

Colleges Be Ambitious: English Education

James B. Brown

Although the Ministry of Education has set goals for functioning in English, most students are presented with very few opportunities to achieve those goals. Many college-level, English language programs remain handicapped by unfocussed and uncoordinated curricula, out-dated pedagogy, and too few hours of study in the major, language skill areas. To overcome this education deficit, English programs at Japanese colleges need to adopt a more intensive approach to teaching English. This paper will compare some of the intensive English programs already in operation in Japan and the U.S. and will discuss some of the possible solutions to the problems of English education at the college level.

It is well known that the Ministry of Education has outlined goals for college-level English education. These goals stipulate that universities and colleges around the country should provide their English language students with programs that will result in the students being able to read, write, and speak English. The Ministry of Education does not set specific, language performance targets in the definition of its objectives for English study, however, so the schools are left to themselves to decide what actually will be achieved. Since there is no general agreement on what levels of English language performance can or should be achieved, many institutions find that they are unable to establish clear objectives on their own. This lack of overall goals in English education at the college level renders English curricula incoherent, and results in a fall-back to the traditional approaches to English language education that many observers see as unfruitful. Among the established language teaching

techniques that most English as a second language (ESL) professionals find unproductive would be included the grammatical analysis of English sentences – taken out of any meaningful reading context, and the line-by-line translation of sentences or phrases without any regard to overall writing technique or organized presentation of ideas.

Students enter universities and colleges having had exposure to at least six years of English instruction. The entrance examination-driven study that they have completed is finally over, and they are released into an arena where they may study or not as they see fit. This would seem to provide an excellent opportunity for colleges to provide English education that focuses more on becoming able to function in the language than being able to pass a grammar-translation test in it, allowing students who have the inclination and the perceived need to study English and gain proficiency. Because of the lack of goals in English education, however, many four-year, liberal arts schools find that they are unable to provide their charges with an English education that varies much from that which they received in high school. Regrettably the Ministry of Education has not been forward thinking in its approval of English curricula, failing to ask even the fundamental questions of where English education programs are supposed to lead, much less dealing with the issues surrounding the development of coordinated curricula. The situation at liberal arts, four-year colleges and universities deserves analysis, and thus is the focus of this article.

Let's take the Ministry of Education at its word and assume that it really should be the intent of Japanese university-level education to enable their students to graduate with some ability to function in English. Since the Ministry in its wisdom has not seen fit to provide unambiguous, language performance targets, for the sake of discussion, let's interpret the Ministry of Education's abstract goals in a more precise, if minimal way, and say that after four years of college-level study, a

student should be able to easily read a short, magazine article about a familiar topic, to be able to write a focussed and well-organized five- or six-paragraph essay without much instructor input in terms of language and content, and to have the oral/aural skills to answer questions about him/herself or to ask for directions and understand them, and perhaps understand a weather forecast on TV. What is necessary to achieve these goals?

To assess what needs to be done about the problem, it is relevant to look at other programs that have concrete goals and which make organized efforts to achieve them. In many academic, intensive English programs (IEP) in the United States, for example, assisting the students to achieve a high score on the TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language) is the goal. While controversy exists about the influence that the TOEFL has on English as a second language programs and, indeed, on college admissions policies, the fact remains that most colleges in the United States have come to rely on a high TOEFL score as an indication of foreign student admissibility, and consequently, most intensive ESL programs have focussed a large portion of their efforts on facilitating the student in the attainment of that goal. A score of 500 or higher is usually required for admission to most four-year colleges in the U.S. (the University of Washington, for example, requires 580 for undergraduate admission), but a score as low as 400 may be enough for provisional admission to a two-year community college.

