

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING IN A JAPANESE INTERNATIONAL
UNIVERSITY: A QUALITATIVE CURRICULUM EVALUATION

by

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Abstract

Moving from a macro overview of curriculum reform in Japan to a microanalysis of the language program in one institution, the main research question that drives the current study is *how does the English language curriculum in a Japanese international university function to prepare Japanese university students academically and linguistically?*. Specific research questions and objectives evaluating the curriculum components and their integration with outside-classroom language practice follow the general inquiry. Firstly, they aim at examining students' and teachers' critical responses to the implementation of the curriculum. Secondly, they examine the linguistic, academic, cultural gains and integration of outside- classroom language learning and practice.

The setting of the study is the Language Studies Department in University E (pseudonyms). Within the framework models of curriculum evaluation, I used the model proposed by Brown (1995). The methodology used is qualitative case study design. The inquiry included a total of 60 interviews from 45 respondents (teachers, students and program administrators). I conducted direct class observations to all English language levels and study abroad pre-departure and post-return courses. Analysis of curriculum documents and outside-classroom language learning material served for program descriptions and data triangulation.

The main findings obtained showed that firstly, the writing skill and outside classroom extensive reading practice are meeting students' needs within the curriculum for English based subjects, especially for tasks such as writing reports and reading relevant literature related to their major. Students' listening and speaking skills

proficiency remain weak despite being in an international campus. Secondly, outside classroom practice has been found to be most effective through study abroad and exchange programs. However, results showed that students' participation in the programs is still limited. Similarly, other existent on-campus opportunities for language practice such as the interaction with international students still lack effective organization for systematic language practice. Consequently, there is an increasing need to raise students' motivation to make the most of their outside classroom international environment on campus in order to practice more the language learned inside the classroom. Findings revealed that the Objectives, Materials and Teaching components of the curriculum are meeting students' academic needs more accurately.

Results in the current study imply that not only English Language Teaching will continue to play an essential role in Higher Education, but it will be increasingly characterized by individualized and self-learning. The analysis on the integration of inside and outside classroom services is expected to contribute to the theory of curriculum evaluation for the further development of evaluation models, as well as to a more needs-addressing-oriented design of English-medium instruction at any university where English as a Foreign Language is taught.

Chapter 1. Introduction

Higher education has been by far the least studied area of Japan's education system. (Goodman, 2011, p. 57).

1.1. Background of the study

Despite numerous years of English Language Teaching and Second Language Acquisition research towards more effective learning, reform of curricula, evaluation and improvement are necessary processes in all language studies departments around the globe. These processes become crucial in language programs not due to failures in curriculum design, but due to changes in societies. Consequently, the academic needs of learners demand a re-examination as they change simultaneously. New issues then arise in the field, and more thorough evaluations are needed.

The case that is object of study in this research (University E) is no exception to these reforms, nor of the universities that have set internationalization as an institutional priority in order to prepare students to live and cope in an increasingly diverse and interdependent world. Internationalizing the university implies that students must be given the opportunity to engage with other cultures and to be exposed to different ways of thinking. Through foreign language study, students have access to

specific materials and cultures which inform and enrich both their undergraduate experience and postgraduate life.

As Yang (2002) points out, an important aspect of internationalization of higher education is the teaching of foreign languages or programs taught in foreign languages. Other scholars have argued that “one of the more tangible outcomes of internationalization is the implementation of foreign language study programs at universities” (Doiz, Lasagabaster, & Sierra, 2013, p. xvii). This shows that the role of language education within the current trend of internationalization of higher education becomes increasingly important.

Moreover, as later studies have revealed (Bigalke & Neubauer, 2009), over the last part of the twentieth century, English Language Teaching (ELT) methodology and practice has developed very rapidly and has undergone changes and controversies. There are hundreds of publications devoted to the exchange among language teachers for continuous improvement of classroom techniques. The communicative approach to teaching and learning English has been a significant aspect of development in this field. It is currently used worldwide in teaching and learning English, especially, in EFL and ESL situations.

As an educational specialty within the discipline of applied linguistics, foreign language teaching has as its main objective “the building of communication skills that require the rapid and accurate use of a complex set of cognitive and motor skills” (Henrichsen, 1989, p. 33). In this respect, this specialty uses methods that are different from those used to teach other school subjects. Systematic frameworks are needed to conduct studies in this field. In addition, successful language learning greatly depends on certain social and psychological factors that are not so important when dealing with content subjects. A major challenge for language teachers comes when they have to prepare their students for the further study of content subjects in English. This is one of the main challenges that Japanese higher education is beginning to face in terms of Second Language teaching and learning.

