

Practitioner Research on a Free Elective System of University English Courses: A proposal for ELT Curriculum Revision

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Practitioner Research on a “Free Elective System” of University English Courses

—A Proposal for ELT Curriculum Revision—

Yukiko IGA

1 Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to propose practical strategies for developing a college curriculum innovation policy on English education in Japan. The aim is to examine principal issues for conducting and analyzing policy research to support course development. The first step for language educators is to recognize the need for evaluating and examining the effectiveness of current practices in providing students with course offerings. The next logical step is to take action and expand on still-broadly defined goals of English language teaching (ELT). This paper will concentrate on how Japanese university educators can do this. My study concentrated on how Japanese policy advisors, decision makers, and administrators can identify focuses for supporting curriculum development and thus better direct language educators in tertiary education.

In brief, I want to help integrate theories of educational development with pedagogical strategies so that teachers might better allocate aid to students. My practitioner research in university general education English classes has enabled me to address the needs broadly described here, helping me to suggest a process of change.

This practitioner research aims; (a) to analyze university students' needs for English (b) to implement a "free elective system" and assess the results. Questionnaires and test score data will illustrate students' responses and their proficiency. A detailed examination on teaching methodology is beyond the scope of this practitioner research.

2 ELT Curriculum

2.1 Curriculum Studies

First, we will review the evolution of "ELT curriculum studies." In *The ELT Curriculum: Design, Innovation and, Management* (1988), Ronald V. White defines "curriculum studies" in the following:

Curriculum theory encompasses philosophy and value systems; the main components of the curriculum: purposes, content, methodology and evaluation; and the processes whereby curricula are developed, implemented and evaluated. And because curriculum studies are so all-encompassing, it is a characteristic of curriculum development that it involves a wide range of issues and people. It is the breadth and depth of curriculum development which distinguishes it from syllabus design, whose concerns and ramifications are restricted to questions of content. (19)

Taba and Tyler, American educators, first advanced a study on curriculum in *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (1949), and in *Curriculum Development : Theory and Practice* (1962). They presented the fundamental question of this study field, "What ought to be taught in an educational institution? (*The ELT* 19)."

In the 1970s, the 'notional-functional' approach sprang up and devised a meaning-based syllabus. D.A. Wilkins' *Notional Syllabus* (1976) presents three notional categories: (1) semantico-grammatical, (2) modal meaning, and (3) communicative function.

Although curriculum studies had been isolated from "language teaching," A.M. Shaw's *Approaches to a Communicative Syllabus in Foreign Language Development* (1975) showed that curriculum studies began to affect language teaching. In *The ELT Curriculum: Design, Innovation and Management*, R. V. White places language syllabus design within the wider context of curriculum. Then, in *Analyzing the Curriculum*, George J. Posner analyzes the curriculum proper,

implementation, evaluation, and critique.

2.2 Concept of Curriculum

Curriculum consists of complex issues. It is not just a content outline. The "Tyler Rationale" and the "Johnson Model," the frameworks of curriculum, help us to understand which elements formulate curriculum. Ralph Tyler points out the primary four questions in curriculum designing.

Table 1 indicates Tyler's four questions (1949).¹

Table 1 Tyler's Four Questions

(1) What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?
(2) What educational experiences can be provided that are likely to attain these purposes?
(3) How can these experiences be effectively organized?
(4) How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?

Here, Tyler refers to educational purposes and educational experiences. Then, he questions how these experiences can be effectively organized. The fourth question; "How can we determine whether these purposes are being attained?" asks how we assess and evaluate the curriculum.

The Johnson Model (1977) by Mauritz Johnson suggests the 5 steps;²

- (1) Goal setting
- (2) Curriculum selection
- (3) Curriculum structuring
- (4) Instructional planning
- (5) Technical evaluation

As Johnson presents in the model, setting goals comes first, and the appropriate curriculum is selected according to these goals. Then the curriculum determines its instructional planning. Posner states that goals express the characteristics of people that are expected to result from achieving the curriculum (Posner, 19).

