

[Original Paper]

Communicative English: A personal perspective of course development

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss teaching a communicative language programme from the perspective of an experienced language learner new to teaching. This paper refers specifically to changes which took place between the courses which started in 1999 and the courses which started in 2000 in the communicative English programme offered at Aomori University of Health and Welfare (AUHW). More specifically I will outline how the course has progressed and been improved upon and the reasons behind the changes. I will then consider how these changes have affected my own personal development as a teacher, focusing in particular on my own expectations of a communicative language course based on previous language learning experience versus the reality of teaching such a course to non-English majors at a Japanese university.

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Keywords: Communication, perspective, progressed, development, expectations

Background

AUHW consists of the Faculty of Health Sciences, within which are the departments of Nursing, Physical Therapy and Social Welfare. In addition students study subjects in the Division of Human Sciences. A major learning outcome of the university is to graduate students to become health and welfare professionals with excellent communication skills. English is emphasized as the main language for professionals of every kind around the world and hence English is taught intensively to give students a high standard of communication ability, as well as to broaden their world-view.¹ English at AUWH is a one year intensive communicative language course for non-English specialists taught by native speakers of English from different parts of the English-speaking world.² The benefits of this go beyond the obvious linguistic advantages. There are minor differences in our use and pronunciation of English, as well as our cultural backgrounds and it is good that our students should be exposed to these differences. We focus on teaching English as a global means of communication. Students study English in the context of their cultural environment and particular circumstances, and im-

prove their communicative abilities through interpersonal relationships.³ Communication is the focal point of the programme with classes focusing on speaking and interacting in English.⁴ This is possible due to the very good level of basic English our students arrive with. It is clear that the majority of students have been very well taught at both the junior and senior high school level and have a good understanding of English grammar structures and a wide vocabulary, a very good base for communication which enables us to avoid spending large amounts of time devoted to memorising vocabulary lists and teaching grammatical structures.

The First Year

In the first year of our courses, 1999-2000, the course was based on a set text, the TALK Learning System, supplemented by various materials. A typical 80-minute class would be divided into a 60-minute speaking class immediately followed by an additional 20-minute modular language training class, where reading, writing, listening and computing were taught with each teacher taking responsibility for planning, teaching and assessing one of the four skills. The

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TALK learning system formed the basis of the speaking class and was designed to encourage students to communicate in English in small groups and it proved to be a very successful text, especially in the early stages, in helping to encourage students to relax and have the confidence to begin speaking in English.

Upon the completion of each unit we asked students to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaires were completely anonymous and we encouraged the students to write any comments (in Japanese) about the course, however good or bad. Responses to the course were generally positive but there were, of course, criticisms too. The main concerns expressed by the students were:

- Some students did not like the TALK textbook. There were complaints it does not contain enough variety of activity, that it is not well structured, and that it does not teach enough useful vocabulary or grammar.
- Some felt that they had not made the progress they expected to make.
- Some felt that there was too much English in the first year, and would have preferred the course to be spread over two or more years.
- Some complained that they had spoken too much Japanese in class.⁵

Students' Replies to End-of-Year
Questionnaire 1999 – 2000⁶
Good and Bad Points of the Whole Course⁷

Good Points

Lessons	101 8
Speaking was the focus of the lessons	25
Were fun	23
Different from school	12
Small class sizes	10
Content	9
Made friends	5
Pronunciation practice	4
Got on well with classmates	4
Talking to friends in English	2
'Free time' talking	2
Learnt everyday English basics	2
Useful for future	2
Communicative approach	1

English ability	22
English speaking ability has improved	12
Listening ability has improved	3
Confidence in English has improved	5
Now able to understand teacher	2
Teaching	16
Native English speaker	6
Different varieties of English	4
Got to know teacher	2
Liked teacher	2
Easy to ask questions	1
Created good class atmosphere	1
No comment	9
Amount of English	4
Having a lot of English	
Evaluation	1
Final test	

Bad Points

Lessons	25
Boring	(9)
Too repetitive	7
(boring so) did not try hard enough in class	1
Too easy	1
Not taught enough grammar and vocabulary	7
Too much freedom with no structure	4
Everything (we did in class)	1
Wanted homework (to help improve)	1
Always changing partners in class	1
Wanted to change classmates	1
Too many students in class	1
Amount of English	18
Double class on Mondays ⁹ was too much	8
Four classes a week were too much	6
Wanted classes to be spread out over four years	3
Not enough English in first year	1
Text book	17
Boring	9
Did not help improve English ability	4
Did not understand how to use it	2
Did not like it	2
No comment	17
Nothing in particular	14
Japanese	7
I (student) spoke Japanese in class too often	

