

Field Test of 'Survey of Returning Students'

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Introduction

In the process of establishing a program of English language study for university English majors, the determination of program goals is one of the first priorities. However, due to the variety of individual student needs and goals, it can be difficult to find a unifying set of program goals. One possible solution to this problem is to adopt English for Academic Purposes (EAP) as a general framework for guiding the development of the curriculum and syllabus.

EAP refers to the language skills necessary for success in academic situations such those our students will find themselves in when studying abroad. At its most basic level, this entails accurate use of the language. Going beyond this, however, we soon realize that other, more refined skills, are also necessary. The ability to effectively organize information, for instance, is necessary for both lucid writing and speaking. Other examples of EAP are the ability to select relevant data to support arguments, to engage in effective exchanges of opinions and information, the ability to distinguish between fact and opinion, and to recognize the difference between a rational appeal and an emotional one. In short, EAP addresses not only the linguistic needs of students, but their need for intellectual discipline as well.

In the questionnaire that is distributed to students, we do not ask them directly whether or not they feel they can effectively organize information in a term paper. We seek, instead, to gather

their impressions of overall general competence in academic situations. Furthermore, as foreign students in an academic environment, they will have specific needs different from those of native speakers, and those needs will also be investigated.

The rationale for adopting EAP as a foundation goal for the curriculum is the fact that all the students in the program are university students and should be expected to master the fundamental skills of higher education. Furthermore, academic skills tend to be applicable to many careers and so will serve the needs of the greatest number of students. For example, the ability to produce a well-written, well-organized report serves the needs of travel agents as well as teachers. In international fields, individuals using English in their work will be assumed by their non-Japanese counterparts to have an understanding of negotiation and discussion strategies. These and similarly applicable skills can all be adapted to an EAP program. Finally, the possibility of overseas study is a very real one for many of our students. Each year hundreds of Japanese students travel abroad to pursue higher education in English-speaking countries. Linguistic competence in itself is not adequate for success in such environments. Students must be familiar with not only academic skills such as reading and writing, but also with the assumptions about thought, learning, and common knowledge that are made in those countries.

In order to evaluate how well students' academic skills are being developed, it was decided to design a self-evaluation questionnaire for students returning from study abroad. Since these students are the ones who will have been required to use those skills, it was felt that their self-evaluations would be a source of valuable insights into the development of their academic competence. This questionnaire is to be given to students upon their return, and in it they are asked to judge their own level of preparation in a number of skill areas at the time they arrived and began academic study in the

English-speaking country.

While this type of inquiry does have the weakness of relying on students' memories and impressions, it is felt that the results can give important insights into how the students adjusted to the new academic environment. In addition, this type of questionnaire will show up areas in which students feel consistently weak. These results can then assist program administrators in making adjustments and additions to the English language program curriculum. While not all students will actually study abroad, it is felt that EAP as a general framework for curriculum design and program development will, in fact, benefit all students in a university English language program.

Before being able to implement regular use of a self-evaluation survey, it was first necessary to field-test a preliminary version. A preliminary version of the questionnaire was administered to fifteen students in order to gauge their responses to the various questions and then determine what changes need to be made. The design of the questionnaire and the results of the field test are the subject of this paper. In the following sections of this paper I will discuss how the initial draft of the questionnaire was designed, the general results of the field test and implications for the present state of the English language program, and what changes may be made in the form of a final version of the questionnaire.

The Questionnaire

The first version of the questionnaire was quite long: 56 self-evaluation questions plus additional requests for comments and other questions. Since this was a test-version of the questionnaire, as many relevant skill areas as possible were included. After the field test, skill areas and categories deemed irrelevant will be discarded to make a more compact and efficient final version. Three steps were taken in the creation of this initial version of the questionnaire.

In the first step I simply used the “brainstorming” technique familiar to so many composition students. While reflecting on my American high school and university education, I made a list of the various skills American students typically acquire and use in upper secondary and higher education. Also included in this list were skills that are particular needs of foreign students, such as pronunciation and listening skills. These skills were then divided into general categories. These categories were later revised to take into account the results of interviews with four students who had recently returned from a year of study in the US.