2.3 The Goals and Responsibilities of ELT Curriculum in Japanese Higher Education

The goals of English language teaching in higher education should meet needs of students, their careers, and evolving society. In teaching university students, I have continuously conducted research on university students' purposes since 1996.³ The questionnaires were collected from 1,590 university students. Their purposes can be classified into the following four categories; communication, academic, career, and international travel objectives. Table 2 presents the four categories.

Table 2 Students' Objectives for Learning English

(1) Communication objectives (a) media (b) information sources abroad (c) the Internet
(2) Academic objectives (a) being equipped to study abroad (b) an adequate score in standardized English tests (c) being qualified to study at graduate schools (d) academic reading and writing in English
(3) Careers objectives (a) expanding job opportunities (b) being qualified to work for foreign companies (c) business travel abroad
(4) International travel objectives

We see in Table 2 that students' purposes are divergent. Students who have purposes in studying abroad need to achieve adequate score in standardized English tests, including TOEFL, TOEIC, and GRE. The percentage of students who have (1) Communication objectives are increasing recently. As the Figure 3 indicates, in the survey of 2000, 45% of students have the objective for learning English to operate computer and make communication through Internet in English. This percentage is much higher compared to the survey of 1996. A student answered, "Due to globalization, we have to study English as a communication tool," "I would like to be able to read English home pages on web sites in order to get the most advanced technologies."

W. M. Rivers, a leading expert of foreign language education, also regards this issue as a principle of language teaching. In her paper, titled "Ten Principles of Interactive Language Learning and Teaching," she

¹ qtd. in Posner: 14.

² qtd. in Posner: 18.

³ Miyazaki University, Faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Agriculture, from 1997 to 2000. Miyazaki Sangyo Keiei University, Faculty of Law and Faculty of Business Management, from 1996 to 1999.

describes principles of language teaching. She states in her principles, "Language learning and teaching are shaped by student needs and objectives in particular circumstances." She also mentions:

"Student needs and objectives are not just personal. They are shaped to a considerable degree by societal pressures and political exigencies. These outside forces exert a largely subconscious influence on what are perceived as individual choices . . . Language teachers must study the language learners in their classes—their ages, their background, their aspirations, their interest, their goals in language learning, their aptitude for language acquisition in a formal setting—and then design language courses that meet the needs of specific groups. Decisions on course content and orientation will affect the way the language will be presented and the types of materials that will be used" (Rivers, *Teaching* 375-376).

Rivers points out that language teachers should carefully study learners' ages, background, aspirations, interests, objectives in language learning, and aptitude for language acquisition. The next step is to design courses that attempt to meet those needs.

Those observations of the evolving society afford new perspectives on ELT curriculum planning and future English Education in Japan. The responsibility of ELT is to devise and offer the optimal curricula that integrate all these needs of students and society. Language educators need to gear themselves up to assess their curriculum, and initiate curriculum innovation.

3 Practitioner Research

3.1 Definition

McMahill defines the term: "Practitioner research" as "Teacher research, also referred to as practitioner research, action research, and classroom research, means teachers inquiring systematically into their own classrooms and teaching practice to solve pedagogical problems and generate knowledge" (McMahill 37). He further mentions that teacher research is not a single method or approach, but the selection of research strategies that are appropriate to the questions to be posed.

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Subjects

This experimental course began in a first-year compulsory general education English course, which I taught during the spring and fall semesters of 2000 at Miyazaki University. 95 Japanese students (48 students of Faculty of Engineering, and 47 students of Faculty of Agriculture) were enrolled in the course.

3.2.2 The Students' English Study Experience and Objectives

The students' English study experience and intentions were investigated through a questionnaire during the first class. The aim was to assess their study background and determine which skills they intended to acquire in their study of English at the University. The questionnaire asked, "Q1: On which English skills have you concentrated before you entered this University?" "Q2 Which English skills do you intend to develop at this University?" Figure 1 indicates on which skills teachers had emphasized in classes at secondary schools.

