

there is less than full commitment to improving language education.

The place of the Communicative Course within the whole curriculum needs to be clarified, as do the expectations that are held of it. In a limited sense, the course has made a very good start, and won the approval of both students and teachers. Long term success may depend on how well some of the issues raised are addressed.

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Some Reflections on the New Communicative Course

Making More of Students' Motivation to Learn English

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Having taught at Rikkyo University for six years, I have long felt that students in regular English 2 classes were not being given an adequate opportunity to develop their potential as English speakers, for two main reasons: classes meet only once a week, and enrollments are too large. Class sizes of 50-60 students may be suitable for lecture classes, but not for English conversation which, to be taught well, requires the active participation of each student. This was brought home to me by the occasional English 2 classes I had with 30-40 students, as well as by my free-elective colloquial English classes, also with small enrollments. The level of attention and cooperation among students in these classes was higher, and instruction was more effective as a result.

As a teacher of the pilot communicative course this past year, I am even more convinced that simple logistical changes have a big influence on what happens in the classroom. The two major changes are class sizes of 30-34 students and twice-weekly meetings. Among other things, these changes tell students that their class--and the subject, English communication--matters. As a result, students try harder and make more progress.

From the teacher's standpoint, meeting a smaller number of students twice a week allows a greater sense of familiarity and involvement. I was able, for

example, to learn students' names early on, something that in English 2 takes considerable effort. I had a better sense of individual students' personalities, as well as their strengths and weaknesses as English speakers. Meeting twice a week does not qualify as intensive, of course, but it is enough to create a much-needed sense of continuity from class to class.

Part of the difficulty of teaching and learning English as a foreign language is that language is a behavior, not just a body of knowledge, and involves habits of thinking and feeling—even the sense of personal identity. What English teachers in Japan bring to the classroom is not just a language but a worldview, including a whole set of assumptions about what people are and how they should behave. Teaching methods oriented to original or spontaneous self-expression frequently run into difficulty with Japanese students whose English training so far has been routinized, formalistic, and unrevealing of the “spirit” of English in everyday conversation. Students in the communicative course are no exception, but the improved conditions of the class make it possible to break down some of these attitudinal barriers, and to try to create a relaxed, spontaneous atmosphere in which students worry less about mistakes and are more willing to take chances with their speaking.

Students' Impressions of the Communicative Course

Of course, teachers' impressions are only half the story; how did the students respond to this course? Results from the first-term course evaluations, administered in July 1995, appear favorable on the whole. Many students took the time to write specific comments, including suggestions for the future. The following summary is based on evaluations by students in the Social Relations sections of the communicative course.

What students found useful about the communicative course

In general, students were satisfied with the communicative course (73%), with a majority agreeing that this is the kind of English course they were hoping to take (63%). Classroom activities deemed by students to be beneficial included conversation practice and discussion (76%), listening activities (73%), roleplaying activities (69%), pair work (68%), and text exercises (46%). Students generally felt that the goal of the course was clear (52%), and the majority approved of twice-weekly meetings (56%).

In their written comments students praised the communicative course in various respects. Many students wrote that they “felt stimulated by the class to speak English” (13 students), while others praised the good classroom atmosphere and the fact that the small size allowed them to get to know their classmates (10). Some students noted the continuity of twice-weekly meetings, which allowed them to “remember what the teacher said in the last class, and pick up from there” (6).

What students found not so useful about the communicative course

Students showed little enthusiasm for the textbook (*American Blueprint*), with up to a quarter describing it as boring or too easy. Students were also neutral with respect to the benefits of homework; 27% disagreed that it was useful. (This result is difficult to interpret, however, as the amount of homework varied by class, with some classes giving very little.)

In their written comments students offered several suggestions for improvement. These include textbooks focused on current events (5 students), more one-on-one speaking opportunities (10), more grammar instruction (10), more listening instruction (2), and more pronunciation instruction (2).

Students' impressions of teaching

Teaching proved to be the best-rated aspect of the new course. Students by and large agreed that teachers devised activities well (82%), were well-prepared for class (92%), explained things clearly (77%), led the class effectively (71%), and motivated students to learn English conversation (83%). As to whether teachers provided adequate guidance outside of the normal lesson time, 48% of students agreed, while 42% neither agreed or disagreed.

Students' impressions of their own progress

Students' impressions of their own progress in the communicative course were more mixed than their evaluation of the course itself. In general, students were more apt to believe that their listening (58%), speaking (46%), and pronunciation skills (40%) improved than their writing (12%) or reading (13%) skills. This is to be expected given the emphasis of this course on communicative English. Yet despite these results, and the fact that a majority of students were satisfied with the course as a whole, only 26% percent could say that they gained

confidence as English speakers, and only 31% claimed to prepare for and have a positive attitude toward class.

On a positive note, 53% of students gained interest in English, and 57% felt motivated to speak out in class. A strong majority reported an attendance rate of 80% or higher (83%), and this is consistent with the impression among teachers that attendance in the communicative course is much better than in regular English 2 classes.

