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## Designing an innovative and effective English-language curriculum within an international studies program

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### **Abstract**

Utilizing the curriculum design framework provided by Nation and Macalister (2010), this paper discusses issues affecting an English-language curriculum that exists within an international studies program. Recommendations are made for designing a program that addresses the unique environment and needs of such a program in order to prepare students to engage the world community and serve as global citizens.

### **Introduction**

The past decade has seen increased efforts in Japanese higher education to attract foreign students and better prepare Japanese students for global contexts. The Japanese government has launched several initiatives in support of these goals including the “Project for Establishing University Network for Internationalization,” better known as the “Global 30” project. This initiative seeks to attract 300,000 international students to Japan by 2020, increase the number of undergraduate and graduate courses in English, and promote international exchange between Japanese and international students both domestically and abroad (“Launching the Project,” 2012). Recently the program has recently been expanded to include more universities with a new focus on improving the TOEIC scores of Japanese students while also encouraging Japanese students to study abroad. Even universities that are not one of the 13 core members of the Global 30 Project are pursuing their own programs to attract international students and increase interaction between those students and local ones (“Kansai Gaidai,” 2012; “Kwansei Gakuin,” 2012; “Osaka

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Gakuin,” 2012).

Although many programs with an international focus seek to prepare students for careers in technology, science, or a variety of other traditional academic disciplines, one popular area that naturally lends itself to the goals of exchange and globalization is the interdisciplinary field of international studies. The exact definition of international studies is up to interpretation, but the Swiss Network of International Studies offers a fairly comprehensive explanation that international studies deals with not only “the analysis of international relations, but also with political, economic, social, environmental, legal, and health issues that extend beyond national boundaries” and covers topics such as “decision-making in international organisations, international and civil wars, sustainable development, public health, migration and refugees, gender issues, globalisation, trade and financial markets, human rights, and European integration, among others” (“Swiss Network,” 2012). Though not explicitly mentioned in this definition, language study is certainly central to any program in Japan that seeks to not only study these areas but provide students with the necessary tools to engage the world community in discussion on these issues. This paper offers guidelines for English-language educators at Japanese universities seeking to design an innovative and effective English-language curriculum within an international studies program. Utilizing one prevalent curriculum design approach as a framework, we will look at unique challenges encountered creating an English-language curriculum for an international studies program and how special attention to vocabulary selection combined with the use of a content-based approach can combine to create a successful program.

### Curriculum Design

Nation and Macalister (2010) offer a comprehensive paradigm for the design and creation of a language program or course curriculum based on current language teaching and education principles. As illustrated in figure 1, they divide the process into a series of interconnected circles. The three outer circles represent *Principles*, *Needs*, and *Environment*, global factors which must be considered in balance during the design process. *Principles* refers to the guiding concepts used to promote learning within the program, ideally based on a review of the current language learning literature. *Needs* is short for needs analysis, or in other words a detailed evaluation of what the learners need and want from the course. *Environment* looks at the context that surrounds the course, including resources and constraints that will affect the course. The inner circle covers more specific aspects of course design, often referred to as “syllabus,” including *Content and Sequencing*, *Format and Presentation*, and *Monitoring and Assessing*. At the center of the inner circle are

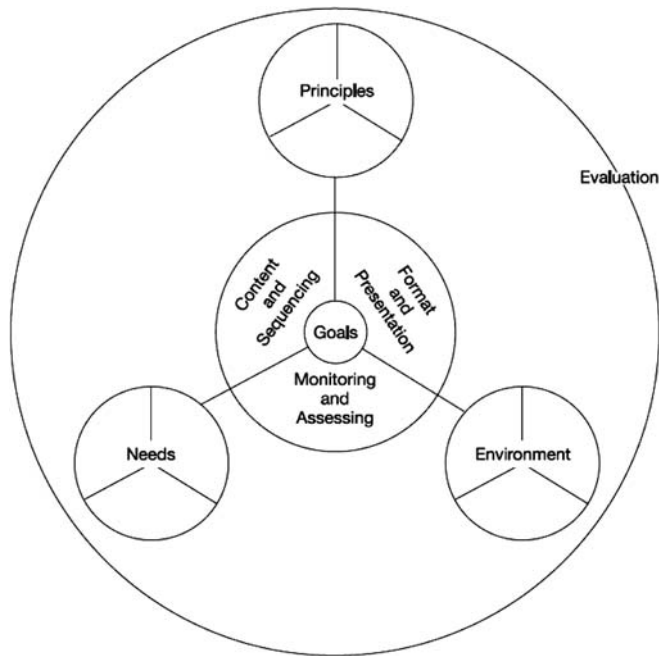


Figure 1 Parts of the curriculum design process (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p.3)

Goals, a reminder to keep curriculum goals the top priority. Finally, the entire diagram is encircled by a line marked *Evaluation*, which they state is a reminder to continuously monitor the curriculum design process in order to make appropriate adjustments. Let us look at each of these points in more detail while drawing connections to an international studies context.