At the University of Washington in Seattle, a large, state university, the Intensive English Program operates on a four quarters-a-year basis. Quarters on average have at least 40 days of instruction, adding up to about 160 days of class per year. Classes meet four hours per day, and include instruction in grammar (using an oral, student-participation approach, not a lecture format), reading, writing, and listening in the four levels of the Lower Division, followed by TOEFL preparation, college preparation, as well as classes in advanced writing,

research report development, and reading in current events in the two levels of the Upper Division. All classes are taught by highly trained native, or near-native speakers of English, and average a 14:1 student-to-teacher ratio. Individual course goals and many of their implementation procedures are specified in a manual of operations for the entire program, resulting in standardization of results among teachers and across quarters, and a coordination of the curriculum at all levels. Instructors usually teach a wide variety of classes over the course of a year, resulting in a broad awareness among them of the specific goals of each course, and how they fit into the overall program curriculum. Testing is standardized for all sections of each class, and is supervised by an independent Testing Coordinator.

Students are required to complete the core curriculum in grammar, reading, listening, and writing in the Lower Division before they may take electives. Those who fail the same class twice are dismissed from the program, and because of the visa difficulties that ensue, often return to their countries. Course grades, therefore, are meaningful to the extent that they can affect the student's ability to remain in the UW IEP and in the U.S. Because the average length of study for most Japanese is only a little more than two quarters¹, high levels of achievement are the exception rather than the rule. Nevertheless, those who continue in their study at the UW IEP, can expect to reach a level of English proficiency that will allow them to be admitted to college in the U.S.

Let's consider a Japanese student who enrolls in the UW IEP with the intention to finish all six levels and continue his education in business at an American college. His name is Taro, and he comes from Tokyo. There is no entrance examination, but Taro must take a placement test immediately after arrival in Seattle. Taro is placed into Level One. (A student can enter at any level, but Japanese students typically enter at Level One or Two.) Taro will take Level One grammar, reading, writing, and listening during his first quarter. Each course will be

taught by a different instructor. His classmates will be largely from East Asia, but a quota system will keep the percentage of Japanese (or any other language group) at no more than thirty percent. Only a minority of his classmates, therefore, and few of his teachers can speak Japanese.

Although many students repeat a course, especially at level three or four, it is theoretically possible for Taro to complete Level Four (all the Lower Division classes) in one year. Completion of all six levels normally takes at least six quarters, or a year and a half. Japanese students who complete all six levels in the UW IEP can often achieve a score of 400 to 475 on the TOEFL, and many gain at least provisional admission to a community college. Provisional admission requires that they continue to enroll in English as a second language courses while taking a fewer than normal number of college classes. English proficiency sufficient to enable a student to gain admission to a U.S. college is the most important goal of many academic, intensive English programs in the U.S., so such programs judge their success or failure based on the number of students who achieve that goal after graduating from the program.

What has Taro done in his first year in the UW IEP? He has spent at least 160 days in class, devoting his time to learning only the English language. Each of his four classes consumed one hour every day, so Taro has spent 640 hours in class over the course of the year. His teachers, all native or near-native speakers, were demanding, and because there were no more than 13 other students in each class with him, Taro has had many opportunities to speak directly with his teachers, and to receive daily feedback on his work and progress. Whenever Taro speaks to another classmate who may be from one of more than twenty countries, he generally must speak in English. Taro has had to spend an additional two to five hours a day outside of the classroom doing homework. Moreover Taro is living in the United States, and although he spends much of his free time socializing in Japanese with his Japanese friends,

he uses his English skills when he goes shopping, listens to the radio, or watches TV. In short, he lives in a near-immersion environment.

After one year, Taro is able to read advanced English as a second language textbooks, can understand advanced intermediate ESL listening materials, and can write a well organized, four-or five-paragraph essay without close teacher monitoring. In addition, he can communicate with his teachers and counselors, and can converse easily, if not perfectly, with his classmates. He is still far from his goal of gaining admission to an American college, but he looks forward to the next year in the Upper Division and graduation from the UW IEP.

