

## Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College: Discussing the future of the English Course curriculum

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### Introduction

Two fundamental questions that must be posed in any organisation of any size are:

1. *What is the purpose of its being?*
2. *How can this purpose best be carried out?*

The purpose of this paper is to accurately define the purpose of the curriculum of the English course at Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College (henceforth, Kyoai) by constructing, in a question and answer style, a description of the current curriculum and thoughts toward its future.

Designing a curriculum in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, at the tertiary level in Japan; is a complex organisational task. Such complex projects may be likened to the parable of the tower of Babel<sup>(1)</sup> (where the tower collapses due to lack of clear lines of communication).

The biblical story above illustrates what can happen when a complex organisation knows its purpose but the process of it being carried out is not sufficiently refined. In other words, *the why* (building the tower) is clear but *the how* (the construction and the communication of ideas between the different members of the team) is not.

Let us take this parable as a useful metaphor for the complex organisational requirements of the curriculum in the English course at Kyoai;

- *The why* (the purpose) of the English course can be briefly summarised as a bi-level approach, creating users

i) of Level B

ii) Level C on the TOEIC scale<sup>(2)</sup>;

- *The how*, meanwhile, are the contents of the curriculum.

This report is meant as an on-going, Action Research<sup>(3)</sup>-based analysis, best practice report on the English course curriculum; conclusions drawn and, finally, steps proposed in order to facilitate clarity and further curriculum enhancement.

## **Curricula and Second Language Acquisition**

Second Language Acquisition is a major field of study. It is widely recognised by scholars in this field that in order to be able to communicate competently in a second language, a mastery of a set of complex tasks is required.

### ***How is this mastery to be achieved?***

Curricula, which are considered reflections of best practice at tertiary level institutions that specialise in SLA, incorporate a communicative curriculum (Breen and Candlin, 2003). Learners taking part in this type of curriculum would hope to gain competency in the target language environment as a result of the efficacy of its design. At this point, a question regarding mastery of the target language must be posed:

### ***What are the complex tasks students need to be masters of?***

To answer this question, it is important to outline the basic known principles of SLA starting with the following factors which are involved in the process. They are namely<sup>(4)</sup> ;

theories of individual differences among learners, social and cultural factors in development, pedagogical principles of teaching, and linguistic constraints on structure ... (Bialystok 1994)

If we take Bialystok's premise as a working theory, there leaves the important question:

### ***What can teachers do to help alleviate the interference of these differences, factors, principles and constraints?***

The prevailing conventional wisdom, according to Breen and Candlin (2003), as noted above, is that a *communicative curriculum*<sup>(5)</sup> is of best practice to alleviate such variables. This, presumably, is the case because such a curriculum will best suit the needs of the types of contexts that most societies in the world (with adequate resources to pay to education) wish their students of English as a second or foreign language to be educated. Breen and Candlin go on to state that in learning to communicate in a new language, learners need to learn more about the socio-cultural factors affecting communication in that language:

The sharing and negotiating of potential meanings in a new language implies the use and refinement of perceptions, concepts and affect. Furthermore learning the conventions governing communication within a new social group involves the refinement and the use of social roles and the social identity expected by the group of its members (p. 11)

It is necessary then, at this point, to connect the above quote to the context of Kyoai by asking the following two questions:

1. *Which learners are learning which language?*
2. *Who has input in the learning process?*

These two questions become the main two sections of the report below.

## **Section 1**

### ***Which learners are learning which language?***

In order to create coherence in the notion of which learners are learning which language, there needs to be some explanation here of the notions of the learners and language learned in our context.

As Breen and Candlin (p.10) note, since ‘individual participants bring with them prior knowledge of meaning and prior knowledge of how such meaning can be realised through the language form and behaviour’, in order to define the best teaching methodology for our students we must ask further questions:

#### ***What are our students like?***

This question will be the main topic of this section and is answered at length below.

#### ***How are Japanese learners ways of constructing meanings communicated?***

An in-depth answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper but many Japanese learners may broadly form their communication patterns within the Japanese frame of placing ‘a very high value on the communication of subtle aspects of feeling and relationship and a much lower on the communication of information’ (Scollon and Scollon 2003, 151).

#### ***How does this affect the way our learners will use a second language to communicate?***

Breen and Candlin point out that there will already be a co-constructed manner of interpersonal behaviour brought to the language classroom. Thus, the learners in our context *will not be* in a new social group<sup>(6)</sup>, students in the English course at Kyoai will be communicating with other students who, by and large, will come from similar backgrounds. As a consequence, learners will, to a greater or lesser degree, remain in their own social identity both without and within the duration of their lessons. There will then, of course, be a block to ‘refinement, perceptions, concepts and differences in the new language’; because the learners in this context are in the EFL domain and in a

mono-cultural<sup>(7)</sup> environment. As a consequence, the expected social roles and identity of the target language group will therefore be more difficult to attain than they would be if the learners were, for example, migrants to an English speaking country i.e. in the English as a Second Language (ESL) context<sup>(8)</sup>.