The second step was to interview four students who had recently returned from study abroad and gather their impressions of their strong points and weak points. They also evaluated the different components of the English language program and gave suggestions for improvements.

The third step in constructing the questionnaire was to compile the information gathered from the student interviews and the list that was created earlier in the first step. Forty-nine linguistic and academic skills were then divided into eight categories: General Speaking Ability, Academic (in-class) Speaking Ability, Pronunciation & Speaking Manner, Writing, Reading, Listening, Other Study Skills, and Discussion & Conversation Topics. In addition to the categories for linguistic and academic skills, an additional category, Cultural Adjustment, with seven self-evaluation questions was also added. After dividing the various skills into categories, the questionnaire was constructed so that students can evaluate their perceived level of preparation on a scale of 1-5.

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| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|------------------------------------|---|---|---|--------------------------------|
| very well-prepared; no problems | well-prepared; almost no problems | generally prepared; not many problems | partially prepared; some problems | not prepared; many problems |

In addition to the 56 self-evaluation questions on the survey, an area was added for students to make comments about the program as well as their study abroad. See the appendix at the end of this paper for a full text of the preliminary questionnaire.

The Survey

The field test was conducted over a period of one academic year. During that period, the questionnaire was given to fifteen students soon after their return from one year of study in the United States. The schools they attended in the US were small, private colleges and universities with a sister-school affiliation with Hokusei Gakuen University of Sapporo, Japan.

The students themselves ranged from sophomores to seniors at the time of their departure from Japan. By the end of the sophomore year, all students in the English language program have completed two years of Oral English, and one each of Pronunciation, Reading, and Composition. Some of the juniors and seniors take a course in small-group discussion.¹

Results

The primary aim of the field test was to determine: 1) the questions with the highest standard deviation; 2) the questions with the lowest average self-evaluation scores; and 3) if there were any questions that students did not answer because they were irrelevant

or not understood. By finding the highest standard deviation, we can determine which skill areas are being addressed unevenly in the curriculum and need to be reconsidered and possibly augmented.² Questions with low average self-evaluations show potential weak spots in the program which also should be reevaluated and possibly strengthened. Irrelevant questions and questions that show a high average self-evaluation along with a low standard deviation can be eliminated from future versions of this survey since we can assume that those questions address skills which are either judged unnecessary by the students or which are already suitably developed in the curriculum (in the following tables NA marks questions which received no response from some students and were judged unnecessary for future versions of the questionnaire).

Results by Category

I. General Speaking Ability

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation (SD) for the items in the category of General Speaking Ability. Items 1 and 2 show no significant problems. Item 3, however, has a high SD showing that some students felt they were not very well-prepared for taking care of some daily needs, such as shopping and handling local

Table 1 General Speaking Ability

| Question | Mean | S.D. |
|-----------------------------------|------|------|
| #1 Travel Needs | 3.8 | .91 |
| #2 Socializing | 3.0 | .89 |
| #3 Daily Needs | 3.4 | 1.02 |
| #4 Getting along with host family | NA | NA |
| #5 Speaking Vocabulary | 2.5 | .81 |

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transportation. Item 4 received no responses from a number of students because they did not stay with a host family. This item may be retained in future versions of the questionnaire in a new category aimed at students who stayed with a host family. Item 5, with a low mean score, shows that many students felt their vocabulary was inadequate. As we will see later, vocabulary tends to be perceived as a problem in other categories as well. In future versions of the survey, items 1 and 2 may be eliminated.

II. Academic Speaking Ability

This category specifically addresses the needs of students for in-class speaking skills. Not all of the skills, such as giving presentations, will have been necessary for students during their overseas study. However, these are common skills required in many academic situations.