Areas for Further Consideration

As the communicative course continues to evolve, there are several areas that will require further discussion.

Teaching format

The new curriculum reflects a shift toward greater standardization in English instruction at Rikkyo. So far, this has taken the form of standardized textbooks and tests. There are clear advantages to this trend, for example, it facilitates cooperation and idea-sharing among teachers, and allows for a more uniform and reliable assessment of students' progress. It is, after all, important to see if our efforts are really making a difference in our students.

Yet I feel that these advantages have to be balanced against the need to preserve some degree of autonomy for individual teachers. One of the things that distinguishes a university from other learning institutions is that teachers have room to cultivate their own style and approach to the material in accord with their own interests and abilities. This flexibility makes the classroom experience more enjoyable and satisfying for the teacher as well as for the students.

My own approach is to make the classroom atmosphere spontaneous and even a little unpredictable, in hopes of getting students to "dive in" to a variety of speaking situations even when they think they are not ready. I believe this is important for Japanese students because their own linguistic tradition often privileges form (e.g., proper levels of diction) over content, leading to undue caution and inhibition when it comes to speaking English. To this end I ask students to create their own dialogues, based on the material in the chapter, which they then present to their classmates. The aim is to have students confront, time and again, the task of inventing their own speaking as the need arises, which is of course what they must be able to do in "real" settings.

Students may not remember every phrase they learned in class, but what I hope they do remember is the confidence of knowing that they can figure out on their own what they want to say. This is a matter of using strategy, of improvising even when one lacks all the needed vocabulary or grammar, to get one's point across. Language games serve much the same purpose in my class, adding variety and levity while helping students feel more comfortable with taking risks and making mistakes.

I am not suggesting that this particular approach is the best one, merely that it is the one that suits my style and philosophy. My impression is that other teachers in the communicative course, while teaching the same material, went about things with their own style and creative slant, and that is all to the good. I hope the course continues to give teachers this kind of flexibility, even as the formal aspects become more standardized.

Exams

Exams offer another example of the benefits as well as drawbacks of standardization. This year our exams in the Social Relations sections of the communicative course consisted of role playing (1st semester) and one-on-one interview (2nd semester). Both of these testing formats are personalized and designed to assess practical speaking ability. For both tests, students were given handouts in advance describing the possible situations (role-playing test) and questions (interview test) that would be asked of them. They were given one or two class periods to prepare.

Students' performances in these tests were consistently good and in some cases outstanding. I remember feeling surprised at how well many of the students had prepared--performing at a level considerably higher than what we have come to expect of students in the regular English 2 classes. Teachers agreed that both of these tests were effective in getting students to review and master the material.

At the same time, however, I feel that these tests were limited as reliable, cross-class measures of student achievement. The points given on such tests depend on each teacher's subjective judgment. Even with agreed-upon standards, it is hard enough to grade all the students of one's own class consistently, let alone assure some kind of consistency in grading from one class to another.

It will be necessary therefore to clarify our purpose regarding exams; if it is

mainly to assess how much our students have learned, then we will probably need to turn to a more objective format than we had this year. The problem is that the more we objectify the test and emphasize outcome, the more the “tail wags the dog” in that instruction begins to be dominated by the need to prepare for the exam. Written exams are more objective and reliable measures of student progress than oral exams, but they tend to encourage memorization of rules, patterns, and mechanics at the expense of active communication. It goes without saying that our students come to us having already endured years and years of mechanics training in their preparation for college entrance examinations, and the communicative course may be one of their last opportunities to experience English in a more lively, engaging way. Indeed, not a few students in their written comments praised the course as a welcome change from the tedium of *juken eigo*, especially the shift away from a focus on grammar and passive note-taking. Given the influence of the exam over the content and flow of the class, then, it will be necessary to find a balance between encouraging active, practical speaking skills and getting an objective assessment of progress.

Grading

The better performance of students in the communicative course was evident not only on the tests but also in class attendance and participation. Again, this is not necessarily because the caliber of student is higher, but because the improved conditions of the class bring out more in the way of students' intrinsic motivation to learn. If I were to grade them by the standards I have set for my regular English 2 classes, a majority would receive A's. In one discussion this year, 50% was mentioned as an acceptable proportion of A's for the communicative course.

This raises the issue of grade inflation. In U.S. colleges grade inflation (i.e., disproportionately high grades relative to a student's actual achievement) is a matter of some concern. This is because grades--summarized by the all-important GPA (grade point average)--have a big impact on a student's prospects for finding a job or getting into graduate school. If a particular institution gains a reputation for inflated grades, the transcripts and GPA's from that institution begin to lose credibility among those who make decisions based on them. This puts students of those institutions at a disadvantage.

Perhaps this issue is less important in Japan, inasmuch as employers pay more

attention to the school's name than to grades. At the very least, however, I think that general guidelines on the proportions of A's, B's, and C's are needed in order to assure that the correlation between students' accomplishments and grades is reasonably consistent among different teachers.

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