That is to say, the students we teach here are from *the same* particular socio-cultural group, moreover, the form of second language acquisition they will be familiar with and/or expect is that of a Japanese learner (for more on types of Japanese learner preferences, see Fujieda, in this issue). As a result, the group behaviour in class will, to all intents and purposes, be of a group of Japanese learners in the context of the EFL environment. In sum, students at Kyoai already know how to communicate in their socio-cultural group in their native language. The topic of discussion in the next paragraph is:

***What is best practice for curriculum design for learners in our context, i.e. having the same socio-cultural group but learning a foreign language?***

In the Kyoai context, the expectations of the teaching and learning styles of non-Japanese English teachers and the learners they come across may be at loggerheads. In the EFL environment of Japan, inexperienced non-native Japanese teachers of English are disadvantaged regarding their native Japanese colleagues because, in general terms, non-native Japanese teachers often expect learners to be able to react as learners in the target language environment would, i.e.

“..asking for information, requesting clarification, requesting explanations and examples, interrupting, restating and making suggestions.”

(Kinsella, 1997)

This expectation causes misunderstandings in the perceived roles of teacher and learners. Apart from perceived roles, there are also other complexities at play in the classroom, as Bialystok (1994); quoted above and here in point form; outlines:

- theories of individual differences among learners
- social and cultural factors in development
- pedagogical principles of teaching
- linguistic constraints on structure

Taking the premise, that although appearing at first to be members of a group with homogenous learning styles; these varying *differences, factors, principles and constraints*; make each learner *similar*, however, members of a *mixed social identity*. In

other words, the conventions learners will use to communicate in English classes will, almost uniformly, be conventions that apply to communication between those of university age Japanese EFL students who may appear to be similar but have varying needs.

How well learners can become aware of the difference between the social conventions of communicating in the way they have been accustomed to in Japan and those of the target social environment depends on a long list of complex variables; most importantly, for the purposes of this report, is what degree of acculturation our learners are able to achieve. This acculturation is analogous to the ability to communicate in a new social group i.e. create the social identity expected of the members of users of English in the target language and social environment<sup>(9)</sup>.

***What is the target language/social environment we wish our learners to be able to participate in?***

We wish our learners to be able to participate in the international English speaking world which we expect the students to come into contact with during their studies and after their graduation (Pennington 2005). Alumni records need to be consulted to find out how many of these students will be living with or dealing with members of the target community (apart from the study abroad program). We will need to find out from the records held; what type of companies the graduates went to; how much they use English within the target community and/or; what is the likelihood of the use of English with the target community; in the future<sup>(10)</sup>. This is discussed in more detail in Section 2.

***What role do teachers play in this process?***

It would seem to be the teachers' job to be a cultural broker between the socio-cultural group of the target language community and the group to which the learners are members.

***How can teachers be cultural brokers?***

Finally, for section 1, teachers can be cultural brokers by adapting the knowledge of the target language / social / cultural environment that they have in a culturally and linguistically stimulating way. This is where the native speaker teacher may have an inherent advantage over colleagues whom have grown up in Japan; as the native-speaking English teacher has knowledge of the target environment that was effortlessly built up as they were growing up.

Section 1 has summarised which learners are learning which language at Kyoai, i.e. the differences between learning a second language in the EFL context and the complex set of variables that each student brings with them to the classroom. This complex process of SLA needs to be thought of in the context of outcomes of the curriculum. How this process may be best carried out is explained below.

## Section 2

### *Who has input in the learning process?*

The following quote is very important for this section

What the communicative curriculum seeks to achieve in terms of any specified purposes must be balanced by what the learner personally expects of the curriculum  
(Breen and Candlin, 13)

The learner may be thought of as the main player in the teaching and learning outcomes of a communicative curriculum, however, there are others who have input in the learning process referred to as “givens” by Graves (2003, 193 )<sup>(11)</sup>:

- The students
- The teachers
- The institution
- Moreover, to a greater or lesser degree, the students’ parents or guardians

### *Who sets what the learners will learn and in what way?*

In the English course at Kyoai, at present, the curriculum is set by a consensus of the teachers in the English program. Changes in the curriculum can be and are proposed by students and / or teachers:

To paraphrase the findings of Section 1 again, *the learners here are, to a greater or lesser degree, using Japanese socio-cultural conventions because they are in the social constructs of Japan, albeit in EFL classes where they are using the English language to communicate.* A curriculum best suited to our learners’ needs must be explored in order to be most efficacious for the future of our learners, therefore according to Graves (ibid), a needs assessment should be carried out by curriculum planners. This assessment is best done by getting input from the disparate voices of those with a stake in the teaching and learning outcomes of the English curriculum at Kyoai, namely the four players’ groups outlined above.