When Taro left Japan, he said good-bye to his good friend, Nitaro who was admitted as an English major to a large Japanese university in the Tokyo area. In his first year, Nitaro's English language education was limited to an English conversation class with a native speaker, and a composition class with a Japanese instructor which he took along with courses in sports, history, and other subjects—all taught in Japanese. He spent ninety minutes in his conversation class each week along with twenty-nine other students, and finished twelve classes before the summer vacation and thirteen classes after the summer break, for a year-total of twenty-five English classes with a native speaker. He had the same number of English composition classes with his Japanese professor. The two English language teachers would assign homework occasionally, but Nitaro rarely spent more than sixty minutes a week doing it. Nitaro did not have many opportunities to talk with his English conversation teacher because of the class size, the language barrier and the fear of class pressure against trying to overcome it.

In one year, therefore, Nitaro had 37.5 hours of instruction in "practical" English with a native speaker, and an additional 37.5 hours of instruction doing grammar-based, translation exercises with his Japanese, "composition" teacher. At the end of his first year, Nitaro would find it difficult to answer even

simple questions in English put to him by a stranger, has had no experience in reading even a basic ESL reading textbook, and could not write an effective, short essay in English. In short, Nitaro's English proficiency has not improved much since he graduated from high school.

Although this is a dramatization of the educational issues, the reality of the situation cannot be denied. Much of the problem is simply mechanical. For Nitaro to get the same number of class hours as his friend Taro in English language instruction from a native speaker in English, for example, he would have to stay at his university in Tokyo for over 17 years. Indeed even this figure does not tell the whole story, Because Nitaro is attending a Japanese university, his program is not as demanding in terms of homework and grades, and lacks both the coordination and the intensiveness of the IEP in America. It is unlikely, therefore, that even with 17 years of study, he could accomplish what his friend Taro achieved in one year. If Nitaro could spend the 17 years studying, and if his program were more demanding, his level of English proficiency still would not be adequate to gain admission to even a community college in the U.S. His speaking ability would be limited to every day conversations: buying things and asking directions, for instance. His reading would be restricted to English as a second language texts, and his writing skills would limit him to short three- to five-paragraph essays – anything more than which would require instructor input for proper completion. In other words, he would not be able to easily fulfill the goals of the Ministry of Education even after 17 years of study.

Naturally Nitaro doesn't have the 17 years to devote to this study. He ordinarily only gets four years of this sort of practice, so it is inevitable that he will graduate with almost no practical English skills, unless he has the initiative to gain them outside of his university English program on his own time and at additional expense.

The situation is unfortunate, and it is not Nitaro's fault. The

responsibility lies with the Ministry of Education which seems unwilling to encourage the curricular changes that are necessary, to achieve its own goals. Sharing the blame, many liberal arts colleges and universities themselves have not been imaginative in their response to the problem. The more progressive among them, including the International University of Japan in Niigata and the International Christian University in Tokyo, have established intensive English programs of their own, paralleling those set up by universities in the U.S. and elsewhere. In addition, colleges which specialize in foreign language instruction often provide meaningful opportunities for students to graduate with some functional ability in the language they study. And they are not alone.

While not directly part of the Japanese university system, branch campuses of American colleges, such as Southern Illinois University in Nakajo, Niigata have tried to bring the intensive American approach to Japanese students in Japan, hoping to integrate them into the mainstream of the home campus after they complete a course of study in their own country.

SIU in Niigata, for example, requires all students to complete the intensive English program before taking any content courses. This usually takes from eighteen months to two years. Students attend class five hours a day, five days per week for five, nominal eight-week sessions per year. Allowing for holidays and mid-week beginnings and endings, this schedule results in roughly 600 contact hours per year for each student. As with the University of Washington IEP, all teachers are trained native speakers. Classes do not exceed a 20:1 student-to-teacher ratio. Homework is demanding, and although the grading system is not as severe as in comparable programs in the U.S., failure to make an acceptable effort does result in compulsory counseling with a student advisor. Students who are demonstrably disinclined to study are counseled to leave the program.