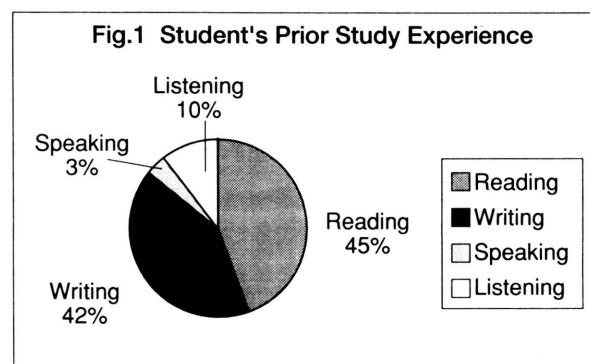
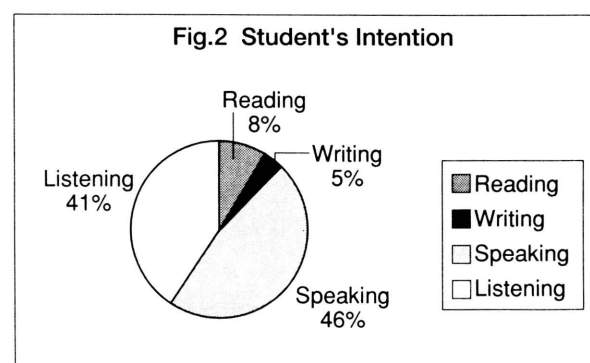
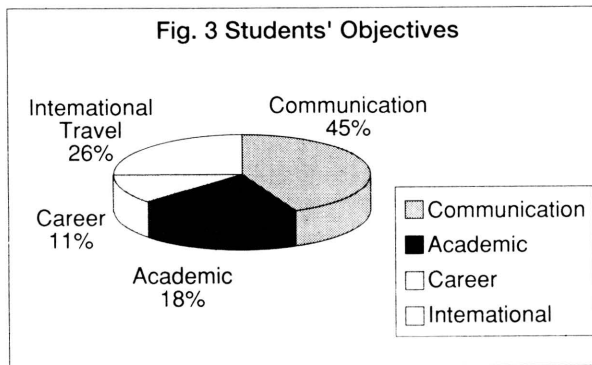


Figure 2 identifies skills students targeted for development in their English courses at the University.



These answers to the questions were evaluated and considered in the design of the experimental course.



3.3 Course Policy and Design

Miyazaki University defines English courses as a required part of general education programs. The average class has 50 students in 90 minute- classes. The Primary question was how to design this course within the university's restraints. I designed the experimental course, within the requirement and obtained the required English department approval.

As Table 3 indicates, this course targeted three English skills. The targets were; Section 1: "listening and reading comprehension, Section 2: "spoken English," section 3: "test- taking skills, in particular the TOEFL listening section." To optimize class size, it was divided into two groups. Section 1 was the required section for all students. Sections 2 and 3 were optional. In this course, students were able to choose the optional sections according to their personal study and career objectives. Note, this course gives students "the right to select skills for study." All students chose one of section 2 or 3, or both sections 2 and 3 according to their objectives. Time scheduling was; Section 1:30 minutes, Section 2: 30 minutes, Section 3: 30 minutes. During the spring term, Section 1 shared 60 minutes and Section 2 and 3 were offered on alternative weeks. However, in the midterm additional questionnaire assessment, students demanded much time for sections 2 and 3. Therefore, the time scheduling was revised. In the course for the Faculty of Engineering, 53.5% students selected Section 2: Spoken English, and 25.6% students joined Section 3: Test-taking skills, and 20.9% students chose both sections 2 and 3. However, in the course for the Faculty of Agriculture, 45.3 % students selected Section 2: Spoken English, 35.7% students joined Section 3: Test-taking skills, and 19.0% students chose both sections 2 and 3.

Table 3 Course Description

Sec.1: Required	Listening Comprehension & Reading
Sec. 2:Elective	Spoken English
Sec. 3: Elective	Test-taking Skills

