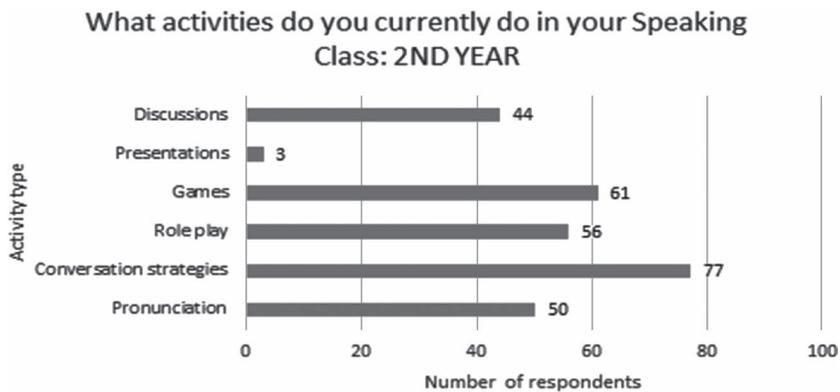
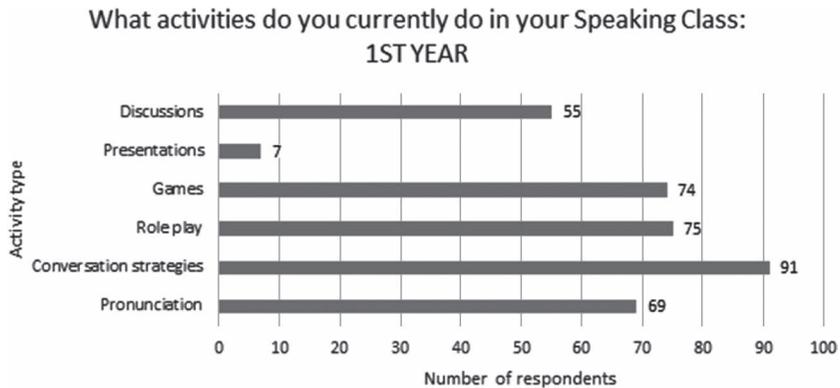
Question 1: What percentage of your Speaking class was spent speaking English?



In both the first and second years, a large majority of students feel that speaking English was the main focus for about 60% or more of their Speaking classes. This was

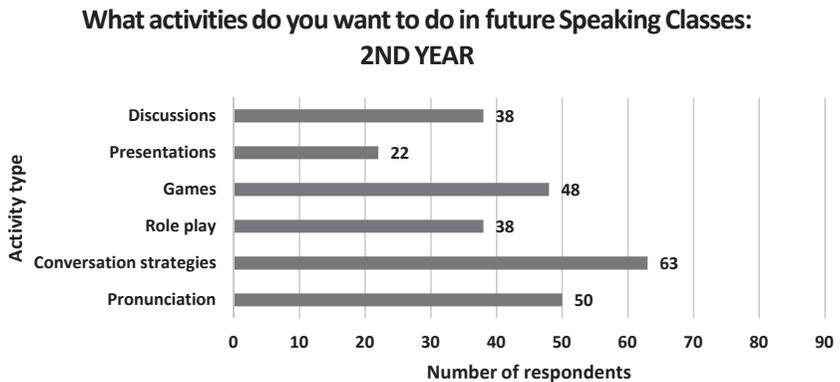
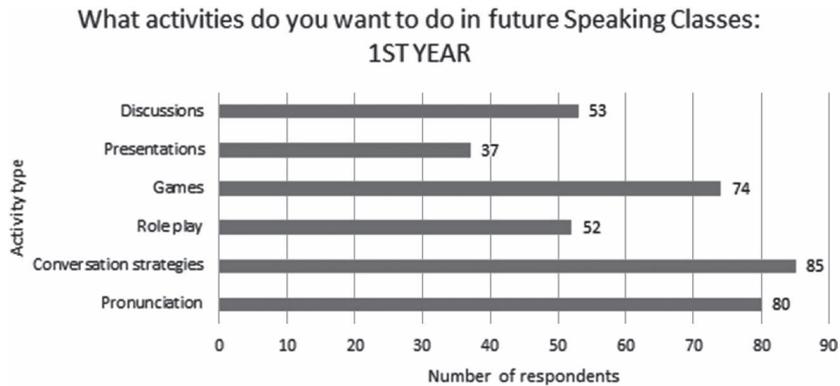
true across all classes.

Question 2: What activities do you currently do in your speaking class?



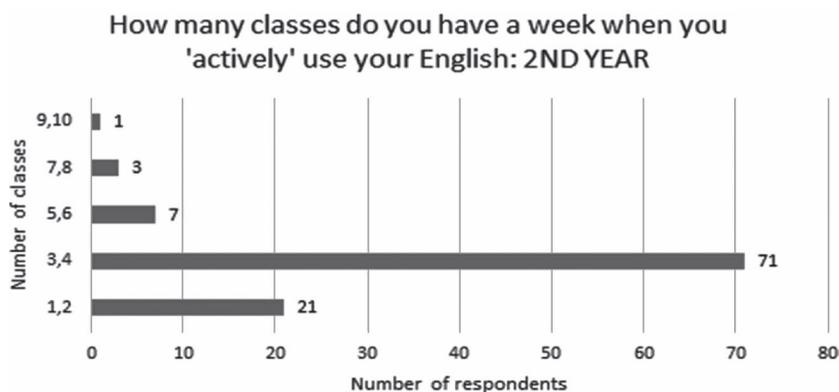
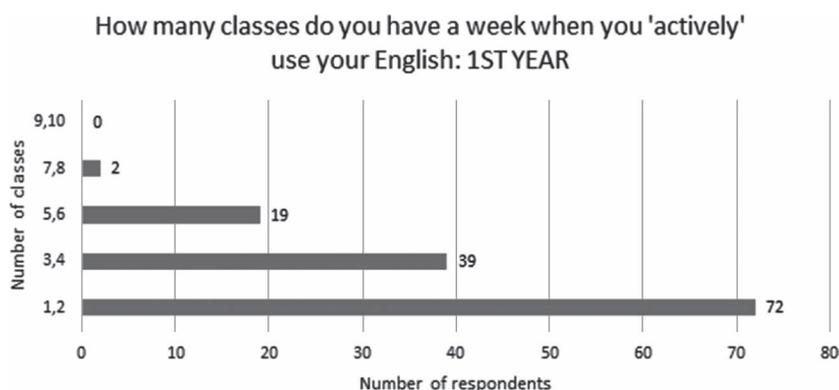
The data show that there is a good mix of activities in the Speaking classes in both the first and second years. The low number of students reporting 'presentations' as one of their Speaking Class activities will be considered in the Discussion section below.

