CEP 2001—A Report on the Content-Based English Program (CEP) at Heian Jogakuin (St. Agnes') College

Introduction

Heian Jogakuin (St. Agnes’) College Department of English Communication has been developing and implementing a content-based English program, (referred to as CEP), over a number of years (c.f. Hayes, 2001; Kelsen, 2001; Mori and Ito, 2001; Shannon, 2001; Terasune, 1995, 1996, 1997; Yoshida & Kelsen, 1999). This paper describes the progress of this development and analyzes achievement in terms of the results of standardized tests for first and second year students for the academic year of 2001, compares the results of this test with the results of the previous year and makes recommendations for improvement.

Background

The English language program was changed last year to incorporate content-based materials in an effort to increase student interest and motivation in the acquisition of English as a foreign language and efforts have been made to ensure that there is a consistent look and feel to the program and to the various units. Last year four special lecturers were hired on a contractual basis to work with the two full time lectures involved in this program to help select and develop materials and a curriculum that would meet the needs of the students. Kelsen (2001) describes the role of these lecturers and points out that one of the main responsibilities of the lecturers “is the development of materials to correspond with the topics” (p. 39). For the most part the team has been able to successfully fulfill these obligations, although there have been some difficulties in gaining unanimous consensus on how best to approach the development and presentation of materials but as Hayes (2001) points out, “the benefits to students of coordinated topics were recognized and outweighed implementation problems” (p. 63).

Program Update

This is a two-year program consisting of College Speaking and College Listening taught by native instructors and College Reading and College Writing taught by fluent bilingual Japanese teachers in the first year and a combined Advanced Speaking and Listening class taught by native English speaking instructors and a combined Advanced Reading and Writing class taught by fluent bilingual Japanese teachers in the second year. As well as these classes, we offer College English which is a first-year class that deals with forms of English language details such as grammar and pronunciation rules and English for special purposes, (referred to as ESP) classes that the first and second-year students choose four classes from sixteen different classes depending on individual needs and interests, such as study abroad preparation, business English, junior high school English teaching, translation, etc..

The first-year College Speaking/Listening and College Reading/Writing curriculum is comprised of a Self-Introduction unit followed by five topic units: 1.) Food, 2.) Travel, 3.) Gender, 4.) Health, and 5.) Environment. The second year curriculum is comprised of five topic units: 1.) Work and Employment, 2.) Art, Culture, and Music, 3.) Internationalization, 4.) Human Rights, and 5.) Future.

* Lecturer, Heian Jogakuin (St. Agnes') College, Dept. of English Communication (English Education)
These topics were chosen by the CEP team because it was believed that they would be useful, interesting and motivating to the students. The topics reflect the current views on these topics and have been prepared in whole or in part in a collaborative manner in the Reading and Writing sections. In the Speaking and Listening sections, members have individually and collaboratively produced materials. To allow for a variety of teaching methods and to encourage creativity and spontaneity in the classroom the materials may be used by any individual teacher in any manner judged fit and the choice of materials is up to the individual teacher. The only commonality is that the teachers use the same topic for that unit.

Most of the first-year Speaking and Listening material was developed as an ongoing project last year and is being refined this year. The second-year Speaking and Listening material is being developed prior to the classes and is being refined as it is being taught. The first-year Reading and Writing materials were gathered or developed last year and was published in an in-house booklet that was distributed to all first-year students. The second-year materials are being selected on an ongoing basis prior to the lessons being taught and are being refined as the lessons are taught.

Coordination among classes has been organized such that the Reading and Writing classes precede the Speaking and Listening classes so that the students will have some content background and vocabulary that they will be able to use in the Speaking and Listening Classes. According to Ito and Mori (2001) most students and teachers are satisfied with the topics and materials being used in the CEP program and faculty expect to continue to use these materials in subsequent classes.

**Method**

**Procedure**

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the CEP program the Michigan English Placement test developed by Spaan, Strowe, Corrigan, Dobson, Kellman, & Tyma (1974, 1978), was administered to all first and second-year students. The first-year students were administered the test at the beginning and end of the first term. The purpose of the testing was to compare the effectiveness of the program on students over a period of one and a half years and therefore students' progress was charted over four periods: April 2000, June 2000, January 2001, and June 2001.

The second purpose was to compare the effectiveness of the program on students in the program in first year in 2000 and students in the program in 2001. The first-year classes of 2000 and 2001 are therefore compared in these periods. The results of these tests are descriptively analyzed and discussed below.