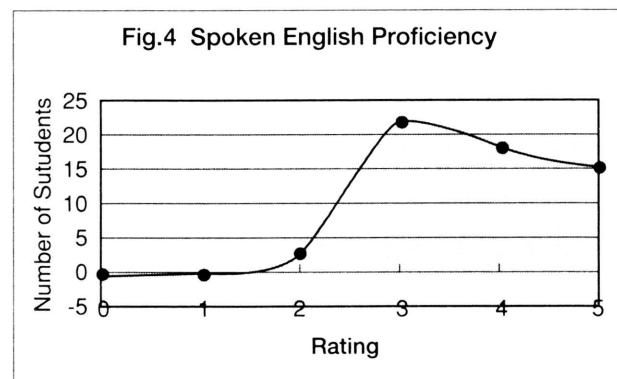
3.4 Data Collected

In order to assess the experimental course, all students completed at three different times during the course; first, at the beginning of the spring term, at mid-term, and last at the end of the fall term (see: Appendix A). Students' opinions in the mid-term questionnaire were reflected in the fall term class design. The last questionnaire reflects the "students evaluation of the class." It is useful in course assessment.

In Section 2, Students' spoken English proficiency was estimated with the "oral production test of direct measurement", using a 5 level rating scale proposed by Valette.⁴

In Section 3, before enrolling in the spring term, students' TOEFL listening scores were recorded. Then, after they complete the course at the end of the fall term, their score results were registered again. The difference of the two scores demonstrates the students' attainment. Figure 5 illustrates "pre-course" and "post-course" scores and a comparison.

4 Results

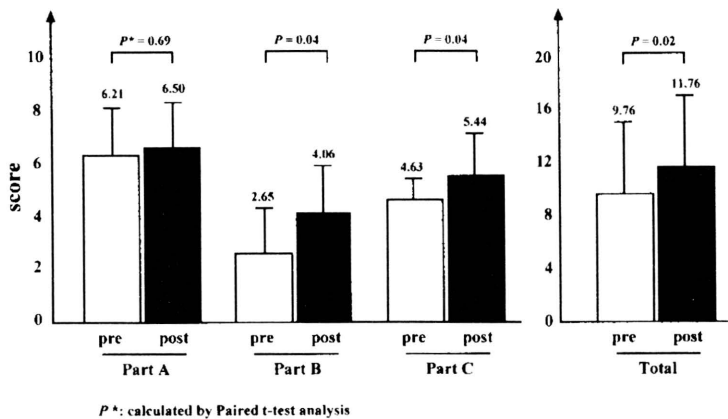


The ratings; 5 — Superior : perfect performance, 4 — Excellent : but short of perfect, 3 — Acceptable : comprehensible but with minor faults, 2 — Fair : faulty production but more or less comprehensible, 1 — Poor :

4 qtd.in Nakamura, Yoshihito et al. edit. *Eigono Speaking* (English Speaking) Tokyo: Taishu P, 1996. 209.

total effort but incomprehensible response,
0 —no response: partial incomprehensible response.
Students were divided in pairs and demonstrated role-play communication.⁵ Figure 4 presents their attainment in spoken English.

Fig.5 TOEFL listening Data



5 Student Evaluation

During the last class, students completed evaluation forms for course policies and the overall course design. The course was based on three sections as electives. Students had the right to select the sections of interest. The first question was; "Do you prefer the free elective system?" As Table 4 shows, 95% of them preferred the elective system. The reasons were; "If I am able to choose skills to practice, I can concentrate on more specific training," "Each student has his own purpose, therefore, the free elective system is better."

The next question was; "Does the free elective system affect your study attitude?" The results were; Yes: 62.5%, No: 20%, and the rest of students stated, "I cannot judge." To the students who answered, "Yes," an additional question followed; "How does the free elective system affect you?" 80% of students answered "I increased my study will because I selected the field of study by myself." 20% of students stated, "I am able to apply what I studied in the course to my future career."

There is a controversy as to whether or not English should be a required course. Concerning this question, students presented their opinions in questionnaires. The results obtained were contrary to my assumptions. Most

of the students expected English to be a required subject. 76% of students answered English should be provided as a required subject. The reasons were; "I need English skills in my future career," "English will be indispensable for the coming global age," and "I intend to take English standardized tests, therefore, I need training in these skills." On the other hand, 24% of them answered English should be an elective subject, rather than a required course. They stated, "We had to complete 6 years of English, so continuing that study should be an option," "Every student has different objectives, therefore, English classes should be an option."