The following framework is an abbreviated form of Graves’ and shows the components

needed for effective course curriculum development.

- Needs assessment
- Course concept
- Selecting and developing class activities
- Organising of class activities
- Evaluation of curriculum change
- Consideration of constraints (p. 179)

A teachers' experience also plays a vital role in the process. To wit, before the needs assessment is carried out, it can be thought of as a given, that our learners will almost certainly be living and working in Japan in the future, not in the target language environment; at this point there is the need to further pose the following questions:

***How far should the main stakeholders in the curriculum, that is; the students, the institution, the teachers and the parents/guardians expect the students to take on the social interaction style of:***

1. *The target community of English speakers while they are at university? and;*
2. *The English spoken by people with whom our learners will probably have contact when they leave university?*

In order to answer these questions there must be a set of sub-questions asked of the various players with a hand in the teaching and learning of learners here. This sub-set of questions are the questions that would need to be asked in a needs assessment of the communicative curriculum planned (The list of questions can be referred to in the appendix B). There is also the following caveat to be considered:

***Do the parent/guardians and students know what is best for them?***

Asking parents/guardians what they think is best for the education of their children may seem that we, as experts, do not know what is best for their charges. This may significantly affect the trust parents/guardians place in us.

We may then, as a consequence of not wishing to betray a trust and as an interim measure, take the premise that we wish our graduating students to be "internationalists". We must, then, draw up a list of attributes of an internationalist. Although we believe these attributes to be of value intuitively, we still need to gain this information from results of questionnaires (and/or interviews) from the main parties involved in the

teaching and learning process both within and without the classroom and the institution. We will have asked all parties concerned with in the SLA process what they wish to see happen. As a result, we will be able to “sell” these attributes to prospective students.

Prospective students will then be able to clearly see that they will not only be improving their TOEIC score when they come here they will also gain the learning lifelong learning skills needed to be an internationalist. Moreover, we, as teachers, can then create a tighter group of classes pushing that idea. Moreover, through continuous evaluation<sup>(12)</sup> of any future *communicative curriculum* the English course at Kyoai will be able to evolve with the needs of the parties involved in the SLA process. To that end, we, as teachers in our context, should agree what we want our students to be:

### **Thoughts on the type of students we may want to produce:**

We may agree that we want our students to become “Glocal” graduates - a combination of the words Global and Local. *Glocalisation* is a term originating in the 1980s from within Japanese business practices but is now a world-wide approach to empowering local communities (Wikipedia). Being a *glocal* person would enable students to create links to local and global communities, resources and knowledge.

Within our context, our students should, by the time they graduate, able to function in both the local and the global arena. They should be able to live and work, wherever they decide but also be able to connect with the wider world. Using English as a tool to access the best of what the English-speaking world has to offer is a strategy our students must be able to develop. Such students it may be fair to deem both “glocalists” but also “internationalists”. The students may wish to choose which term is better suited to them depending on the circumstances the path they decide upon graduation.

### **In order to facilitate the goal of making our students internationalists we must ask these questions:**

#### ***How do/will/are/ they (able to) communicate with foreigners<sup>(13)</sup>?***

In order to answer this question, it is possible to refer the reader to Section 1, which asked the question “*Which learners are learning which language?*”.

The answer to which, can be thus paraphrased:

*Members of a mixed social identity in the Japanese tertiary EFL context, these learners have the aim of becoming more familiar with the target social and language environment. This would facilitate the ability to function in Japanese society after graduation but, simultaneously, learners who have the ability to*



*be members of a wider international community*

***Where are our students from?***

This information is readily available from records held at Kyoai.

***What type of students are these?***

Students, who on average, in the student intake of 2002, have the TOEIC score, upon entry, of 326 points; and upon graduation an average of 516. As a side note it is interesting to see that incoming students have a TOEIC average of 351.

***How is that measured?***

Breen and Candlin (2003) write that within any target competence ‘the communicative abilities of interpretation, expression and negotiation are [its] essential or ‘primary’ abilities’ (p. 12). These skills are said to be underlying the skills of reading writing speaking and listening. How far competence can be measured depends on the observable communicative performance in the four skills. The English (communicative) competence of the learners in the English course at Kyoai is measured by the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC).