According to a spokesperson for the school, student compliance

with the demands of the program has been improving year by year, although at first it was difficult to get the students to appreciate that they were in a very different educational environment. This suggests that Japanese university students can be encouraged to study and achieve performance goals. Moreover, now that the university's reputation is better established, people there claim it is attracting more students who want to take advantage of what it has to offer, namely, the opportunity to finish their study with a strong, serviceable English capability. The school is also beginning to attract non-traditional students, those who are older or who have already completed a four-year program at another institution, because of the assurance that clear goals in being able to function in English will be achieved.

The average, liberal arts, four-year institution in Japan typically remains oblivious to the direct challenge that these other programs present. In an social environment where "Internationalization" and developing the means to cope with a smaller world are increasingly stressed, most Japanese colleges have continued to teach the English language as they have for the past 50 years, emphasizing translation exercises which are devoid of any language content other than the grammar problems they present; in other words, students spend more time learning about English than learning the language itself.

Even the bulk of classes taught by native speakers leave something to be desired as they usually fall into the classification of "conversation" classes. The words "English conversation" remain opaque in terms of goal directed study despite the development of extensive materials and even schools which call themselves "English conversation schools." At the Intensive English Program at the University of Washington, for example, conversation classes are not taught as part of the core curriculum for the lower division, but are offered as electives. According to the spokesperson for the Southern Illinois University program in Niigata, there are no "conversation classes," as such, offered in their program. Inevitably, conversation classes at most liberal

arts colleges in Japan, fall victim to the same problems that plague English education at that level overall. They lack clear performance goals. They lack coordination among teachers of the same level, resulting in different requirement requirements, the use of various textbooks and unrelated testing procedures. Niigata University, a national university, for example, forbids teachers to use the same textbook two years in a row. Classes also lack integration in curricula between levels, and between “conversation classes” and the classes taught by Japanese instructors. The result, ipso facto is less than optimal.

True, under popular pressure to provide a more “internationalized” curriculum most colleges have established some sort of summer, English–study programs with sister schools and the like abroad. Too often, however, these programs are not integrated into the curriculum as a whole, and rarely amount to little more than study holidays where students invariably spend more time “holidaying” than studying. In any case, it is impossible to make up for four years of disjointed, and centrifugal English study in a brief three- or four-week stint at an English program abroad.

Not only do the problems of disorganized curricula affect students, they also have a debilitating effect on teachers. Instructors, working within the context of an educational environment where there is limited hope of student improvement invariably become cynical and discouraged. Classroom instruction becomes perfunctory and further contributes to the decline in student expectation. A vicious cycle of low student performance, resulting in reduced teacher expectation and concern, followed by lower student performance is often a natural outcome of the English curriculum.

No one would complain about the present state of affairs, however, if Japanese colleges and the Ministry of Education agreed that English education is only intended to allow the students to have as much fun as possible. This *laissez faire* approach, however, is not what we hear being promoted by the

Ministry of Education. It is spending large sums of money and involving considerable organizational talent in developing the Assistant English Teacher (AET) program in the secondary schools with the hope of enabling students to learn more communicative skills. Clearly there is an understanding that the present teaching technology and curricula are inadequate. If the issues discussed at the most recent Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) conference in September 1992 are any indication, the universities agree that there is a problem and that something needs to be done about it.

THE PROBLEM

The difficulty seems to be that there are not enough people at the Ministry of Education or university level in English education who have an appreciation for what is necessary to bring the Nitaros of Japan up to the levels achieved by IEPs in Japan or abroad. The danger of this lack of expertise is that university level English education runs the risk of being increasingly marginalized to the extent that it has an effect on the numbers and, more seriously, the quality of enrollments in English-major programs.