As shown in table 2, all of the items in this category indicate a relatively low self-evaluation, that is, a mean score under 3.0. In addition, item 7, asking questions in class, has a high SD. As noted above, vocabulary again seems to be a problem in this category as

Table 2 Academic Speaking Ability

| Question | Mean | S.D. |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|
| #6 General Discussion Skills | 2.1 | .81 |
| #7 Asking Questions in Class | 2.7 | 1.12 |
| #8 Expressing Opinions | 2.4 | .95 |
| #9 Turn Taking in Class Discussions | 2.6 | .80 |
| #10 Giving Presentations | 2.9 | .93 |
| #11 Debate | 1.9 | .81 |
| #12 Persuasion | 2.1 | .85 |
| #13 Speaking Vocabulary | 2.7 | .85 |

well. It is felt that these items should be retained in essence, but the wording should be changed in future versions. For instance, "Debate" in item 11 may be perceived by some students as referring to formal forensic debate, while the intention was to refer to the informal exchange of opinions and ideas in class. It would be instructive to do a follow-up interview with students who participated in the field test to determine what their actual understanding of these questions was.

III. Pronunciation & Speaking Manner

Looking at table 3, we see that the responses to the items in this category show a surprisingly high level of confidence in the students' own pronunciation and speaking manner. Items 14 and 15, however, do indicate by a high SD that some students do not feel as confident as others with the clarity of their pronunciation and Japanese accent. In future versions, the items in this category may be condensed into two or three general questions about pronunciation.

IV. Writing

Table 4 shows the results for the Writing category. The focus

Table 3 Pronunciation & Speaking Manner

| Question | Mean | S.D. |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|
| #14 Clear Pronunciation | 3.1 | 1.09 |
| #15 Accent (Japanese-English Pron.) | 3.3 | 1.01 |
| #16 Intonation & Rhythm | 3.4 | .80 |
| #17 Volume | 3.7 | .93 |
| #18 Eye Contact | 4.1 | .77 |
| #19 Nonverbal Communication | 3.8 | .75 |

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Table 4 Writing

| Question | Mean | S.D. |
|----------------------------|------|------|
| #20 Research & Term Papers | 3.0 | .97 |
| #21 Grammar | 3.5 | .88 |
| #22 Punctuation | 3.1 | .96 |
| #23 Organization | 2.9 | .88 |
| #24 Speed | 2.6 | 1.08 |
| #25 Methodology | 2.9 | 1.08 |
| #26 Format & Typing | 3.1 | 1.15 |
| #27 Using Computers | NA | NA |
| #28 Using the Library | 3.7 | 1.07 |
| #29 Spelling & Vocabulary | 2.9 | .72 |

of this category is primarily on the writing of research and term papers. The problem of writing essay exams is touched upon in the category of Other Study Skills. The responses to these questions show a high degree of variability. While items 21 and 22 indicate relative confidence with mechanics such as grammar and punctuation, the other items do not. A low level of perceived preparedness is indicated by either a low mean score or a high SD in all of the other items except item 20, research and term papers in general, and item 27, using computers. As can be expected by now, vocabulary is shown to be a fairly weak point in item 29. A number of students did not reply to the question on computers presumably because they were not required to use them.

In future versions of the survey, a separate question referring to computer use and type of computer used may be included in a miscellaneous category along with the host family question from item number 4. Items 21 and 22 in this category may be combined.

V. Reading

The responses to the questions in this category, as shown in table 5, indicate that this may also be a problematic area for students studying abroad. The amount of reading that is usually assigned in overseas colleges and universities seems to pose a particular problem for students. Since their English education in Japan tends to stress close, intensive reading skills, few students are prepared for the extensive reading that must be done in a limited time when they study abroad. The one anomaly in this category is item 32, getting information from textbooks. This should be followed up in interviews with the students to find out what their interpretation of this question was and how it differs from the other items in this category.

VI. Listening

Aside from listening for daily needs, listening, specifically in academic situations and situations in which information is coming at a high rate of concentration and speed, poses another difficulty for students. This is indicated by the low mean scores in items 37-40 as well as the high SD in items 37 and 39. Item 36 can be eliminated or moved to the General Speaking category if that category is modified to cover daily needs in general rather than just speaking.