**Instrument**

The Michigan Test is a one hundred question placement tool designed primarily for English as a Second Language (ESL) students at the University of Michigan in the United States. The test is used extensively throughout the world and the Heian Department of English Communication has been using this test since 1995. There are three versions labeled A, B, and C, and these versions are rotated in different test periods. Although the test was devised as a placement tool we have found that by dividing the test into two sections, the first is a twenty-question multiple choice listening exercise, and the remaining eighty question section is a grammar/reading exercise we can find differences in student performance that would not otherwise be visible. The results of the test as a whole and the individual components of the test will be reported, as well as a comparison with the results from the previous year.

**Results and Discussion**

**One and a half Year Analysis of Second Year Students**

**Combined Total Scores**

The combined test results for the four test periods are presented in figure 1 and the detailed values are presented in table 1. The chart shows that over the
Table 1. One and a Half Years Results of Michigan Test Scores (Max=100)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>33.32</td>
<td>43.35</td>
<td>39.73</td>
<td>40.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>37.41</td>
<td>38.88</td>
<td>40.81</td>
<td>44.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36.59</td>
<td>39.78</td>
<td>40.59</td>
<td>43.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Two Year Results of Michigan Test Score Summary Max=100

Figure 2. Two Year Results of Michigan Test (Listening for Second Year Students) Max=100
course of one and a half years the students increased on average over 6%. It is difficult to attribute this increase totally to the CEP program because of the number of other factors such as contact with other native English speakers, overseas travel and home stays, self-study, tutoring, etc. that would affect test scores but there is a general increase in English ability. Furthermore the test does not measure speaking ability, fluency, proficiency, comprehension speed and other factors that the CEP program concentrates on. Tests and evaluations that would take these factors into consideration would more likely show a higher level of improvement. Interviews with entering and exiting students would be one approach that could be taken to evaluate these more subjective components.

Listening Skills

In order to see if there was any difference between the components of the Michigan test, the Listening component was measured separately and is presented in figure 2. The large increase in first-year scores appears to decline in the January testing but gains most of the score by June as shown in table 1. The data indicate that there is a rapid increase from the April score of 33.32% to the June score of 43.35% and then a slight decline in the January results to 39.73%. The June 2001 scores of 40.00% are higher than January but still do not match the results of a year earlier (see Table 1.) The reason for the decline between June and January is not well understood but it is possible that the room used to take the test as well as the quality of the tape may be contributing factors. If the classroom used to give the test is large this will interfere with the quality of the sound, making the tape more difficult to understand. As well the tapes are over five years old and are beginning to lose audio fidelity. To account for these possibilities the Michigan test should be conducted in the same room and the tapes should be replaced if it is deemed that the audio quality is inferior. Other means of evaluations should also be considered because the Michigan test does not evaluate some of the key skills that the CEP program concentrates on such as speaking fluency, discussion ability, and aural comprehension. I believe that in interviews and classroom evaluations there is an increase in these skills and alternative assessment methods would better demonstrate these skills in an objective and reliable manner.

Reading and Grammar Skills

The scores for the reading section of the Michigan test gradually increased as is indicated in table 1 which indicates that the students on average are improving in these skills areas. It should be noted that the Michigan test is not measuring what the students were being taught but only an overall measure of English language proficiency. Testing by individual instructors is done for course and student assessment purposes but is not included in this analysis. The April 2000 average was 37.41% and increased slightly to 38.88% in the June testing. The January 2001 test results showed a gradual increase to 40.81 and the final June 2001 test results were 44.90%. This shows an increase in overall test scores of 7.49% (See Figure 3.) These results indicate that over the course of one and a half years there is gain in both listening skills and reading and grammar skills as measured by the Michigan test and suggests that this gain can be partly attributed to the CEP program.

In the next section a comparison is made between the students in first-year in 2000 with the students currently in the first-year program to identify whether there are any significant differences between these groups and whether there was a significant difference in the first-year gain in listening skills and reading and grammar skills as measured by the Michigan test.

A Comparison of the results of the Michigan Test for First Year Students for 2000 and 2001

Combined Total Scores

The combined scores for the first year students for April and June 2000 and 2001 are presented in table 2. The entry level for students in 2001 was slightly higher than that of 2000 and there appears to be a very similar overall increase in scores on the Michigan test in June although the 2001 scores were lower (see Figure 4.) It is unclear at this time whether this is a true decline in
Figure 3. Two Year Results of Michigan Test (Reading/Grammar section for Second Year Students) Max=100

![Graph showing percentage scores from April 2000 to June 2001.]

Table 2. First Year Results of Michigan Test
Average Scores and Standard Deviation (SD)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Apr 2001</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Jun 2001</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>35.91</td>
<td>15.26</td>
<td>45.07</td>
<td>10.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>36.60</td>
<td>11.18</td>
<td>35.85</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>36.46</td>
<td>10.74</td>
<td>37.69</td>
<td>8.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Results of Michigan Test for 2000 and 2001 in April and June (Total Michigan Score) Max=100

![Graph showing percentage scores for 2000 and 2001 from April to June.]