***Does the TOEIC test; meet these four-skill needs?***

The TOEIC Speaking and Writing Tests were launched in January 2007. As a consequence, there is a possibility to be closer to the aims that Breen and Candlin write are best practice for the testing of students’ ability. That is, to test<sup>(15)</sup> how students have adapted to the socio-cultural identity of the target language environment by testing students on the four skill areas of Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening<sup>(16)</sup> . As described by Professor Pennington, Leader of the English Course, at Kyoai (2005) ‘is very much geared towards English for international communication’, he continues it is hoped that students will be able to attain a certain level by graduation: The upper level, with a goal of reaching TOIEC 730 and the regular level, a goal of being able to communicate in everyday situations<sup>(17)</sup> (Pennington, *ibid*).

***Is that the best test to measure this – why was this test chosen?***

According to ETS (Educational Testing Service), the organisation that runs the TOEIC test, the TOEIC test is the standard for workplace English language proficiency worldwide<sup>(14)</sup> In Japan;

companies use the TOEIC test to measure the effectiveness of self-development and English language training, to assess the English proficiency of new employees, as a standard for selecting personnel for overseas business trips or assignments, and as a criterion for promotion and pay increases (ets.org)

At present, Kyoai has students take the listening and reading skills tests. The benefits of these tests are, according to the TOEIC website:

[the test] can be [carried out] objectively, cost-effectively, and efficiently. Generally, direct tests of speaking and writing are less objective and reliable and more time consuming and expensive (ets.org)

However, with the launch of the TOEIC Speaking and Writing Tests in January 2007, there is a possibility to being closer to the aims that Breen and Candlin write are best practice for the testing of students' ability. That is, to test<sup>(15)</sup> how students have adapted to the socio-cultural identity of the target language environment by testing students on the four skill areas of Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening<sup>(16)</sup>. As described by Professor Pennington (2005), Leader of the English Course the English course 'is very much geared towards English for international communication', he makes clear that the goals of the course have two levels to achieve by graduation: The upper level, with a goal of reaching TOIEC 730 and the regular level, a goal of being able to communicate in everyday situations<sup>(17)</sup>.

## Conclusions

This report has shown some of the complexities of curricula in the field of SLA, and in the context of EFL teaching at Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College. It has shown that not only do Japanese students in such circumstances bring with them a complexity of constraints, but also the context of the institution, and what type of course is most effective to make graduating students successful. That said; there is a need to think about any future curriculum change and renewal with a look into the current processes of the English course here with a review of best practice. This best practice proposes a *communicative curriculum* where all parties are consulted to bring about a focus on how to best help students be able to function within the target language environment. The caveat being that in order to know the target language environment some needs assessment must be first carried out.

The findings of this report are that there needs to be a forum for the on-going adoption of a syllabus based on the needs of the curriculum. To that end, attaining a cycle of curriculum renewal is proposed. The first steps toward this goal may be outlined as follows:

1. Carry out a needs assessment
2. Introduce a spoken language proficiency test

### Notes

(1) I do not mean to say that the current curriculum is in danger of collapse only to illustrate the inherent problems in a complex organisation

(2) See appendix C. for an outline of TOEIC scores and their meaning re: students' communicative ability

(3) Action Research aims to bridge the gap between theory, research and practice (Nunan, 2003)

(4) In addition to Bialystok's outline, countless scholarly works have been written in the field. Bialystok's quote is merely to establish parameters for the scope of this essay (see for example Richards and Rodgers (1986) who succinctly outline theories and approaches towards mastery of SLA)

(5) 'The communicative curriculum defines language learning as learning how to communicate as a member of a particular socio-cultural group. The social conventions governing language form and behaviour within the group are, therefore, central to the process of language learning' (Breen and Candlin, 2003)

(6) The "new social group" here is not the same in the context of the quoted Breen and Candlin passage. The new social group in the passage is from the context of a non-native English-speaking migrant in a new social group of the English speaking environment

(7) Apart from the teacher

(8) In the EFL context, according to Graves (2003, 181) many students 'have no target needs [and] no clearly anticipated use for the skills gained through study'

(9) Or speakers of English in countries in the outer ring of Englishes (for more information see Kachru, 1985)

(10) The questions that would need to be asked can be found in Appendix B

(11) We should also take into account the type of companies our students work in at present and why those companies chose our students. We should also ask the type of companies with whom we wish our students to be employed; what type of English course graduates they require. This will ensure the aspirations of our students would

also be met in a future curriculum

(12) This continual improvement is a main feature of the *communicative curriculum*