Table 5 Reading

| Question | Mean | S.D. |
|------------------------------------|------|------|
| #30 Speed | 1.9 | .85 |
| #31 Extensive Reading | 2.1 | 1.02 |
| #32 Getting Info. from Textbooks | 3.1 | .77 |
| #33 Getting Info. from Print Media | 2.8 | .83 |
| #34 Connecting & Applying Ideas | 2.9 | .57 |
| #35 Reading Vocabulary | 2.5 | .81 |

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Table 6 Listening

| Question | Mean | S.D. |
|----------------------------|------|------|
| #36 Daily Needs | 3.8 | .98 |
| #37 Understanding Lectures | 2.9 | 1.06 |
| #38 Radio | 2.7 | .85 |
| #39 TV News | 2.5 | 1.02 |
| #40 TV Entertainment | 2.9 | .85 |

VII. Other Study Skills

The intention in creating this category was to include general study skills that are not subsumed under any of the other categories. Item 41 in table 7, taking lecture notes, indicates a low level of confidence and is probably, at least in part, related to the low confidence rating of item 37, understanding lectures, in the Listening category. Item 42, taking essay exams, could possibly be included in the writing category, but it is felt that this may interfere with the focus on research and term papers. Item 43, taking other types of tests, received few responses and may be eliminated. Item 44, studying with English textbooks, seems redundant after item 32 in the Reading category, getting information from English textbooks, especially in light of the similar mean and SD scores received by both items. After eliminating items 43 and 44, this category will need to be rethought.

Table 7 Other Study Skills

| Question | Mean | S.D. |
|-------------------------------------|------|------|
| #41 Taking Lecture Notes | 2.5 | 1.02 |
| #42 Taking Essay Exams | 2.6 | 1.02 |
| #43 Taking Other Types of Tests | NA | NA |
| #44 Studying with English Textbooks | 3.3 | .85 |

VIII. Discussion & Conversation Topics

The purpose of this category was to determine whether or not students were prepared to participate in academic discussions both in and out of class. While feeling confident to discuss the cultures of Japan and America, items 45 and 48 indicate a deficit in students' awareness of social controversies and current events. Item 49, Other, received sporadic replies and can be eliminated since there is an opportunity in the "comments" section of the survey for students to indicate discussion and conversation topics they encountered. Furthermore, after eliminating items 46 and 47, the remaining two questions could be fleshed out and made more specific if that is deemed necessary.

IX. Cultural Adjustment

A final category was added to rate students' adjustment to life in the United States. Again, the question referring to host families received few responses and should be placed in a separate section for students who stayed with an American family during their study abroad. The only area which students consistently rated low was the question about food. Not much can be done in the curriculum to prepare students for this inconvenience. In future versions of the survey this category of questions will be eliminated. If students wish

Table 8 Discussion & Conversation Topics

| Question | Mean | S.D. |
|---------------------------------|------|------|
| #45 Social Controversies | 2.9 | 1.02 |
| #46 American Culture | 3.4 | .88 |
| #47 Explaining Japanese Culture | 3.5 | .88 |
| #48 Current Events | 2.3 | 1.00 |
| #49 Other | NA | NA |

Table 9 Cultural Adjustment

| Question | Mean | S.D. |
|---------------------------|------|------|
| #50 General Culture Shock | 3.7 | .87 |
| #51 Host Family | NA | NA |
| #52 Dorm Life | 3.7 | .87 |
| #53 Socializing | 3.4 | 1.02 |
| #54 American College Life | 3.8 | .83 |
| #55 American Lifestyle | 3.9 | .72 |
| #56 Food | 2.9 | 1.26 |

to explain difficulties they had in adjusting to life overseas, they can do so in the free-response comment section of future questionnaires.

