

Working Towards a Curriculum Development Project at the EEC

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Introduction

The English Education Center (EEC) at Ehime University was founded in 2001 to organize freshman general education English courses into a uniform curriculum. As the executive decision to establish the EEC was made shortly before the 2001 academic year began, little time remained for formal curriculum development. The resulting curriculum was a hastily assembled collection of educational materials aimed at improving oral proficiency. Subsequently, EEC permanent faculty members were instructed by another executive committee to create more organized teaching materials aimed at oral proficiency (which were unpublished). However, the contents of these materials were created via writers' subjective judgments rather than fact-based methodology.

Due to the growing popularity of TOEIC (Educational Testing Service, 2016) as a standard measurement of English proficiency, another executive decision was made in 2004 to focus the EEC's curriculum on listening and reading competence. Members of the EEC were again asked to create new materials (Kanamori, et al. 2005; Kanamori, et al. 2006a; Kanamori, et al. 2006b; Lyons, et al. 2007). Although time pressures were less of an issue during this iteration of the EEC's curriculum development, formal investigation into the needs of students was not conducted. Instead, concepts and contents within these materials were loosely centered on increasing students' scores on examinations of general English ability.

In 2008 another administrative decision was passed down to divide the EEC curriculum into four separate skills courses. This time, however, an attempt at formal curriculum development was conducted. A few EEC permanent faculty members conducted teacher and student surveys comprised of statements extracted from can-do lists of standardized examinations of English proficiency such as EIKEN (EIKEN Foundation of Japan, 2016), GTEC (Benesse Corporation, 2016), TOEIC

(Educational Testing Service, 2016), and CEF (Council of Europe, 2001) as well as statements contributed by EEC teachers (Yamanashi & Hiromori, 2008). The most popular can-do statements according to survey results were then placed on a can-do list for each new EEC course (see Appendix 1 for an example).

However, as can be viewed in Appendix 1, many can-do statements represent proficiencies that are nearly impossible to cultivate during a fifteen week course, but are more suitable as long-term proficiency goals. Consequently, the can-do items sourced from standardized examinations are mainly expressed as unit themes in textbooks created by EEC faculty members (Stafford, et al., 2010; Blight, Tanaka, & McCarthy, 2010; Murphy, Heffernan, & Hiromori, 2010; Stafford, et al., 2010; Stafford, 2013).

Needless to say, the direction of the EEC's curriculum has largely been determined by executive committees independent of the EEC and whose members may not necessarily maintain expertise in EFL education. In addition, decisions regarding the EEC's curriculum have frequently been based on anecdotal evidence rather than data obtained from methodical research, both outside of and within the EEC. This article describes the current need for a systematic, research-based curriculum development project from within the EEC aimed at evaluating and revising the EEC's curriculum to meet current developments in English education in Japan and the changing needs of Ehime University's incoming students.

Issues Supporting a Curriculum Development Project

MEXT Reforms

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) began to implement staged educational reforms in 2011 with the aim of increasing its citizens' English proficiency. Among the first of MEXT's

reforms is requiring English as a subject for all 5th and 6th public primary school graders and the encouragement of communicative language teaching methodologies (MEXT, 2008a). MEXT has also made several revisions to the Course of Study Guidelines for middle schools – which were introduced in 2012 – where class hours and the target vocabulary corpus have been increased and the importance of a balance in teaching all four language skills is emphasized to encourage classroom activities for communication, not grammar teaching (MEXT 2008b).

Furthermore, implementation of the new Course of Study Guidelines for high schools began in 2013 which also recommend that class time and vocabulary corpus size be increased, the four skills be given more equal attention, and that “language activities should be interlinked for comprehensive learning” (MEXT 2009, p. 2). Most noteworthy, however, is that MEXT declared that “grammar instruction should be given as a means to support communication” rather than be the main purpose of instruction (MEXT 2009, p. 7).

Although time will ultimately determine the success of MEXT’s reforms, in coming years, many of Ehime University’s incoming students will have studied under more rigorous primary and secondary EFL curriculums. The anticipated enrolment of these students and the government’s recent will to foster greater communication abilities in Japan’s English education systems make the present a golden opportunity for the EEC to embark on a curriculum development project.