If Japanese colleges and universities are unable to make the adjustments that are clearly required, students who want or need to learn practical English will be driven to go elsewhere. Those colleges that hope to attract new and better students with International Studies departments will be especially hurt, since serious students are undoubtedly aware that graduation from an International Studies program without at least a smattering of English is a significant deficiency. Moreover companies looking to hire graduates from such programs must have the minimal hope that students will have at least some of the English skills necessary to operate in an international business environment, an environment, by the way, that will undoubtedly become more, rather than less demanding on Japan's ability to

field people with the cross-cultural and language skills needed to function in an international arena with a minimum of friction. International studies and internationalization itself are worthy goals, but abstracted from specific targets, including those involving language learning, they lose a great deal of their appeal. Since few students in the present system at many colleges achieve even a basic level of practical English, the prognosis does not look promising for major steps in internationalization being taken on account of their efforts.

Unless Japanese liberal arts universities are willing to take the steps necessary to improve their English programs, internationalization in Japan and the presentation of Japan's views to the international community will be achieved by the graduates of other – mostly American – programs. That is not bad in itself, but as this international exchange comes into full flower, with increased integration in economics, world politics, and social affairs, those who wish to participate – the most progressive and brightest of the student population – will snub the Japanese university system. This will leave college, English programs with the most conservative elements who see their days in college as a second childhood.

Fortunately the degree from a Japanese college or university still carries more weight than the diploma or practical skills achieved abroad. Were it not for this advantage, Japanese college, English programs would be utterly uncompetitive. It would be a sorry state of affairs, however, if Japanese students were forced to essentially mark time for four years at a Japanese college to get the degree, and then spend an additional several years somewhere else to get the education.

A COORDINATED SOLUTION

Introduce Intensive English Programs into the existing curriculum

The problem can be solved by the introduction of more intensive English programs in Japanese universities. College English language programs are only a part of a wider ranging study that presumably is directed at the achievement of specific educational goals established by the partnership of the colleges and the Ministry of Education. As a part of that broader curriculum most of which is rightly taught in Japanese, intensive English programs must achieve their targets without impeding a student's progress through the other courses that s/he needs to graduate. It must not make excessive demands on teacher and staff time or tightening college budgets. An intensive English program offered as a part of international studies and operated as such programs are in the U.S. or at pioneering schools in Japan, would not only offer students the chance to graduate with operational skills in the English language, but would also force a welcome change in the focus of much of English education in the junior and senior high schools, from examination-driven, grammatical nit-picking to a more practical approach, thereby supporting the AET program already under way.

Eliminate English as a required entrance examination subject

As an important component of improving English education at the college level, English language should be eliminated as a required test subject for entrance examinations. There is little evidence to support the view that entrance exam-driven study provides the best results in the acquisition of communicative English skills. The development of an IEP would render such testing obsolete at any rate. Students can be placed into the appropriate level of the IEP after they enroll in classes. If their level is too low to fit the lowest levels of the IEP they should be discouraged from studying English intensively, or the lower levels of the IEP can be adjusted to serve their needs. It is

important to remember that German, French and other languages are offered to students who have never studied them in the past, and who have not taken an entrance exam to demonstrate any proficiency or aptitude in them.

Pay for the increased classes and new teacher hires by offering the IEP classes to the community

Since the IEP could be run as a semi-independent, extension institute (as it is at the University of Washington), it could offer educational opportunities to non-student members of the surrounding communities. It would not be necessary to have all the classes on campus, for example, allowing students in the program to pick up the credits they need by attending classes set up by the college but taught in a local "culture center." The extra income earned by this expansion could compensate a college to some extent for the slow decline in over-all student populations, enabling it to keep the level of its undergraduates high by not having to dip low into the barrel of applicants out of economic necessity. Also, since an IEP almost by definition involves many classes and thus many teachers, some of the expenses incurred could be defrayed by having access to non-college-student sources of income.

Integrate the IEP into the existing schedule and credit system

Typical college English programs offer two or three classes in the English language in the first year, and three to five classes, including electives, in each of the following three years. Since all of these are ninety-minute classes, by dividing them into forty-five minute periods, students could have four classes of English a week in a somewhat intensive format under the present credit system even in the first year. An intensive English program would be easier to implement if it paralleled the existing class credit and scheduling system. It would be reasonable, for instance, to allow students to enroll in IEP classes instead of other English courses in phonology or grammar.