X. Student Comments

The last section of the survey asked students to give their comments and feedback to a number of open questions. The comments in this section of the questionnaire bore out many of the trends noticed in the previous categories. Comments have the added advantage of letting students be specific about what problems they had, including those not addressed in previous sections, as well as letting students offer advice to teachers and future overseas students.

Student feedback can be used in a number of ways. The comments of the students provide a number of insights that will assist in preparing future students for their overseas study. Some students commented that they wished they had read more. Others thought that developing their vocabulary and listening skills would have been helpful. One student advised against being shy when making friends. Other comments gave suggestions for improving the curriculum, such as increasing extensive reading and vocabulary practice. The teaching of note taking skills was cited by another as a useful addition to

the curriculum. A number of students made reference to certain specific examples of culture shock they encountered that were not anticipated in the questionnaire. Discomfort with the religious services at the college disturbed one student who was not aware of the extent of religious differences between Japan and the US. Another was annoyed with her roommate for engaging in dorm room shenanigans with her boyfriend. Preparing for reverse culture shock also seems to be a need for students planning to study abroad. Changing interpersonal communication strategies (i.e. being too straightforward for Japanese culture), lack of motivation for studying in Japanese university upon returning, and language maintenance were a few of the concerns mentioned.

Finally, at the end of the section given for comments, students were asked if they would be interested in forming an informal discussion group for students returning from abroad. The purpose of such a group would be to encourage language maintenance and to help ease the readjustment to life in Japan. Almost all respondents indicated that they would be interested in participating in such a group at least some of the time.

Conclusion

The purpose of this field test was to gauge students' responses to the various questions and determine what changes are in order. It was found that some of the questions will need to be worded so that the respondents and the investigator are working with the same concepts. Other questions can be eliminated as redundant or unnecessary. If students' responses show that they had a high level of confidence in their preparation in specific areas, those questions, it is felt, can be eliminated. Other items in the questionnaire can be condensed or combined when it is apparent that in students' minds those items represent the same or similar concepts (such as grammar

and punctuation). Finally, a new category to include optional questions referring to homestays and computer use may added.

Some of the changes will have to be preceded by interviews with students who participated in the field test. This will be necessary to determine just how the students understand certain of the questions so that rewording and recombining can be carried out reliably.

A secondary purpose of the survey is to spot areas in the curriculum that need reinforcing specifically for students planning to go abroad in the near future. It was found that the section reserved for comments is a great source for specific suggestions for curriculum changes, problems, and advice for both future overseas students and program administrators. The positive response to the possibility of forming an informal group for returning students is also encouraging.

The next step in this project is to carry out the changes outlined in this paper. Upon completion, this questionnaire could become a standard part of the students' overseas program. The data collected would be used to make adjustments in the general English language program as well as a source of valuable information for students due to embark on their own study abroad. Finally, returning students could be encouraged to form an informal discussion group as a source of continued contact with their overseas experience.

Appendix

Survey of Returning Students

Name: _____ No.: _____ Course: _____

US School: _____ Length of stay: _____

Year of school at departure: _____

TOEFL score at departure: _____

Main purpose of overseas study: _____

Please read through the *entire* survey before you begin answering.

Please rate your general level of preparedness in the following areas *upon arrival* at your place of study using the following scale:

| | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--------------------------------|
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| very well- prepared; no problems | well- prepared; almost no problems | generally prepared; not many problems | partially prepared; some problems | not prepared; many problems |

General Speaking Ability

1. Travel needs (getting from Japan to your destination)

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

2. Socializing (making friends, small talk)

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5 4 3 2 1

3. Daily needs (shopping, local transportation)

5 4 3 2 1

4. Getting along with host family (if applicable)

5 4 3 2 1

5. Speaking vocabulary (including slang & idioms)

5 4 3 2 1

Academic (in-class) Speaking Ability

6. General discussion skills (participating in class discussions)

5 4 3 2 1

7. Asking questions in class

5 4 3 2 1

8. Expressing your own opinion

5 4 3 2 1

9. Taking turns in class discussions

5 4 3 2 1

10. Giving presentations

5 4 3 2 1

11. Debate

5 4 3 2 1

12. Persuasion

5 4 3 2 1

13. Speaking vocabulary

5 4 3 2 1

Pronunciation & Speaking Manner (how well do you think others could understand you?)