(13) That is to say, people that our graduates are likely to speak with in English. These “foreigners” may be native English-speakers, or more likely people whose second or even third language is English

(14) Because more than 4.5 million people take the test per year

(15) It is a 20-25 minute conversational, face-to-face interview conducted by a certified interviewer and tests include grammatical precision, pronunciation, fluency, and sociolinguistic appropriateness (ets.org)

(16) In Japan, the TOEIC test website writes, that it is recommended that students who take the Language Proficiency Interview have an English ability TOEIC 730 or above – unfortunately, this score is above the reach of many of our students, at present

(17) See appendix C. for an outline of TOEIC scores and their meaning re: students’ communicative ability

## **Appendix A.**

### **Questions for the stakeholders in our students’ learning**

*What type of things do students want to learn about when they study here?*

*What type of things do parents want their children to learn about when they study here?*

*What type of things do teachers think is best for students to learn about when they study here?*

*What type of things does the institution (the board of directors) think is best for students to learn about when they study here?*

### **After graduation:**

*What type of job do students want to be able to do when they graduate?*

*What type of job do parents want their children to be doing when they graduate?*

*To what extent is there a match between the needs of the parties involved?*

*How can the institute better meet these needs?*

By making a stronger curriculum

By constant revision of the curriculum

This can be done by getting input from the students as it is already.

## **Appendix B.**

### **About current students' jobs**

*What types of companies/groups do our graduated students work at?*

*What are the types of companies/groups that we wish our students to be a member of after graduation?*

*How many students are currently working in the types of companies that we would hope are commensurate with the future curriculum?*

*More importantly – how many do we wish to be?*

*Why do we wish that?*

## Appendix C.

### ■ PROFICIENCY SCALE

The chart shows the approximate correlation between TOEIC scores and levels of ability.

Revised May 1, 1997

TOEIC Score	Level	Evaluation Guidelines
990	<b>A</b>	<p><b>Can usually communicate adequately as a non-native speaker.</b></p> <p>Within his/her own realm of experience, the individual is capable of sufficient understanding and can typically respond with appropriate expressions even about topics outside his/her field of specialization. Although speech is not equivalent to that of a native speaker, the individual has a strong grasp of vocabulary, grammar, and structure and the ability to use the language relatively fluently.</p>
860	<b>B</b>	<p><b>Is capable of communicating appropriately in most situations.</b></p> <p>Understands ordinary conversation well and can respond naturally. The individual also has the ability to respond in some fashion, even when the topic relates to specialized fields. There are typically no great barriers to communicating in usual business situations. While grammatical and structural mistakes sometimes occur and some isolated disparities exist in terms of correctness and fluency, they are not so frequent that speech is misunderstood.</p>
730	<b>C</b>	<p><b>Has sufficient knowledge for daily activities and conducting business within certain limits.</b></p> <p>Can understand the gist of ordinary conversation and has no trouble forming responses. However, the individual shows some disparities in the ability to respond correctly and making himself/herself understood in more complicated situations. The individual has acquired a fundamental knowledge of grammar and structure and has the vocabulary to communicate essential information, even when lacking expressive power.</p>
600	<b>D</b>	<p><b>Is capable of the minimal communication in ordinary conversation.</b></p> <p>Can understand simple conversations when the other party speaks slowly and repeats or rephrases what is said. Is capable of responding to familiar topics. Knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and structure is generally inadequate. However, if the other party is used to dealing with non-native speakers, the individual can manage to get a point across.</p>
470	<b>E</b>	<p><b>Is not able to communicate adequately.</b></p> <p>Even simple conversation at a slow pace is only partially understood. Is able to communicate with isolated phrases but not in full, grammatically correct sentences and does not effectively serve to make himself/herself understood.</p>
350		
220		

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## 要旨

### 共愛学園前橋国際大学

#### 英語コースの現状におけるカリキュラムの問題点と改善の考察

ジェニングズ スティーブン

本研究では、共愛学園前橋国際大学の英語コースのカリキュラムについて行ったアクションリサーチを報告する。現在、第二言語習得（SLA）に基づいた理想的なカリキュラムは、SLAコミュニケーション型カリキュラムを模倣したものだと言われている。共愛学園前橋国際大学の英語コースのカリキュラムを改善していく上で、以下の質問が考えられる。

1. どの学生がどの第二言語を学習しているのか？
2. 学習過程に関係しているのは誰か？

本稿では上記に挙げた質問と、現在のカリキュラムのニーズと問題点について考察する。また、その問題点において、今後どのように取り組むかについても記述する。最初のステップとして、以下を提案する。

1. ニーズアセスメントを行う。
2. 英語インタビューを行う。