Reforms Within Ehime University

Factors within Ehime University and the EEC also make the present an ideal time to implement a curriculum development project. For one, Ehime University began a new cycle of curriculum in the 2016-2015 academic year, which will continue to the end of the 2019-2020 academic year when new curriculum can be implemented. Also, the three year time span leaves plenty of time to conduct a research-based curriculum development project. Furthermore, the transition from a semester schedule to a quarter system has brought about many changes which may offer advantageous teaching opportunities because of the new sequential (compared to concurrent for semesters) format of courses offered. These factors, in addition to MEXT’s reforms warrant a thorough, research-based curriculum development project.

A Plan for Curriculum Development

A multitude of curriculum development models exist for English language teaching, but among the most cogent is offered by Brown (1995). Brown’s model, shown in Figure 1, “provides both a set of stages for logical program development and a set of components for the improvement and maintenance of an already existing language program” (Brown 1995, p. 19), which is highly suitable for the EEC. Since many of the components in Brown’s model already exist in the EEC, the logical place to begin curriculum development project is with a thorough evaluation of objectives, testing, materials, and teaching. This process, which could take place during the 2017-2018 academic year, is facilitated by current surveys and tests or ones that are being developed. Before starting a thorough curriculum evaluation project, however, it’s expedient to identify certain areas of the program that require evaluation most.

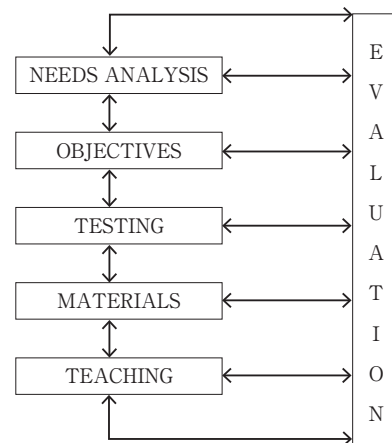


Figure 1

Productive Skill Courses

Since the EEC’s courses were divided into four separate skills in 2008, a distinction between productive skills and receptive skills became very apparent. Within the EEC, the receptive skills courses of speaking and writing require students to use their existing knowledge of English to produce a conversation and a paragraph (respectively) with a minimum of quality as described in a scoring rubric based on the sub-skills necessary to complete the overall task.

From an evaluation perspective, because of their decidedly criterion-based nature, progress with learning goals in these courses are rather easily measured compared with those of the receptive courses for two

main reasons. Firstly, because their tertiary education focused mainly on listening and reading proficiency (for the sake of university entrance examinations), incoming EEC students commonly have little experience with the productive skills of speaking and writing. Secondly, compared to the rather open-ended goals of improving general proficiency in the reading and listening courses, the goals of generating a spoken conversation and a written paragraph in the productive courses are rather clearly defined.

The merits of the EEC's content-based, productive courses under the limited 22.5-hour terms are obvious – the concise goals and objectives of these courses are new to students, they are clearly defined, and students' progress can be readily measured. However, although anecdotal evidence suggests a high degree of learning among speaking and writing course students, an intervention study should be conducted during the curriculum evaluation process to confirm this. Pre and post-tests would not only inform of the extent of learning, but would also reveal which speaking and writing objectives are being learned more successfully than others and which student profiles are more (and less) successful than others at doing so.

Receptive Skill Courses

While the content-based goals and objectives of the productive courses of speaking and writing are clearly defined, relatively new to students, and learning progress is therefore comparatively easy to measure, the situation for the receptive skills courses of listening and reading is less straightforward.

Indeed, for admissions purposes, most incoming freshmen have at least six years' experience studying English through the *juken benkyo* system for the goal of obtaining an acceptable score on the National Center Test for University Admissions – whose English portion is basically a test of general reading and listening proficiency (National Center Test for University Admissions, 2015). This means that many students have already mastered basic reading and listening skills such as previewing, predicting, skimming, scanning, and understanding main ideas and details, which the current EEC receptive skills curriculums aim to teach. In contrast to the speaking and writing courses where students learn objectives which are new to them, the receptive courses chiefly aim to increase general English listening and reading proficiency.

While increasing proficiency is not at all a bad goal, it

is perhaps more suitable for a years-long program rather than a 22.5-hour listening or reading course which the EEC offers. While incremental listening and reading progress in proficiency is possible under the limited scope of the EEC's freshman English program, it does not appear on standardized examinations such as the GTEC (Benesse Corporation, 2016) which the EEC uses to measure students' improvement over their freshman year. Table 1 shows rather disappointing average scores for freshmen students during the 2015-2016 academic year.