### ***Environment***

The first step in any curriculum design process should be a realistic look at the environment in which the course will be created, in particular who the learners are, who the teachers are, and where the course will be taught (Nation & Macalister, 2010: p.14–23). Most international studies programs in Japan today seek to increase interaction between local and international students, and this can have a profound effect on the design of the language program. Will native speakers and nonnative speakers have opportunities to study together? If so, in which courses? Will there be a language requirement for participation in these courses? One common model provides separate language instruction for international students and Japanese students at lower and intermediate proficiency levels and then combined content courses for advanced students of both language backgrounds. This type of program allows for learners to build up the language and academic skills they need before adding the extra challenge of studying more difficult content in their second

language.

However, as an increasing number of our students come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, special care should be taken to provide an appropriate path for students who do not fit neatly into categories, such as “native speaker” or “international student.” For example, many Japanese students today have lived abroad for a year or more with some spending considerable parts of their childhood overseas and only returning to Japan for university, and already having a more international perspective, these returnees are often attracted to international studies courses. In addition, not all international students have the level of English proficiency or the academic skills to perform successfully in English-language content courses without any additional support or training. Certainly, the diversity of the students can be a strength of any program if it is designed to accommodate a variety of cultural backgrounds and language levels.

After understanding the kind of students who will study in the program, it is important to consider who the teachers will be. Of course any language program seeks to hire the best trained and most experienced teachers it can afford with its budgetary constraints, but administrators in an international studies program have additional important factors to consider. As mentioned previously, the student body of an international studies program tends to be more linguistically and culturally diverse than average, and ideally in order to provide proper role models, the teachers will come from a variety of backgrounds as well. Although Japanese graduates have a much higher chance of using English as a common language of communication with another nonnative speaker than with someone from a native speaking country, the old paradigm of native speakers as superior language teachers still exists in many institutions (Harris, 2012). Any international studies program should embrace English as a global language and attempt to recruit qualified instructors who represent the multicultural world in which our students will most likely use the language.

In addition to linguistic and cultural diversity, knowledge of international studies content areas should be seen as an important requirement for language instructors. As will be discussed in the section on course content, a school of international studies must go beyond teaching English as an isolated subject and give students every opportunity to use the language to engage international content. Teachers with a strong background in an international studies content area themselves will more likely understand and be prepared to teach English with this kind of global perspective.

The third environmental factor to consider in the curriculum design process is the situation where the program will be created, specifically the resources and constraints. Important resources and constraints that affect an international studies

language program in a unique way are time and technology. Of course, the amount of time allotted for language study is a determining factor in the success of any language course, however, since international studies programs make such frequent use of international exchange with institutions that may be on different academic calendars than most Japanese universities, *when* the students will study can be almost as important as how often they study. Some universities that rely heavily on international enrollment or exchange programs have opted to shift their calendars to more closely match those in the U.S. and other countries. If this rather fundamental change is not possible or desired, administrators should take into account the effects of having students enter and leave course at odd times, including issues such as grades, credits, and disruption to classes.

One possibility for dealing with these challenges would be to divide the curriculum up into smaller, more independent modules that can be more easily assessed than a traditional program in which students merely progress from year to year on a set track. After thinking about time, it is important to also decide what technological resources will be available. Access to the Internet, either via fixed computer labs, blended learning spaces, campus wide wireless, or a combination of the above, can help students and teachers explore valuable language and international studies content while engaging the world community in ways never conceived of a few decades ago. Many language programs today are experimenting with new uses of technology including online language exchanges (O'Dowd, 2007) and use of mobile devices to increase language exposure (Kiernan & Aizawa, 2004).). It's important to recognize that unlike a decade earlier, today it is not necessary to install a massively expensive CALL lab in order to make effective use of technology for language learning.