English ability	6
English speaking ability has not improved	5
Pronunciation has not improved	1
Teaching	6
Could not understand teacher's explanations	2
Teacher spoke too often not allowing students to speak enough	1
Did not like teacher	1
Classes varied too much depending on the teacher	1
Did not want to change teachers after the completion of every course	1
Evaluation	3
Oral tests made me nervous	2
Wanted to be internally assessed	1
Other	2
Stopped using dictionary, started to ask the teacher instead	1
Will just end up forgetting as there is no English after the first year	1

The Second Year

Both positive and negative feedback received in the first year was carefully considered in planning for the following year's course, the result being the introduction of a topic based course at the beginning of the second year, where the aims of each unit were carefully explained to enable students to have a clearer sense of where they were going. A feature of the new course was that the modular language training arrangements used in the first year were dropped in favour of incorporating reading, writing, and listening into normal classroom activities with a separate, non-assessed computer class. The TALK Learning System textbook was retained but supplementary texts and activities formed the core of the course and were chosen to ensure that we offered a course which was stimulating and challenging for all of our students. The aims of Active English 1 and Active English 2 were set out to include:

- This is a language course which aims to improve English communication skills. Special emphasis will be placed on the ability to communicate fluently and confidently in spoken English, in a variety of situations.
- Students will spend most of their time communicating in spoken English. Pronunciation, fluency and clarity will be monitored, and appropriate help will be given to individuals. There will be practice in listening, reading and writing¹⁰

The goals of Creative English 1 and Creative English 2 were

to continue on from Active English 1 and 2:

- This is a language course which shares the same aims as the Active English course, but it is intended to build upon the skills and fluency acquired during that course. More demanding tasks will be set and students will have greater freedom to use their English in situations which they create for themselves. Students will be encouraged to become independent learners, able to motivate and organise their own learning.¹¹

The second year course was a much more successful course than the one offered in the first year and this is reflected in the overwhelmingly positive feedback from the end-of-year student questionnaire. The end-of-year performance contest was retained from the first year and proved to be popular among the students again. Another popular feature was the writing exercise introduced for the first time in the final course, Creative English 2, where students were asked to write in English and then give an English oral presentation on a topic of interest related to their major. This was a very difficult assignment to give a group of non-English majors, but the students seemed to appreciate the challenge and on the whole it proved to be a very popular segment of the course.

An 'experiment' which was greeted with a mixed reaction was a listening exercise given in Creative English 1 based on an English-language television drama for non-native speakers of English. This drama was introduced to bring more English listening into our programme, but although the drama itself was reasonably short, the pace of the English spoken in it was too quick for our students. The majority of the students were completely lost and just could not pick up the English sounds. However, they enjoyed watching a short drama in English.

Students' Replies to End-Of-Year

Questionnaire 2000 ? 2001 ¹²

Do you think your English ability has improved this year?

Reasons why or why not ¹³

Yes, greatly	16.55 % (23 / 139)
English speaking ability has improved	11
Started to enjoy studying English	5
Tried hard to improve in class	3
Many chances to speak and improve	3
Native teacher	3
Good teaching	1
Classes were in English	1
Pronunciation	1
Now have more confidence to speak in English	1

Yes	36.69 % (51 / 139)
English speaking ability has improved	15
Many chances to speak and improve	10
Classes were fun	8
Had to speak in English	4
Native teacher	3
Spoke English in and out of class	3
No comment	2
Teaching was good	2
Vocabulary lists were useful	2
Listening ability has improved	2
Pronunciation practice	1
Pronunciation has improved	1
Spoke a lot of English so I was able to remember vocabulary	1
Spoke with the teacher often (in class)	1
Almost never studied English while at high school	1
Now able to think more in English	1
Tried hard to improve in class	1

Yes, a little	28.78 % (40 / 139)
English speaking ability has improved	12
Listening ability has improved	6
No comment	6
Many chances to speak and improve	5
Good teaching	4
Confidence in English has improved	4
Spoke with friends in English	3
English class was fun	3
Had many opportunities to think and speak in English (in class)	2
Became used to speaking in English even if it was not perfect English	2
Tried hard to improve in class	2

Yes, but only a little	10.07 % (14 / 139)
English speaking ability has not improved	6
Never revised what I learnt in class	4
Did not really want to study English	1
Did not know enough vocabulary	1
Not taught enough vocabulary	1
Lessons were difficult	1
English is difficult	1
Did not try hard enough in class	1
Spoke in Japanese too often	1
Easier than at high school	1
Classes were boring	1

No, not much	5.8 % (8 / 139)
No comment	2
Did not try to improve in class	2
Do not like English	1
Not enough pronunciation practice	1
No point studying (English) because I always ended up speaking in Japanese (in class)	1
Not good at English on entering this university	1