Question 3: What activities do you want to do in future Speaking classes?



The data show that what is actually being done in the Speaking classes is in line with student preferences. One exception is the relatively large number of students wanting 'presentations' in the Speaking Class, in contrast to the low number reporting this type of activity in class. Again, this issue will be addressed in the Discussion section.

Question 4: How many classes do you have a week when you actively use your English?



The data show that the vast majority of first year students consider that they only have one or two classes that they perceive as ones where they actively use or 'produce' English, as compared to a typical three or four such classes for second year students.

Discussion

We shall now return to the data for each of the survey questions and consider how they inform our concerns about the English Department curriculum, in particular relating to courses such as the Speaking course in which production and fluency are major goals.

The first question sought to ascertain whether the present Speaking classes were achieving the objective of focusing on speaking in the classes. If this were not the case, any proposal for increasing speaking or input/output-focused classes might be met with

the justified objection that the problem lay not with the number of such classes but with the fact that the current classes were simply not fulfilling their purpose. In fact, over 75 per cent of students in both the 1st and 2nd years reported that 60 per cent or more of class time was spent on speaking. This confirmed our suspicion that problems with students' ability and confidence to use English were likely to be found in the limited number of Speaking classes rather than with their content.

The second and third questions focus specifically on the content of the course as taught by each of the 7 teachers for the 14 classes. The data confirm that there is a good mix of activities in the Speaking classes in both the 1st and 2nd years. As presentation is a central part of Progress in English III, we have asked Speaking class teachers not to do this in class, and this is reflected in the data. We have also specifically requested that teachers focus on pronunciation in Speaking classes in some way. The data confirm the need for good communication among teachers: to remind older teachers and to inform newer teachers of these two matters.

Answers to the third question regarding student preferences show that what is actually being done in the Speaking classes is in line with what students want from these classes. One issue that comes up here is the relatively high numbers attached to 'presentations' among 1st year students. This is not a bad thing; their hopes will be met both in Progress in English III and in the Presentation and Discussion course offered to more advanced 2nd year students. If we advise 1st year students of this, they may be more satisfied with the 1st year syllabus.

A further point worth making concerning the second and third questions is that there is no category of activity called "free conversation": unguided fluency practice in English. This is certainly part of some teachers' Speaking classes but responses may have subsumed this category into the related "conversation strategies". Future research should make and explain clearer categories of classroom activities.

Data for the final question confirms that although 2nd year students typically have three or more classes which they see as providing opportunities for the active use of English, well over half of the first year students report having only one or two such classes in one week. Considering the fact that few students will be aware opportunities beyond the classroom for using English, for English Department students to become capable and confident users of English one or two classes is clearly insufficient.

The promotion of learner autonomy from the first year is a clear priority as we address

these circumstances; students need to take responsibility for their own learning and to find or make opportunities to use English beyond the limited classroom time. Institutional support for this learner autonomy is an additional responsibility faced by the English Department, and one for which plans are being made, in addition to the Spring English Camp which has learner autonomy development as its primary purpose. However important this is, we believe that this alone is not a sufficient response to the actual needs of English Department students and to the wider society. We therefore propose that 1st year students need a greater number of focused and effective English classes in which they both encounter and produce a much greater volume of English than is the case in the present curriculum.

Conclusion

Richards (2001) writes that “one of the basic assumptions of curriculum development is that a sound educational program should be based on an analysis of learners’ needs” (p. 51). It was with this in mind that we wanted to examine our Department curriculum to find out whether students were having an adequate opportunity to practice their English language abilities. On the basis of the results gained from the survey, we hoped to be able to share the insights we gained from our research with the other members of the Department, in order to collaboratively work towards making the necessary changes.

The survey was driven by our three concerns of: 1) wanting to know if the Speaking classes were ‘fit for purpose’; 2) wanting to have a better understanding of the Speaking course as a whole; and 3) wanting to understand the reasons for students lack of preparedness for speaking English in class. The analysis of the data shows that the Speaking classes are indeed fit for purpose and that the problems with students’ ability and confidence to use English are therefore more likely to be associated with the limited number of such classes, rather than the specific content. From the survey we could also see that students’ preferences were in line with the kinds of activities being conducted in the classes, and this was true across both years and in all classes. Furthermore, we were able to identify a specific area for our curriculum development: namely that in the 1st year, students are only getting one or two classes a week which provide the opportunity for active English use.

The results of the survey have allowed us to gain a better understanding of our

Department, and the Speaking course in particular, and have allowed us to identify a specific aspect of the students' needs which will be the focus of our curriculum development efforts. Moving forward, we hope to work towards reorganising the curriculum in such a way that we can increase the opportunity for 1st year students to actively use their English.

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