Conducting higher education studies in language teaching (TESOL) as well as translation and interpretation raised my interest to further investigate not only students’ second and foreign language learning processes, but also the process of design, revision and improvement of curricula towards their successful language acquisition, especially in higher education. In a few years of teaching and research, I have become aware of the influence that the socio-cultural and outside classroom environment has on students’ language learning, and Japan is not an exception. One of my main motivations for the

study of this topic is the need for development of English language education in Japan, and its integration with students' opportunities of outside-classroom language learning and practice. I consequently concur with Poole's (2010) statement of the main reasons for conducting these kinds of in-depth studies on Japanese higher education, being not only "the dearth of literature on the topic, but also the timeliness of the matter" (p. 1), as for the past ten years Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has been launching several reforms aimed at improvement and revitalization of its higher education, particularly in ELT.

1.2. Statement of the problem and Significance of the study

The Japanese international university is a setting that has received very little attention, to date. (Lee, Browne, & Kusumoto, 2011, p. 16).

As mentioned above, the Japanese MEXT has been introducing several changes in its curriculum and syllabus for English in schools during the last decade. Among these changes, we find the adoption of communicative syllabus approach.

As higher education specialists, administrators, language teachers and scholars inside and outside Japan continue to conduct research towards productive discussions and improvement of language curricula in Japanese education, many issues still remain unaddressed. Researchers have been accurately arguing that within higher education in Japan ELT plays an important role, therefore its curricula demands thorough examination. However, this aspect has not been given sufficient attention with regards to research (Goodman, 2011; Lee et al., 2011).

Furthermore, we find that in the recently published edited volume entitled *Language and Learning in the International University: from English Uniformity to Diversity and Hybridity*, edited by Preisler, Klitgard, and Fabricius (2011) the authors examine the existent linguistic diversity in higher education, as well as the use of

English as a lingua franca, EFL and ESL in several university contexts such as Sweden, United Kingdom, China, Macau and Korea, together with the problems and challenges it brings. However, the case of Japan, where EFL is a requirement since high school until university level, is not addressed. Similarly, in the volume entitled *English Medium Instruction at Universities: Global challenges* (2013) the authors critically examine different contexts in which English Medium Instruction is taking place, and the challenges faced in each case. It addresses cases from China, Finland, Israel, the Netherlands, South Africa, Spain and the United States. However, once again, the case of Japan, which (although slowly) has also been introducing English Medium Instruction at universities, as shown in Chapter 2 of this study, is not addressed. These facts undoubtedly point towards a need for further research in this area.

Moreover, as I examined the case of the English language curriculum at University E in more detail, I found that there are a few specific issues that remain unaddressed (these are explained in more detail in Chapter 4). Among the issues that need further research and that shed light on the need for curricula evaluation towards improvement I found, firstly that, as a bilingual international institution, University E conducts English-medium instruction; therefore all Japanese students are required to take English content classes as part of their credit completion requirement. In this

respect, the systematic examination of the English language curriculum becomes more necessary, so that students obtain better preparation for the English-medium instruction. As Kirkpatrick (2011) emphasizes, “the internationalization process and English Medium Instruction are inextricably intertwined, as the former leads to Englishisation” (p.101). In this regard, the preparation of Japanese students for English-medium instruction (English content classes) is still insufficient in many universities due to a lack of courses or programs such as “Academic Communicative English (ACE)”, “Content and Language Integrated Learning” (CLIL) or “Content Based Instruction” (CBI).

Secondly, the program being examined in this study has only one course that serves as a “Bridge class” for the transition from Standard English classes with a communicative approach to English content classes (academic subjects in English). In this respect, there is a strong need for teachers and curriculum designers to either develop these kinds of courses or to strengthen Standard English language classes with a more academic focus. In addition to the above, before the inquiry began teachers had little familiarity with the university’s outside-classroom language learning and practice, and how students could use the facilities, which pointed to a more urgent need for awareness and integration into the language program.

Moreover, with regards to methodology in curriculum evaluation, not many studies concentrate on only qualitative methodology. Most studies use quantitative or mixed methods. The current study is aimed at contributing to addressing in-depth issues that are revealed by using qualitative inquiry through examining the Japanese international university context. Furthermore, in this study I provide rich qualitative data that can be triangulated with the quantitative data available towards the improvement of the curriculum.

Other unaddressed aspects related to methodology (explained in Chapters 3 and 4) such as the use of only quantitative methods, surveys, interviews to male teachers only and limited sample size, have been recorded by researchers that have conducted evaluations of some components of English language curricula (Berger 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Haswell 2012, Lee et al., 2011; Colarossi, 2009; Read, 2002; Sybing, 2010).

The setting of the current study is the Language Studies Department in University E, an international higher institution in Japan. This department is in charge of language teaching to all enrolled students at the university. In 2011, the revision of the university curricula was completed and the revised curriculum (including the English language program) was implemented. At the time that data collection for this

study began, this was the first external qualitative evaluation taking place after the revised curriculum was implemented in 2011. As Poole (2010) has emphasized, there has been very little or almost no external assessment of teaching at Japanese universities until recently.