Questions for reflection:

- How can you increase your students' opportunities to interact with people of various cultural and linguistic background?
- How can you use technology to increase connections between your students, the people of the world, and the various perspectives they can provide?

### *Needs*

With a rough understanding of the environment in which the international studies English program will function, one may move on to evaluating the needs of the learners. These needs can be divided into three categories: *Necessities*, *Lacks*, and *Wants* (Nation & Macalister, 2010: p.24–36). *Necessities* refers to what the learners will be required to do with the language they study. For a sense of the kinds of futures international studies programs in Japan expect for their graduates,

we can look to their stated missions. Osaka Gakuin's International Studies program seeks to "develop an international mindset and enhance the ability of students to understand other cultures, peoples and individuals to enable them to interact in a spirit of coexistence with a wide range of people from around the world ("Osaka Gakuin," 2012)". Meio University's program "cultivates, as global citizens of the 21st century, talented individuals who can be active both locally as well as internationally ("Meio University," 2012)." While Kwansai Gakuin University's School of International Studies wants each student to "be a world citizen who renders service to humanity ("Kwansai Gakuin," 2012)." These goals share the common features of expecting not only linguistic competence or knowledge of the world, but also the ability to actively participate in the global community. For language educators, this means that they must prepare their students to use language effectively in a variety of international and intercultural contexts and for meaningful purposes. As stated in our definition of international studies, these purposes could range anywhere from human rights and public health to trade and finance. Active participation in the world stage requires critical thinking and proven communications skills.

Once establishing what the students need, it is important to understand what they *lack*. Although some educators in Japan will speculate about the specific shortcomings of Japanese students, it may be more helpful to focus on areas in which nearly all language learners studying in their home country lack: experience using appropriate language in realistic situations that they will encounter in international contexts. Any international studies language program should seek to meet this gap head on by incorporating approaches that make use of authentic language in situations that closely approximate those the learners will encounter in the real world.

Finally, it is also important to take into account learner wants. When a program meets students' expectations, they will respond in turn with increased motivation and effort (Tucker, 2011). It is vital to the success of any program that students are given choices and various paths that they may follow to achieve their own personal goals and objectives. Making prospective students aware of the goals of the program, as well as the options open to them, can help ensure that they only join the program if their wants are in similar to what the program will provide.

Questions for reflection:

- What do your students really need? What do they want?
- Is your curriculum helping your students achieve your program goals in every way possible?

## ***Principles***

Knowing the needs of our learners, as well as the environment in which we will teach them, we decide upon the principles that will best guide us toward our goals (Nation & Macalister, 2010: p.37–69). Any language program should make use of an approach based on current principles that are supported by empirical research, and of course an international studies English program is no different. Fortunately, several respected researchers have compiled lists of the most effective principles for encouraging language learning (Brown, 2002; Nation & Macalister, 2010). However, certain principles are particularly important for a program that seeks to train global citizens, namely the selection of vocabulary and the types of tasks utilized.

The lexical needs of learners evolve as they become more proficient at the target language. Students at the lower end of the spectrum need to first focus on the most frequent words of English in order to understand everyday situations as well as the most common words that appear in texts of various types. As they progress through the most frequent words and lexical chunks, a curriculum designer needs to look ahead at the contexts in which the learners are most likely to use English. For students of international studies this may be in the academic study of fields such as economics, political science, and environmental studies or in career contexts like business negotiations, overseas development work, and language education. For a course with a clear focus, such as tourism, it would be ideal to perform a corpus-based analysis of relevant lexical items (Chujo et al, 2006), but given the interdisciplinary nature of the field, a more general approach to vocabulary selection may be adequate.

Course textbooks can be selected with themes drawn from international studies disciplines and even an extensive reading library could be constructed by gathering titles with international and cultural topics that reflect the specific themes of the program. For example, a program with a strong international relations or peace studies stream would benefit by having multiple copies of graded reader biographies on Nobel Peace Prize winners such as Gandhi (Rollason, 2004), Martin Luther King, Jr. (Degnan-Veness, 2003), and Nelson Mandela (Degnan-Veness, 2001), or novels that include themes of war and peace like *Jojo's Story* (Moses, 2001), *Blood Diamonds* (MacAndrew, 2005), and *The Interpreter* (Randolph, 2012). National Geographic's Footprints Reading Library has hundreds of nonfiction titles at a wide range of levels on topics relevant to international, including area studies, culture, and the environment (Waring, 2010). In this way students will be able to build a strong foundation in the basics of English while already being exposed to the more specialized vocabulary, concepts, and information that they will encounter in more advanced content courses.