No, not at all	2.16 % (3 / 139)
No comment	1
English speaking ability has not improved	1
Low level of English taught at AUHW	1

Personal Background

My own expectations of what constitutes a good communicative language course had been greatly influenced by my own experiences of language learning, an intensive three-year Bachelor of Japanese Language degree with a weekly study load of between 30-40 hours. Upon successful completion students were expected to be able to:

- converse freely in Japanese in non-technical situations
- understand native speaker discourse on non technical subjects
- read general Japanese texts
- be familiar with Japanese word processing software
- have pursued another area of interest, such as marketing or linguistics which broadens students' skill base
- have acquired the research and essay writing skills required for the units which present an overview of Japanese society, its history, religion and politics.¹⁴

The experience of having studied in a communication-oriented language course highlighted to me the importance of making communication the pivotal point of a language programme. However I was not fully aware of how to achieve this, and coming some way to understanding how to incorporate what I had learnt in the classroom into my teaching has been one of the major areas of my personal development as a

teacher. Students' communication skills need to be developed by effective, stimulating and varied communicative activities which should form the basis of the teaching and learning programme. Through such activities students become more experienced and confident in other areas (for example, cultural awareness) while involved in meaningful communication. Learners also need to be given examples and models of good usage. All these techniques should be used in realistic contexts which are relevant to the students' interests, experiences and stage of language development. A language programme with communication as its main goal includes certain features. These features must be carefully planned, implemented, integrated and maintained. In a successful English language programme:

- the dominant language in the classroom is English
- students learn appropriate grammar when they need it to comprehend or convey messages in English
- communication involves using appropriate language for real purposes
- communication will often have some personal importance or meaning for the students
- communication will often be unrehearsed and may be unpredictable, especially in conversation
- the development of listening skills is recognised as an essential part of language learning
- students' conversation in English is very important
- classroom organisation is flexible, allowing pairing, grouping and movement of students and teacher
- when assessing, teachers and students place emphasis on communicative skills

Another area of personal development I can identify is in understanding the differing roles both the teacher and the student play in the learning partnership and just as importantly in the realisation that the role of the teacher itself changes as students develop confidence in using English and take increasing responsibility for their own language learning. It is important for the teacher to set clear, achievable goals with his or

her students; create an effective learning environment in the classroom; encourage interaction and communication among students, as well as between students and teachers; and to recognise and allow for individual differences and learning styles. A sense of self-confidence must be instilled. We as teachers are there to support the development of our students' confidence in using English. This is achieved by first modelling good communication skills, setting exercises for students, pulling them back, correcting the work by getting the students themselves to explain what they did, what they thought and then moving on. Setting up a range of interactive activities allows students to feel comfortable about taking risks, perhaps making mistakes, but being able to understand that learning from their mistakes is a natural part of the learning process.

Future

English is a very difficult language for Japanese speakers to learn, and to understand how languages are learnt should be the next area in my own personal development, more specifically, understanding the level of English ability our students arrive with, identifying what areas need to be worked on and knowing how to help them overcome any difficulties they may have. Despite the great grammatical disparity in the two languages, our students come to us with a very good grounding in English grammar structures and a wide vocabulary, and do not generally have great difficulty with the reading and writing components of our course. They do, however, face great difficulty with both the pronunciation and listening components and this was very obvious from their study of the drama video mentioned earlier. This is a facet of our students' English education I would like to explore in the future.

Conclusion

This paper refers specifically to changes which took place between the courses which started in 1999 and the courses which started in 2000. Further development has taken place and the courses which started in 2001 were different again, although they followed similar models to the 2000 courses. This will be an ongoing process of development in the future. In this paper I have considered the difficulties which I as a teacher, experienced in language learning, but new to teach-

ing have experienced in putting into practice in the classroom techniques which I found to be effective in my own learning.

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Appendix

Teachers' Responses to Students' Concerns (Internal Memo, March 2000)

The questionnaires that we have regularly asked students to complete have generally shown an encouraging response to the courses we are offering, but there have of course been criticisms too. It is always useful to see our teaching through the eyes of our students, and all criticisms have been considered carefully in our planning for next year's classes. Some of the main concerns (expressed by 3 or more students) are reproduced below, together with our responses.

Some students did not like the TALK textbook. There were complaints it does not contain enough variety of activity, that it is not well structured, and that it does not teach enough useful vocabulary or grammar.

For next year we have planned a topic-based course of our own which will introduce vocabulary and grammar in a structured way throughout the year. Students will receive a copy of the syllabus for each course as it begins, and should have a clearer sense of the direction in which they are going.