Table 4 Student Evaluation

	Yes	No, or I do not know
Do you prefer the free elective system?	95%	5%
Does the free elective system affect your study attitude?	62.5%	37.5%

6 Discussion

This research reveals a positive students' response to the "free elective system," and an increase in proficiencies of those students in the system. The spoken English average proficiency was "3—Acceptable: comprehensible but with minor faults" (Fig. 4). In addition, the post-course TOEFL listening score also increased compared to the pre-course score (Fig. 5). From this view point, the "free elective system" graded as positive option for English department.

The future direction of this survey should be retry with larger numbers of students using an additional controlled group. More data will demonstrate wider students' support for this type of program.

This experimental course points to advancements in students' performance using an alternate registration system. Further increases in proficiency could be achieved with further revisions. In a single class, offering more than three sections is difficult due to the current time limitations. Those limitations mean, students who are to study reading or composition skills would probably not have an opportunity under the present schedule.

5 For further evaluation rating of oral production test, see Nakamura, Yoshihito et al. edit. *Eigono Speaking* (English Speaking) Tokyo: Taishu P, 1996. 191-229.

Collaborative teaching or cross registrations could be the solution.

From the results of this experimental class, I obtained basis for formulating those proposals for curriculum innovation. Suggestions are for course policy, course design, students' registration system, and ways to supplement curriculum limitations. The next Section will present concrete proposals.

7 Proposed Points of Revision

Course policy is defined as a course of action dealing with multiple class subjects. I will examine the subject of revisions inside an English department from the following three dimensions; (1) planning what kind of class we offer; (2) our student's registration system; and (3) ways to complement programs within the English department. An English educator's primary concerns should also include their students' overall needs. This can be answered by the questions, "What English skills do students need for their future academic or career objectives?" On this issue, Dr. Rivers gives an excellent summary in the following; "Professors of languages and literatures will need to give much more thought to the needs and aspirations of the wider student body, rather than devoting so much of their time and energy to the few majors with potential for graduate studies in their specialized fields or subfields" (Rivers, *Teaching 2*). She continues, "Can they also meet the needs of all comers in the language area, providing courses of diverse contents at the level of proficiency or language control that interested students bring with them, with incentives to continue to any level that meets the students' needs?" (Rivers, *Teaching 2*)

As categorized in Table 2, students' objectives have many divergences. Educators should consider the extent to which the curriculum meets their students' actual needs. Current students' answers should be available as a guide to revise programs. In order to meet students' needs through course revision, a consensus of the whole English department of the university should be obtained before implementation. An opportunity to practice every English skill cannot be offered in one single class. I propose teachers should supplement each other's courses. If one teacher provides a composition class, then other teachers should teach other skills: spoken English skills, business English skills, test-taking skills, or other skills. The

majority of skills are available for students within the English programs through mutual cooperation of the entire department.

First, educators define which additional skills are to be targeted by ELT classes. Next, language teachers should cooperatively plan to respond to these needs. Their response to students' needs will determine overall course policies. After setting course policies, they can set precise goals for each class. Presenting a clear set of objectives in a class description will allow students to select the most appropriate classes. Staff members could offer additional guidance in class selection within their department. It is an educator's primary responsibility to provide the education required for an individual's success in their chosen field or career.

At mid-term of the experimental course, I distributed a questionnaire to obtain students' opinions of the elective system at this point of the course. 95% of the students gave favorable opinions of the system.

English, unlike other foreign languages, is required a minimum of 6 years prior to entering college. Students have already acquired a basic knowledge of English by this time. Therefore, higher education English classes should do more than simply repeating English structure at a university level. They should have an opportunity to explore more specific areas of the language. Some of these aspects may include the normal skills, including discussion, negotiation, ethics, reasoning, and also writing skills for a variety of needs.

On course design, Rivers observes in her paper, *The Undergraduate Program : Course for All Comers*; "In any program large enough to permit it, courses should be devised, even at the elementary level, that accommodate choice of approach and content. In designing these courses, we keep in mind not only objectives but also the diversity among our students of aptitude for various aspects of language and of learning styles (oral-aural preference versus visual; learning through use versus abstract analysis for two instances). We have the possibility of developing courses that emphasize the oral-aural from the beginning some courses begin with a strong listening component before speaking is expected, as in Terrell's Natural Approach (1977, 1982), while others encourage attempts at communication, both listening and speaking, from the earliest stages." (Rivers, *Teaching 7*) Rivers insists here that we should consider students'

objectives and aptitude diversities in prescribing courses.