A MODEL

What would such a program look like? A student might take an introduction to intensive English in the first year as a required course. This could involve four, forty-five minute classes per week in the practical study of English, a coordinated curriculum with study in all four skill areas: reading, listening, writing, speaking. In the second year, a student could elect to enter the IEP. Admission would be open to anyone. New students would be put into the appropriate level based on a placement test. Those whose level was too low for a reasonable expectation of success in Level One would be discouraged from trying to get their credits in the IEP, or special classes for beginners could be established.

During the second year, IEP students would continue their study in the four skill areas in a weekly class schedule of at least two, forty-five minute classes per day. Credit for the classes would be awarded on the basis of successful completion. Failure of the same class twice would result in dismissal from the IEP, and a return to the standard curriculum for accumulation of credits. The power to dismiss students from the IEP is critical in the maintenance of educational standards. Grades without teeth are meaningless.

The IEP would also provide an excellent venue for Japanese teachers of English to participate in the education of students who could look up to them as examples of what "internationalized" Japanese can be. In this author's opinion, there has been too much emphasis on hiring native speaker teachers for communicative classes in English. Increasing numbers of Japanese professors are returning from programs abroad with superb English language skills, and thus can provide excellent role models for IEP students. Moreover integration of Japanese and foreign teachers into the same program would break down the view that what Japanese and foreign instructors teach is substantially different in terms of value and serious scholarship.

By the third year, students would be taking more classes in the IEP and could be offered content courses in, for example, English literature or International Studies in English as electives.

Many colleges already offer such courses taught by native speakers and Japanese professors, but too much instructor time is consumed coping with the language deficiencies of the students, minimalizing course objectives in terms of content. Coping with language problems is the mission of an IEP. The IEP teachers would be in a position to help the students with the language difficulties they encounter in the content studies and would be in communication with the teachers of these classes to assure coordination of effort.

In each IEP level, there could be a mix of students from each of the three years, depending on their achievement and the level of English proficiency with which they entered the program. Some students, for instance, might have had a year abroad during high school. These students might be placed into higher level courses which were mostly filled with seniors. They should get credit for all classes that they passed out of by successful placement testing.

Because the IEP could be set up as a semi-independent, extension program, it could provide an opportunity for continued education for non-student members of the community. Businesses which needed employees who could function in English could send them to the IEP. Researchers at university or company labs who needed to be able to use English at international conferences could also benefit from an IEP Program. The presence of these non-student participants, a more mature and goal-directed group, could have a positive effect on the progress of the students who were studying beside them, as well as provide economic support for the program. In addition, development of an IEP could form the foundation for intensive instruction in other languages as well. Intensive instruction in Japanese, for example, might attract more foreign students, further internationalizing a campus and providing additional sources of

income for the college.

Japanese who travel or study abroad are often embarrassed by their inability to use English even after so many years of English “study.” They seem to believe that Japanese are somehow uniquely handicapped when it comes to learning English, and feel personally ashamed at their inability to use English more effectively. Meeting other non-English speakers in an American IEP, reinforces this sense of being handicapped. Arabic speaking students, for example, whose language is just as different from English as is Japanese, seem to learn to communicate in English so much faster than Japanese students do without the extensive background in junior and senior high school study. The fact of the matter is that Japanese students are uniquely handicapped when it comes to learning English, but not in the way that many of them imagine. They are held back by their underdeveloped English language programs. The Ministry of Education’s efforts in the secondary schools with the AET program have started the push for the development of communicative English, but they alone are not enough. Unless a college-level program that provides proficiency placement testing and the time for meaningful study is also implemented, the situation will remain substantially the same. Students will be still be forced to spend too much time studying for the entrance exams. Ambitious and concerted efforts to change the way English is taught at the college, level, however, could result in a positive stimulus to the internationalization process and to English education at all levels of schooling.

NOTE:

1. From survey performed by author while Testing Coordinator at UW IEP.