As the response to the TALK text book was overwhelmingly favourable, particularly in the early part of the year, we still intend to use this course next year, and the topics which we study will be ordered to fit in with the TALK text book. We do intend though to use fewer TALK materials for each topic, and to cover a wider range of topics. Supplementary texts and activities will be chosen to en-

sure that we offer a course which is stimulating and challenging for all of our students.

Some felt that they had not made the progress they expected to make.

This is a common concern among language learners, particularly those who have already achieved a good level of competence before beginning a new course.

In the early stages of learning a language, progress is both quick and satisfying. Within a single lesson the beginner can learn enough language to be able to communicate simple details, and the acquisition of basic vocabulary and structures has a huge impact on the ability to communicate in the target language. As the learner enters the intermediate stage, the rate of progress relative to the number of hours of study gradually becomes less marked, and for the advanced learner progress may appear very slow.

An additional factor is the fact that the courses which we have offered this year have almost certainly been quite different from the sort of course which our students followed at school. For students who may have become used to measuring progress in terms of the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical structures, some aspects of our course may have been disappointing. For next year, we do intend to include more vocabulary and put more emphasis on those grammatical structures which are most useful for oral communication and this may improve motivation for those students who see the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar as the main purposes of language lessons. However, as this year, our declared aim will still be to improve the communication skills of our students, and we feel that the best way to achieve this is through use and practice.

We have been pleased this year with the progress our students have made with their communication

skills. We have watched their confidence grow, and the ease with which they are able to express their ideas in English. These skills are not easy to quantify, but we hope that they will serve our students well in the future.

Some felt that there was too much English in the first year, and would have preferred the course to be spread over two or more years.

Some students have found this first year very busy, and with their major studies in Nursing, Physical Therapy or Social Welfare, four lessons of English a week may have seemed an unreasonable burden, particularly as there are no further courses of this type in the second year.

Our English lessons have been organised in this way for a number of reasons. Firstly, as Nursing, Physical Therapy and Social Welfare studies intensify in the second and subsequent years, it is unlikely that our students will become less busy than they have been in this first year, and it will become more difficult rather than easier to allocate time for English studies.

Secondly, there are clear advantages to the sort of semi-intensive course which our students have followed. Language learning is a cumulative process and regular, daily practice is the ideal way for students to achieve their full potential. (Next year we shall be able to avoid the double lesson which we have had on Mondays this year, and students will have English lessons on four days a week.)

Having achieved a good level of competence, it is important to maintain it. Some students will take the elective English Communication course in their second year, and will have the opportunity to practise their English in Australia. We would encourage all of our students to take every opportunity to practise their English, and we hope that they will continue to maintain contact with their English teachers throughout their time here

Some complained that they had spoken too much Japanese in class.

The golden rule in our English classes has to be "No Japanese" . We have tried throughout the year to create an English-speaking environment within our classrooms (perhaps with varying degrees of success, depending upon the activity) and this is certainly the only way forward for our English classes.

Much of our work has been done with students working in small groups, and unfortunately the teacher is not able to work with every group at the same time. With smaller classes next year, there should in most cases be fewer groups working within a class, and the teacher will be able to monitor the work of each group more effectively. In a group of three or four students working hard to communicate in English, a single individual who insists on speaking in Japanese can spoil the efforts of all the rest.

As language teachers, we are sympathetic to the frustration which students may sometimes feel if they are unable to express their ideas clearly in English, and there will always be a temptation to lapse into Japanese to explain a particular point. This option will not be available of course when our students are addressing someone who speaks no Japanese, and this is the situation for which we must prepare them.

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1 <http://www.auhw.ac.jp/e-auhw/human-s/index.html>

2 Students have the opportunity to enrol in an elective, two-credit course, English Communication, in one of their remaining three years at AUHW.

3 <http://www.auhw.ac.jp/e-auhw/human-s/hu01.html>

4 A complementary course in comparative culture and language is taught in Japanese for students to learn semantic

and phonetic structures making it easier to study English.

5 Appendix: Teachers' Responses to Students' Concerns.

6 110 responses from a total of 161 first year students studying English in 1999-2000 (68.32%)

7 Question one of five questions asked in questionnaire.

8 Students occasionally offered more than one comment on both questionnaires.

9 There was a double English class on Monday afternoons, periods three and four.

10 青森県立保健大学・授業要項2000年, pg 17.

11 青森県立保健大学・授業要項2000年, pg 18.

12 139 responses from a total of 164 first year students studying English in 2000-2001 (84.76%)

13 Questions one and two of 11 questions asked in the student questionnaire.

14 <http://www.chchpoly.ac.nz/courses/details/japnba01.htm>