

The Reformative Movements in General English Education in Japan*

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, in accordance with the great demand of English as an international language, the role and situation of English education has been discussed. In the Japanese educational system, English is a required subject at junior high and high schools, and at universities and colleges it is either a required or an elective subject. Over the past few years, there were two crucial revisions of English education curriculum by the Ministry of Education in Japan.

One is related to the high school curriculum, three new subjects, Oral Communication English A, B, and C have been introduced since 1994. This revision was based on the viewpoint that it is necessary to develop the students' communicative competence with the attitudes to understand a foreign language, country and people.

The other one is related directly to the general English requirements of universities; the minimum requirement for credits of foreign language was removed by the revision of the official requirements for the inauguration of a college in 1991. Although this removal of requirement for credits suggests any university would be able to change its curriculum independently, it consequently produces the necessity that each university should take responsibility to clearly define the objectives for its English education.

These two revisions had a great effect on the present English educational situation and accelerated reformative movements in many universities and colleges. In this brief study, I would like to investigate the actual situations of general English education in universities which resulted in the reformative movements in Japan, and point out what we should take into account basically to reform a curriculum to meet social trends. And next, I am going to present you two universities' innovative English language curricula as a well organized program based on the current views on teaching practical English. Lastly, I would like to state my opinion on what we should do further for general English education at universities.

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THE PRESENT SITUATION OF

GENERAL ENGLISH EDUCATION AND THE ISSUES

Firstly, we need to reflect on the actual present situation of general English education in Japanese universities, and next we should consider the issues which have been disregarded for a long time. Until 1991, university students were required to get more than eight credits of one foreign language, and the majority of students elected English as their first foreign language. Under these circumstances, in fact most of the universities or even teachers themselves did not set a goal to achieve, and the syllabus, methods and materials were decided freely without concerning students' needs and interests. With regard to the English class itself, most of teachers have preferred the reading by the grammar-translation method which has been long inherited in Japan, and this one-sided teaching deprived students of their aspirations and motivation. Such a method which has been in use for a long time at many universities has been criticized sharply in these recent reformative movements.

The main reason for this actual problematic educational condition might be attributed to the difference of objectives for teaching and learning English, and this is often discussed in the field of foreign language education. Historically speaking, the issue on the educational objectives of English education has been discussed from two aspects, that is, one is the "academic aspect" for cultural enrichment, and the other is the "pragmatic aspect" for practical use of language. As many surveys show, there is still a wide gap between teachers' and students' objectives concerning general English education.

Here I would like to offer a data from two surveys conducted by JACET (The Japan Association of College English Teachers), they were carried out to research the present-day condition of English education, in 1983 for university teachers and 1988 for students. On the matter of the purpose of English education, 30.2 % of the students answered "improvement of communicative competence," and 17.9 % answered "cultural enrichment." On the other hand, 20.8 % of the teachers answered "cultural enrichment," 12.8 % answered "development of the basic ability for professional education," and only 15.9 % answered "improvement of communicative competence." We can clearly see the percentage of the answers for "improvement of communicative competence" has risen in recent years. The reason more students want to develop communicative skills is because they have more opportunities to use English in various situations.

As far as the foreign language students are concerned, the history of language teaching shows emphasis on a very limited range of competence and has often proved less than useful for any real communicative purpose. That is to say, as long as the use of English as a foreign language was confined to academic purposes, for example, cultural enrichment, a limited command of the language, chiefly in the written form, was found reasonable and adequate. But at the present time, in many places and cases even in Japan interpersonal communication in English is now more vital than academic usage. Considering this world wide trend of English communicative usage, Japanese teachers should recognize that it is becoming more important for university students to be equipped with the command of English which allows them to express themselves in speech or in writing in a much greater varieties. Now, under these circumstances, most of all the English teachers have reached the critical stage where they must reflect on the present situation of education. In particular those teachers whose teaching principles are anachronistic and irrelevant to their students should be aware of the pressures and requirements from society domestically or internationally.

THE REFORMATION OF GENERAL ENGLISH EDUCATION CURRICULUM

Now, the majority of universities have begun planning or have established a new curriculum of English education in response to the nationwide movement to upgrade foreign language programs mostly because of the reorganization of the Faculty of Liberal Arts initiated by the Ministry of Education. The stages we must discuss on organizing a new curriculum can be simply summarized as follows: In the first place, the idea and the objective of general English education should be defined clearly based on the issues how teachers want to nurture students and what kind of language abilities would be necessary for the students to achieve this goal taking into consideration the students' needs and the requirements from the society. In the second place, a new curriculum should be designed appropriately to accomplish the purpose which has been set up to adjust to needs of each university or department. Furthermore, syllabus designs, teaching materials, methods and facilities should be decided carefully to be effective for the pursuit of the purpose within the limitation of the time. Regarding the present situation, the majority of universities are inclined to focus their objectives on the improvement of English language practical

these objectives that I mentioned previously.