We should offer both (a) General purpose English language classes, and (b) Targeted English language classes. Students have an opportunity to select targeted English classes according to their objectives and interests. Here, I suggest content-based curricula to meet students' needs. Content-based instruction can be defined as the integration of particular content with language-teaching aims.

Table 5 Suggested Class Types

a) General purpose English language classes
b) Targeted English language classes Target examples: test-taking skills (TOEFL, TOEIC...), listening comprehension, spoken English, writing, reading comprehension, business, academic discussion, academic writing...

An Enhanced Students' Registration System

We should set a "drop-add period." During this period, students may audit a class to decide whether or not he will officially register for it as a regular member. We should give students the right to select classes according to their objectives. Rivers gives supportive remarks for this proposal, she insists that language teaching and course design will be very diverse, and that the days of a monolithic approach to a language course, imposed on all learners, are well past (or should be), as students and their perceived needs and objectives change, so will the content and techniques of language courses (Rivers, *Teaching* 376). Allowing students to select courses which are not only necessary now, but also particularly valuable in their future careers is a revision we should offer in the near future. The free selection was originated at Harvard University in the 19th century. Initially this system evoked controversy in U.S. higher education, but it has become the norm in the vast majority of western countries. Many of these universities have gained respect as leaders in higher education.⁶

If the department lacks staff, funding, or time to offer every kind of courses, collaboration with other universities could supplement that shortage. "A multi university cross registration system" offers a promising chance for

students to have that supplement. A credit transfer system will be ideal. According to a survey by the Ministry of Education, the number of universities accepting credit transfers is increasing in Japan. In 1988, the number was 123, however, it had increased to 342 in 1996.⁷

Within a single experimental course, we had achievement beyond expectations near majority of approvals of students. The flow of curriculum innovation is expanding nationwide. Each university has individual needs for suitable curricula, therefore, we should flexibly develop and revise our ELT curricula.

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6 Carnochan, W. B. *The Battleground of the Curriculum: Liberal Education and American Experience*, trans. Tanji Megumi Tokyo: Tamagawa U.P. , 1996. 13.

7 The University Council Report 1999, 194.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions 1: at the beginning of the course 2000

Q1 On which English skills have you concentrated, before you entered this University?

☐ Reading

☐ Writing

☐ Speaking

☐ Listening

Q2 Which English skills do you hope to study at this University?

☐ Reading

☐ Writing

☐ Speaking

☐ Listening

Q3 Which methodology of foreign language learning is most effective for you?

Q 4 Do you think audio-visual devices will specifically assist you in developing your English skills?

Q 5 What are your study objectives? Please describe your study objective in detail.

Survey Questions 2-1 : at the middle term of 2000

Section 1 : Listening & Reading Comprehensive

Section 2: Spoken English

Section 3: Test-Taking Skill (TOEFL listening)

Q1 Which Section did you select to join?

Q1-1 On what did you base your selection of that Section? Please describe your objective in detail.

Q2 This course adopts a "free elective system." What do you think of that system? Do you prefer that system? Please give your opinions and reasons.

Q3 Which course offerings do you expect?

Q4 Do you think English should be a compulsory subject?

Please expand on your reasons.

Yes []

The basis for your answer.

[]

No []

The basis for your answer.

[]

Q5 Do you have any other suggestions for this course?

If so, please describe.

Survey Questions 2-2 : at the end of the course 2000

1 On the "Registration System" of this Course

Q1 Did the "free elective system" affect your study attitudes?

Yes []

No []

Q1-1 How did the free elective system affect you?

2 On the "Coursed Design" of this course.

2-1 Scheduling

Section1 [] too long [] proper [] too short

Section2 [] too long [] proper [] too short

Section3 [] too long [] proper [] too short

2-2 Class size

Which class size do you regard as appropriate?

[] below 15 student /class, []15-25, [] 25-35,

[] 35-50, [] above 50

The basis for your selection.

[]