- 35 -
overall listening performance or whether some other factors are influencing the results. Possible factors influencing these results may include room size, quality of audio, etc. among others, which would help to account for the fact that students who entered in 2000 tested again in January of 2001 showed lower scores than in June the previous year.

**Listening Skills**

The means and standard deviation are shown in table 2. In 2000 students’ scores increased from 33.32% to 43.35% from April to June. This year’s students started at a slightly higher score of 35.91% and increased to 45.07% indicating a slightly lower overall gain in listening comprehension although not a significant change over 2000. Figure 5 illustrates the parallel gain in listening skills.

The reason for the increased entry level score this year is unclear but may be attributable to the efforts of high schools that we draw from to increased amounts of communicative activity in the English programs being offered and exposure to more native speakers more frequently. Until more data from future years verify that there is a steady increase in listening skills, I am unable to draw any comprehensive conclusions, although I do welcome this improvement.
Reading and Grammar Skills

Table 2 indicates the Michigan test results for the April test which shows slightly lower reading/grammar ability than the previous year with the average score being 36.60%. The June scores indicate a decrease in reading and grammar but it is not significant, as illustrated in figure 6. The reading and grammar scores are probably not much changed from the April level because there has not been enough time to consolidate the learning enough to have an effect on test scores of this nature. This may suggest that a better time to discuss the efficacy of the reading and writing program would be after the completion of the entire program since 2001 students seem to be different from the previous year in terms of proficiency and needs. As with the speaking and listening portion of the CEP program, alternative assessment tools should be considered in order to reliably assess the overall effectiveness of the program. Students are assessed by teachers throughout the term and these assessments should be included in some objective assessment instrument that better reflects what CEP program objectives have been met and how effectively they have been met.

Overall Discussion and Conclusions

The second year students in the Department of English Communication CEP program have been assessed over four periods between April 2000 and June 2001 and have shown a demonstrable increase in general English language ability as measured by the Michigan Placement Test indicating that the CEP program is having a positive affect on the students in the program. However, the topic and discussion oriented nature of the CEP program makes it difficult to assess effectively using a standardized test such as the Michigan because the objectives of the program are more oriented toward the use of English in everyday life, rather than to increase raw scores, therefore other types of measurement which tap achievement based on the skills the program is aiming to improve would be more appropriate.

One of the intrinsic objectives of the CEP program as well, is to place more importance on developing skills in lifelong learning. We feel that the amount of time that can be devoted to teaching English language skills in any two-year institution is insufficient for students to master English given the level that they are currently entering at and therefore feel that the students need to learn to continue their studies into adulthood. Because we have set this as one of our attitudinal goals of the program, more qualitative and longitudinal testing methods would be appropriate to measure the impact of the CEP program on our students.

However, by modifying our objectives and adding more skill related tasks, we could improve the program and still maintain the topics approach that we feel has been successful in motivating students based on classroom experience and interaction as well as previous reports on the program (Mori & Ito, 2001). This could be done by applying a more thorough needs assessment of our entering students and adjusting the content in our program to fill gaps in skills and abilities that we discover in our students’ English language abilities through this assessment. We now have the students divided into three groups based on ability in speaking and listening as well as divided based on reading and grammar abilities. I believe that this is effective and allows for classes that better match the needs and abilities of the students. We now need to put more effort into attending to the knowledge and skills gaps that are presented to us in order have a truly effective and efficient student centered English language program.

The Michigan placement test has been used to evaluate the English language program for over five years now and it is time to ascertain whether this instrument is measuring what we are trying to achieve. Other instruments should be introduced that would better assess our objectives in this program. For example, personal interviews might be one means to assess the speaking skills of our students both at the beginning of the program and at other times throughout the program and at the end of the two-year course. From the interviews we would be able to assess the effectiveness of the speaking and listening component of the program and at the same time we should be able to adjust our
program to address any deficiencies that may be occurring. Other methods such as case studies and classroom observation would also be of value in assessing the overall efficacy of the CEP program and would better elucidate the strengths and weakness of the program.

A more careful needs assessment which would be part of the interview at the beginning of the program would also allow us to better deal with the learning gaps that we are experiencing such as grammar and vocabulary deficiencies, among others.

References and Further Reading

Hayes, B. (2001) Qualitative Analysis of Collaborative Teaching in a Content Based Japanese Women’s College, Bulletin of Heian Jogakuin (St. Agnes’) College, 33, 56-64


Instruments