The first example is the curriculum of the Economics Department reformed in 1994, at Aoyama Gakuin University. The goal of English education has been set on the development of the students' all-round English competence, and three sub-objectives are as follows: the first one is to improve four English skills in more well-balanced way than before by giving priority to listening and speaking exercises, the second is to develop the basic English ability necessary for professional studies of economics, and the last is to foster the attitudes to understand foreign people and cultures. The most striking feature of this curriculum is the use of a proficiency test in the course 'listening comprehension' as a pre-test and post-test to estimate the growth of listening ability. In this department, a published test CELT (Comprehensive English Language Test) is used. The course 'Listening comprehension' is a required subject, however, the students who fail this test at the end of the semester would not be allowed to receive credit. And the score of this test are also used to assess materials, methods and other pedagogical points. This class aims at the development of listening ability to the level where the students can comprehend English conversation spoken at nearly natural speed, by using authentic materials which have been grading up from basic to advanced. Moreover, a elective course titled 'English qualification test class' has been set up to prepare the students for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), and not only listening skills but reading skills, grammar and vocabulary are taught by using the previously given test. And in this course the students can take the trial examination of the TOEFL twice a year. The setting of the specific goals such as these valid tests will surely raise the motivation of students.

Next, as the second example, I would like to present a new curriculum organized for Policy Science Department established in 1994 at Ritsumeikan University. The meaning of foreign language education of this Policy Science Department is defined clearly that the gatherings of information and logical expression through foreign language medium and communicative competence for international exchange are indispensable for the study and research of policy science. And a unique curriculum has been established for the students so that they can select and study intently one of the following foreign languages, English, German, French or Chinese. In this integrative foreign language program, the role of English language education is based on the conception that at the present English plays an important role not only as an international language but also as a facilitative medium throughout the world

in the academic domain of policy science.

Students are required to take at least four kinds of classes in a week, an English composition class, language laboratory class, an oral-communication class and a CAI(Computer-assisted instruction) class to improve practical competence. The prominent feature of this program is English classes are organized on the basis of the results of a placement test which involves only listening skill, and the same test is given at the end of the semester to estimate the growth of ability and to collect the data for the organization of the second-year classes. It is for this reason that giving a lesson and exercises intensively in a small-size class organized according to students' abilities is considered most effective in developing the practical English competence within the limitation of the time so that they can communicate fluently.

In addition to the introduction of these examples, I would like to put briefly the points of a new curriculum of general English education started from 1995 at my Kagoshima Prefectural College. This curriculum was reorganized from the popular viewpoint that as I stated above, the development of English communicative competence is very important. To attain this objective, we changed the system of the course English I as follows: we divide one major into two classes to downsize the number of students less than 20 on average, one class is taught by a foreign language instructor, and the other class is taught by a Japanese instructor in language laboratory. Though I don't take up here, there are some points that need to be improved further.

So far, we have discussed and observed the reformative movements mainly focusing on the viewpoint that the development of communicative competence is necessary with consideration of needs of students and society. However, there is a further point which needs to be considered as characteristic of general English education at universities. Because the issue of developing of communicative competence might be improved more in junior high and high school programs, the issue for developing English abilities necessary for professional education should be addressed more at universities. Then, I would like to recommend the introduction of ESP courses into general English education curricula. ESP is the acronym of English for Specific Purposes and this term is used where English is studied for some specific vocational or educational purposes throughout the world. Now, English has come to be considered the dominant international language in the areas of science, technology, economics and others, and ESP courses are now in great demand in countries anxious to familiarize their students with the latest developments in their field

of study in the English speaking world. Many students need to study specialized subjects through the English medium at the undergraduate or graduate level or they may wish to be able to use with a minimum of efforts textbooks, reference books, or scholarly journals and reports available to them only in English.

However here in Japan, ESP courses are not well familiar to the field of English language education. In 1993 at the conference of JACET (The Japan Association of College English Teachers), Tottōri University reported a design of a new English curriculum in the reorganization of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, and in this curriculum design the introduction of ESP courses seemed to be the main point of reformation in the foreign language education program. This ESP courses were planning to be offered to second-year students, however, other details were discussed and investigated because of the lack of knowledge and information on ESP.

It must be noted that ESP courses have been closely linked with the reading of material in specialized fields, but what skills need to be developed should be decided in the light of students' needs and specialities or career possibilities. However, the serious question remains who should or can teach the ESP course because of its unfamiliarity in the actual English teaching situation in Japan. Most of regular English teachers are usually inappropriate for this task without orientation and supplementary training. ESP requires not only skills in language teaching, and especially in preparing language-learning materials, but also some knowledge of the demands of the specialized field. For this, close cooperation with a specialist or practitioner of specialized course is desirable and the retraining of teachers in association with an expert in the field might be indispensable.

CONCLUSION

As I pointed so far, several observations in the actual situations of general English education, the current needs of students and society, and recent reformative movements have shown that we must consider what general English education in university should be now or how it should be reformed from the four specific objectives as follows: the first is the improvement of English basic ability required commonly for any speciality of department, the second is the development of English ability and skills required for a specialized study or research, that is English for Specific Purposes, the third is the development of English communicative competence, and the fourth is to foster the students' understanding and appreciation of another culture. Many universities that reformed a curriculum feature the reinfor-

cement of communicative competence in various characteristic ways, however, we should regard all four of these objectives as intertwined and interdependent. An understanding of the nature and use of language is basic to a methodology which develops effective communication skills, and effective communication is prevented by the lack of understanding of the cultures of the speakers of the language and by the lack of personal self-confidence in expressing oneself through a new medium. Fluency in reading with direct comprehension derives from the ability to think in the language, which is facilitated by active control of the communication skills of listening and speaking. These four objectives should be kept in mind in developing general English education curricula, even though the selection of objectives and the order of priority will vary according to national demands, social demands and the interests and aspirations of the types of students.

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