Just as deliberate selection of relevant vocabulary can help prepare students for the language they will most likely encounter in the field of international studies, careful selection of appropriate language tasks will begin training them to use English effectively in real world contexts. Task-based language teaching has gained acceptance as an approach that allows promotes language acquisition while building the skills and competence learners need to succeed in authentic communication (Ellis 2003). Students of international studies will certainly experience a range of situations in which they must use the English they have learned to communicate effectively, whether it is in their immediate goals of joining content classes with international students or studying abroad in an English-speaking country, or for their long-term goals of using English in an international career. Students headed to more academic programs could be tasked with asking a professor for help with a research paper in English or collaborating on a multimedia presentation with English-speaking peers. Likewise, as students prepare for jobs that require English, they could engage in projects that mimic real world tasks such as promoting a new product or comparing possible sites for an international aid program. The key is to make the language-learning environment as similar as possible to what the students will likely encounter in international contexts outside the classroom.

Questions for reflection:

- Is your curriculum based on sound language learning principles?
- Are you maximizing your students' exposure to the language and tasks they will encounter in real international contexts?

Upon reaching a broad understanding of the environment in which the program will take place, the needs of the learners, as well as the principles which will guide learning, a curriculum designer can focus on the more specific tasks of deciding the goals of the courses that will be offered, the content that will be taught, and the sequence in which it will be presented.

### ***Goals***

Like those institutions participating in the Global 30 initiative, most international studies programs seek to send their students abroad to study either for a short term of a month or so, for a longer term of a year or more, or even a combination of both. Some schools even require their students to spend some time studying at in an overseas program. Even while studying at their home institution in Japan, many Japanese students in international studies programs will have opportunities to take some or all of their content courses in English. With the need to use English in an authentic academic environment in mind, one major goal of



these programs is to prepare learners for academic tasks such as reading challenging texts and then participating in critical discussion of what they have read, as well as researching relevant topics and synthesizing what they have discovered in an essay or presentation. Considering the rigors of an international academic environment, special care should be taken to encourage critical thinking and learner autonomy. In addition, special care should be taken to prepare students for the intercultural situations that they will most certainly encounter while studying abroad or even on their own campus interacting with international students.

However, study abroad and academic preparation should not be seen as the only goals of an international studies English program. More and more companies are seeking graduates with strong language skills and the ability to function effectively in an intercultural environment (Ihara, 2011). To this end, a solid curriculum will balance linguistic targets with benchmarks for measuring competency in dealing with interpersonal communication in global contexts. To make this wide variety of goals, both academic and career-oriented more manageable, it is advisable to break them down into performance objectives (Brown, 1995). A progression of these objectives over several semesters could look something like the following:

#### Vocabulary targets:

1. Demonstrate receptive understanding of the most frequent 1000 words of English
2. Demonstrate productive competence of the most frequent 1000 words of English and receptive understanding of the most frequent 1200 words. Also, show familiarity with approximately 200 words related to an international studies discipline.
3. Demonstrate productive competence of the most frequent 1200 words of English and receptive understanding of the most frequent 1500 words. Also, show familiarity with approximately 300 words related to an international studies discipline.

#### Intercultural competence:

1. Demonstrate the communicative ability to introduce oneself and build rapport with someone from a different culture through conversation on everyday topics such as family, friends, and interests.
2. Demonstrate the communicative ability to describe several aspects of one's own culture to someone from a different culture.
3. Demonstrate the ability to research another culture, show cultural sensitivity, and educate peers about cultural differences.

Questions for reflection:

- What does your program want your students to achieve?
- How will they most likely use English in their academic and professional careers?

### ***Content***

A growing body of research supports the integration of language learning and content (Coyle et al, 2010), and few fields provide as rich a source of materials for the language classroom as international studies. English-language learning textbooks abound with themes related to culture and geography, global issues, area studies, and global business, and newspapers and news magazines, both in print and online, provide unlimited authentic texts that can be used for engaging lessons with international content. Furthermore, increased access to the Internet, in particular sites like TED.com, YouTube.com, and various news channels such as CNN and BBC offer the availability of listening material on nearly any topic imaginable. Of course, it is not enough to merely present these materials to students, and careful consideration of the programs guiding principles should be used to utilize these resources as effective language learning tools.