14. Clear pronunciation

5 4 3 2 1

15. Accent (Japanese-English pronunciation)

5 4 3 2 1

16. Intonation & rhythm

5 4 3 2 1

17. Volume

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5 4 3 2 1

18. Eye contact

5 4 3 2 1

19. Gestures (nonverbal communication)

5 4 3 2 1

Writing

20. Doing research & term papers

5 4 3 2 1

21. Grammar

5 4 3 2 1

22. Punctuation

5 4 3 2 1

23. Organization

5 4 3 2 1

24. Speed

5 4 3 2 1

25. Methodology (how to write class papers)

5 4 3 2 1

26. Format & typing

5 4 3 2 1

27. Using computers (what kind(s) did you need to use? _____)

5 4 3 2 1

28. Using the library

5 4 3 2 1

29. Spelling & vocabulary

5 4 3 2 1

Reading

30. Speed

5 4 3 2 1

31. Extensive reading (reading a lot)

5 4 3 2 1

32. Getting information from textbooks

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5 4 3 2 1

33. Getting information from newspapers & magazines

5 4 3 2 1

34. Connecting & applying ideas (organizing, thinking about & connecting what you read)

5 4 3 2 1

35. Reading vocabulary

5 4 3 2 1

Listening

36. Daily needs

5 4 3 2 1

37. Understanding lectures

5 4 3 2 1

38. Radio

5 4 3 2 1

39. TV news

5 4 3 2 1

40. TV dramas & movies

5 4 3 2 1

Other Study Skills

41. Taking lecture notes

5 4 3 2 1

42. Taking essay exams

5 4 3 2 1

43. Taking other types of tests (please specify _____)

5 4 3 2 1

44. Studying with English textbooks

5 4 3 2 1

Discussion & Conversation Topics

45. Social controversies (e.g. guns, death penalty, abortion)

5 4 3 2 1

46. American culture

5 4 3 2 1

5 4 3 2 1

54. American college life (e.g. choosing classes, scheduling, advisors)

5 4 3 2 1

55. American lifestyle (including concerns about safety)

5 4 3 2 1

56. Food

5 4 3 2 1

Comments

In the space below, please comment on the following topics.

- A. Anything else you did that you think helped to prepare you for overseas study.
- B. Anything you did not do but think would have been helpful in preparing you for overseas study.
- C. Any problems you had that were not mentioned in this survey.
- D. Any advice you have for Hokusei English teachers to help other students prepare for study abroad.
- E. Any advice to other students who will study abroad in the near future.

[Endnotes]

1. Although the primary purpose of this field test was not to establish concrete results, trends, or correlations, correlations between school year and self evaluation and between TOEFL score and self evaluation were calculated. It was found that, regardless of school year, the average self evaluation for sophomores, juniors, and seniors was 3.0. However, the TOEFL score did show a positive correlation. The average TOEFL score for the students participating in the study was 513. Those students with a score above 513 averaged 3.3 on their self evaluations, while those with a score below 513 averaged 2.8.
2. The overall average standard deviation for all items in the questionnaire was 0.91.

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J. W. LUCKETT

This paper describes the results of a field test of 'Survey of Returning Students', a questionnaire to be given to students returning from a year of study in an English-speaking country. The questionnaire is designed to elicit students' evaluations of their own level of preparation for academic study in English. It is assumed that these self-evaluations will serve as a measure of the overall success of an English language program to sufficiently develop English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The analysis of the results of this field test attempts to determine what changes should be made in future versions of the questionnaire before it is routinely administered to returning students. It is hoped that such a questionnaire will become a regular part of students' overseas programs so that the results can be used to improve the general curriculum.