Moving from a macro overview of curriculum reform in Japan, including English language teaching, to a microanalysis of the language program in one institution, the purpose of this study is then to conduct an evaluation of the current English program at University E in relation to the principles stated in the curriculum evaluation ELT and SLA literature with a view of further curriculum improvement and development inside and outside the classroom, which also entails teacher development. More specifically, qualitative curriculum evaluation is aimed at providing a descriptive and critical account of teaching practices, students and teachers perceptions towards the curriculum, thus revealing its efficiency and effectiveness. The findings of any curriculum evaluation studies can then become contributions, not only to the program, but to the field for a better understanding of the participants' learning context, their learning experiences.

In light of the purpose of the study the main question of *how does the English language curriculum in a Japanese international university function to prepare*

Japanese university students academically and linguistically? drives the current research. Thus, I have further developed the specific research questions and objectives of the research as follows:

1. How do the components (**Needs analysis, Objectives, Testing, Materials and Teaching**) of the English language curriculum at the university level address and meet Japanese students' academic and language needs?
2. How do the students and teachers critically respond to the development and implementation of the curriculum components in terms of their language proficiency improvement in each skill?
3. What linguistic, academic and cultural gains that students obtain from the outside-classroom services (for English learning and practice) does the university's language curriculum integrate with the inside-classroom English language learning?
4. How are students and teachers critically responding to these gains and their integration?

The corresponding objectives have been stated as follows:

1. Describe the implementation process of the revised 2011 English curriculum at University E.

2. Identify the components of the English language curriculum that address and meet the students' academic needs.

3. Explain the students' and teachers' critical responses towards the new curriculum, in terms of addressing their needs.

4. Examine the outside-classroom services for English learning practice at the university.

5. Identify the gains and contributions these services make towards addressing Japanese students' language needs.

1.3. Thesis structure

The thesis consists of seven chapters in which all discussions are aimed at answering and accomplishing the proposed research questions and objectives of the study. In Chapter 2, I provide an overview of the context of Japanese higher education, and the role of English Language Teaching in the new policies, specifically, the

increasing internationalization of universities. The role of study abroad, as one of the main sources of input to raise students' language proficiency outside the classroom, is examined. The review of these sources related to the context and background provided a preliminary familiarization with the context being studied before the data collection began.

As the specific object of study (case) is the 2011 revised English language curriculum at University E, it was necessary to choose a framework with relevant concepts to the study. Thus, in Chapter 3 of this study I then provide a theoretical review of the concepts and approaches of curriculum evaluation, which is the approach I use in the current study. More specifically, I chose the model introduced by Brown (1995) for language curriculum design and evaluation. This model served as a guide in the initial stages of the internal design and revision of the English language curriculum at University E, though no general evaluation had been performed at the time this study began. Moreover, as the language curriculum at University E is considered to be a fixed curriculum with unified syllabus and objectives, it was necessary to use a compact model such as this that allowed examining the components as part of a whole unit (the curriculum) for this external evaluation. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that the model is used in Japanese higher education ELT for external evaluation.

The methodology and research design of the study are presented in Chapter 4. Based on the purpose, research questions and objectives of the study, I conducted a review of the literature related to language curriculum evaluation methodology, as shown in that same chapter. Qualitative approach and case study design is the methodology that directs the current study. The instruments for the data collection (interviews, observations and document analysis) were adapted and modified from those proposed in the theoretical/ conceptual framework. In Chapters 5 and 6, I present the analysis of the data based on the theoretical propositions of the framework and relevant literature. Results of outside-classroom learning and practice services in terms of gains and integration to inside-classroom have been discussed in light of research and literature on study abroad. Study abroad has been found to be one of the most broadly examined outside-classroom language learning opportunities in comparison to on campus language practice and self-learning facilities.

Systematic analysis and presentation of the findings has been found to be a key term in English language teaching research within educational research, applied linguistics, and more specifically in curriculum evaluation (Brown, 1995). The conclusions of the study have been stated accordingly, towards providing the answers to the research questions. Thus, I concluded that the Objectives, Materials and Teaching

components of the curriculum are meeting students' academic needs more accurately. Moreover, most of the themes that emerged from the analysis of outside-classroom learning and practice are being integrated in the Needs analysis and Teaching component of the curriculum. Similarly, the analysis of the use of the Self Access Learning Room and Writing Desk relate to the Materials and Testing components.

This study is intended to contribute in several areas of the discipline of applied linguistics, specifically English language teaching research and curriculum evaluation. The main contributions of this study can be seen not only in light of the unaddressed issues encountered in previous research (which I have tackled) but also in the production of a substantive body of data (which I have coded and discussed) that covers all aspects of the curriculum through observations, students', teachers' and administrators' interviews. The second part of the analysis consisting in the examination of the integration of outside classroom learning and practice into the students' standard language classes is expected to become an essential finding that contributes to further development of language curricula, as well as a more needs-addressing oriented design of English-medium instruction at any university where EFL is taught. Moreover, curriculum design and evaluation models are usually limited to inside classroom

learning. This study sheds light on the need to include on-campus self-learning and study abroad opportunities inside curriculum design and evaluation models.

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