Questions for reflection:

- What topics, concepts, and language are your students likely to encounter in their international studies content courses, while studying abroad, or after graduating from your program?
- What materials are available or can be created that will make these accessible to your learners in ways that promote learning and language acquisition?

### ***Sequencing***

Traditionally at Japanese universities, lower-level learners are taught “general English” and tasked with mastering basic skills. Only more advanced students are allowed to engage in content-based learning in the target language. However, in this era of language for meaning-focused communication, what is “general English”? If language is to be used to interpret and convey messages, why are texts unrelated to the target field more appropriate for lower-level learners than texts which drawn from within the field? As mentioned earlier in the construction of an international studies themed extensive reading library, all materials within the program can be chosen with relevance to the field in mind.

Rather than trying to build some kind of hypothetical foundation built on random topics and then moving up to a false hierarchy toward content, it is more

effective to see sequencing as a spiral with topics, skills, concepts, and vocabulary repeated and recycled through the course of the program in increasing difficulty (Nation & Macalister, 2010: p 82–83) As one example, beginner-level students could work on essays or presentations describing their own community one semester, comparing it to a community from another country in a later semester, and then collaborating on a project to identify problems facing either or both communities and then proposing solutions. Students would be building skills and language from semester to semester that recycle what they have learned previously.

Questions for reflection:

- How can you introduce relevant topics, concepts, and language in ways that are appropriate for their level of language and knowledge?
- Are you providing sufficient opportunities for target skills and language to be recycled and eventually acquired?

### ***Format and Presentation***

Once it has been decided what to teach and when, the question of how arises. Considering the international and multicultural nature of the environment proscribed here, certainly the program's pedagogy should reflect current practices that will help students not only achieve linguistic and cultural competence, but also be prepared for the kind of varied contexts that await them, especially if they are to engage the global community in ways described by the mission statements of these kinds of programs. This preparedness can be cultivated with an educational approach that values learner autonomy, cooperation and collaboration, personal initiative, and critical thinking and action.

Questions for reflection:

- Are your students engaged in the kinds of tasks and learning that are similar to what they will encounter in the future?
- How can your program encourage learner autonomy, cooperation and collaboration, personal initiative, and critical thinking and action?

### ***Monitoring and Assessment***

The success of any task or process must be monitored and assessed in order to be measured, and language learning is no exception. Most universities in Japan that teach English on a large scale have some system of assessment in place, often one of the widely accepted measures such as the TOEFL, TOEIC, or GTEC. Although these standardized tests can provide important figures that correlate with learner proficiency in English, more sensitive measures should be used to evaluate student

progress through the program's performance objectives. The assessments used will depend on the specific objectives of the program, but could include such types as placement, diagnostic, and achievement tests, learner portfolios, self and peer assessment, interviews, and task performance reviews.

Questions for reflection:

- Do your institutional and program assessments measure what you are seeking to achieve?
- Are your assessments clear, valid, and reliable?

### ***Evaluation***

The final point to consider when creating an English program is how to evaluate the program. Although the exact criteria of evaluation will vary, several important points include checking that the level of instruction is appropriate for students in the program, goals and objectives are relevant and being met, students are satisfied with their courses, and the program is operating within institutional constraints such as budget and mission. Methods for program evaluation could include interviews with students and instructors, surveys (both self and course evaluation), teacher portfolios, assessment results, classroom observation, and student and teacher achievements. The purpose of each method of evaluation as well as how it will be used should be made clear to everyone involved in order to ensure a healthy climate of respect and value. When an area of possible improvement is identified, ideally through multiple measures, the appropriate stages of curriculum development discussed should be revisited and revised. Curriculum design should be seen as a continuous process with the curriculum itself as a tool used to bring together the various components that will make a program more effective.

Questions for reflection:

- Are you, your staff, and administration willing to evaluate every aspect of your curriculum with an open mind?
- When you find areas for improvement, do you see it as an opportunity for your program to grow and develop?

### **Conclusion**

Every language program is different and in order to understand the unique challenges that must be met and resources that may be employed, a curriculum designer should use a systematic approach to look at the environment in which the program will exist, the needs of the learners, and the principles, which shall guide

the entire process. If one seeks to create an effective and innovative curriculum within an international studies program, all three of these aspects of curriculum design should be carried out with a global perspective in mind. If your students are able to study as they will experience the world and learn and practice language as they will use it in the future, they will be much better prepared to engage and serve the world community as true global citizens.

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