Listening		Reading		Total	
Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
107.84	108.64	111.17	110.95	219.00	219.59

Table 1

Moreover, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages scale of English proficiency (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, 2013), it would take students an additional 150-250 guided learning hours to advance from their incoming average B1 level (as correlated to the average GTEC score) to the next level of B2 – an impossibility under the limited time of the EEC's 90-hour education program.

Therefore, a thorough evaluation of the goals of the listening and reading courses should also be conducted with special attention given to whether students make progress, not with scales of general proficiency such as GTEC, but with the EEC's own common examinations. Such an intervention study would produce data valuable for assessing: to what extent do beginning proficiency levels determine success with the common test and final grades; whether there is indeed learning progress of the receptive skills among students during the course; which groups of incoming proficiency benefit from the current curriculum and which do not; and (taking MEXT's new guidelines into consideration) whether teaching for listening and reading proficiency is still worthwhile.

Incoming Level Differences

Another issue that should be addressed during the curriculum evaluation is the differences in English proficiency among incoming students and how this affects learning success during each course. Currently, students must study under a unified curriculum using a common textbook and take common final test. Higher proficiency

students may have an advantage with passing the course, while others will certainly have a disadvantage.

The difference in levels may not be so pronounced under the criterion-based productive courses where students learn relatively new content, but such differences may be more pronounced in the proficiency-based receptive courses. Incoming level differences will likely widen in future years as MEXT deemphasizes the National Center Test for University Admissions (National Center Test for University Admissions, 2015) in favor of a more accommodating policy starting in 2018. Data gathered about proficiency differences during the curriculum evaluation process would certainly reveal whether: streaming students into classes of standardized levels is beneficial; teaching methodology should be officially adopted for multi-level classes; or the creation of a remedial program are warranted.

Sequential Quarters

A new quarter system has been implemented at Ehime University which, because of its sequential format, may offer advantageous teaching opportunities compared to the semester system. The quarter system offers the opportunity to continue building students' individual English skills throughout the academic year in contrast to the current curriculum where the four skills are offered separately. Therefore, the current curriculum should be evaluated in relation to how it might be improved to better suit the features of the quarter system.

Conclusion

Although the EEC's current curriculum may be functional by some measures, it is one that has come from an outside executive committee and it is also one which was tentatively based on research. Fortunately, now is a time of opportunity where the EEC could spend three years researching and developing a progressive, well-founded, accommodative, and forward-looking curriculum for its students.

While the conversion to a quarter system and MEXT's new educational guidelines may be a catalyst for change, the need to reconsider the merits of proficiency-based courses, the responsibility of accommodating students of a variety of incoming proficiency levels, and the potential of transitioning from a separate-skills curriculum to a more sequential and integrated one strongly underscore the need for such a change. The only barrier to moving

forward with this opportunity is the will and commitment that it takes to carry out such a project.

Appendix 1

Writing Course Can-do List

1. Can write texts that convey content about memorable events (school events, travel, etc.)
2. Can write simple texts introducing the area one lives in
3. Can write one's impressions of books read and movies seen
4. Can write postcards (or e-mail) giving recent information to friends
5. Can write texts explaining matters of interest (simple recipes, instructions for using appliances, etc.)
6. Can write summaries of content heard or read about matters of interest (newspaper and magazine articles, lecture content, etc.)
7. Can write one's thoughts and opinions about familiar topics from daily life ("Food and Health," etc.)
8. Can write simple texts introducing Japanese culture (food, holidays, festivals, etc.)
9. Can write explanations and reasons for something one wants to do (desire to study abroad, take a job, etc.)
10. Can write texts understanding principles of "process writing" (drafting, revising, proofreading, editing, etc.)
11. Can write texts understanding principles of "paragraph writing" (introduction, main body, and conclusion / topic sentence and supporting sentences)
12. Can write texts using maps, graphs, statistical data, and other visual aids
13. Can write greeting cards or thank-you notes to friends, teachers, or family
14. Can write simple texts expressing apologies or excuses (not being able to attend the scheduled meeting or class, etc.)
15. Can write texts on unlikely matters or imaginary (hypothetical) events

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