

Growing an engaging program of English elective courses

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Abstract

Since being enacted in response to continued falling student enrollment in elective English classes from 2004, and in preparation for the 2009 academic year, curriculum renewal and development of English elective courses offered to students across the faculties at Kyoto Women's University has, overall, resulted in greater numbers of students choosing to study in these courses. This paper discusses the continued focus on developing and delivering relevant and interesting courses for our students, as well as challenges that have been identified over the years with respect to both real and potential growth. Because the Junior College has closed, this paper will focus only on changes in university course enrollments in the wake of these curriculum renewal and development measures.

Keywords: Curriculum renewal, curriculum development, elective courses

Introduction

Curriculum development is an ongoing effort to design and implement classes and materials that are relevant and engaging to the student body.

Brown (1995) points out that if curriculum is considered as being an ongoing concern, it can change in response to “new types of students, changes in language theory, new political exigencies within the institution, or something else” (p. 24). Since being initiated in preparation for the 2009 academic year, viewing curriculum renewal and development as an ongoing process has allowed the faculty of the English section of the Foreign Languages Department of Kyoto Women’s University to evaluate student enrollment patterns on an annual basis, and to respond proactively to classes in which student enrollment has fallen or failed to grow to necessary levels.

This paper explores the measures taken since preparations began for the 2009 academic year in order to reverse the downward trend of enrollments evident beginning 2004 in elective English courses offered to students from all faculties, and necessary in order to avoid class closures. A range of strategies has been implemented over the years, generally resulting in higher levels of class enrollment. These strategies will be discussed below, as will a number of issues identified with respect to both real and potential growth.

However, the elective program does not exist in isolation from other aspects of the English learning experience at Kyoto Women’s University. The placement tests implemented to assign students to their required English language classes, the ALC e-learning program, textbook choice, supplementary activities introduced by teachers, skills workshops, and the Ibunka Hour program, for example, all influence the experience of first year students and therefore their decision to pursue further study in the higher grades.

A cause for concern

In 2004, relatively few second and third year students chose to continue studying in general elective courses offered to students across faculties, and numbers were dropping (see Table 1). This was especially true in classes taught by native speaking English teachers (Hicks, 2010).

Table 1. Falling enrollments in English elective classes

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
2 nd year, first semester	467	499	476	400	310	448	399
2 nd year, second semester	223	107	139	84	89	110	100
3 rd year, first semester	69	74	96	46	48	39	58
3 rd year, second semester	39	34	42	18	35	20	24

(Compiled from *White Paper on Foreign Language Communication Classes*, 2009 & 2013)

The small enrollment numbers in elective classes was not considered a priority at the time, when e-learning was being introduced into compulsory courses, prompting adjustments to the syllabus and methods of evaluation, as well as the training of staff and the creation of student training and instructional materials. However, in response to fiscal concerns, the value of small elective classes was increasingly questioned. At a departmental meeting in 2008, some classes were closed, while others, after careful checking of the timetables of each department, were rescheduled to times more convenient for students. However, such small changes did not offer a great deal of hope for a turnaround in student enrollments.

Faced with the very real possibility of further class closures over the coming years, a cycle of curriculum development was implemented with

the hope that more students could be attracted to the elective course offerings of the department.

The initial response

Gallagher (1994) suggests that curriculum renewal revolves around changes in location, content, or skills. Curriculum renewal and development implemented at Kyoto Women's University initially involved changes in temporal location of classes, and since then has mainly involved changes in content and skills, although a selection of courses now utilize the Internet and are taught in the computer labs. One issue that was identified while investigating the various courses on offer was the subject matter of elective classes. Prior to the 2009 academic year, individual teachers decided class themes and selected materials for use in their courses, wrote the syllabus, and decided appropriate assessment instruments. The biggest concern at that time was that the courses, which were mostly country studies, were not of relevance or interest to students. Therefore, the first stage of our renewal efforts was to establish the kind of subject matter that was of relevance and/or interest to students across the faculties.

Richards (2001) suggests that the basis of curriculum and course design should be analysis of learner needs. Surveys to gauge student interest in a wide range of subject matter were conducted at the beginning of December 2008 and again in 2009. Returns were much higher in 2009, thanks to greater teacher support for the process. The surveys asked students to indicate the kinds of elective courses they would be interested in studying in the upcoming year, whether they were planning further English study, and the reasons for their decision. More informa-

tion about how the surveys were conducted and an analysis of results is available in Bradford-Watts (2010).

Sowing the seeds

For the 2009 academic year, courses were selected for the subject areas in which students showed most interest. The following courses were introduced in 2009 : *Listening to music in English*; *Teaching English to children*; *English for nutrition and health*; *Career English*; *English for the travel, tourism, and hospitality industries*; *Understanding English through fairy tales and fables*; *Understanding movies in English*; *Talking about Japan*; *Study and travel abroad*; and *Discussion strategies and skills*. Teachers were assigned to courses based on their interests and training. They selected course materials and wrote the syllabus. These changes resulted in an across the board increase in second year student enrollments in both first and second semester classes.

Although the new courses were based on reported student interest, in fact only some courses proved popular. These mostly included those related to traveling abroad or those that were perceived by students to be useful for the future. Courses that proved unpopular included *Understanding movies in English* and *Discussion strategies and skills*. The reasons that these courses were unpopular are unclear. In the case of *Understanding movies in English*, four courses using movies were introduced both by our department and the Department of English Literature, and enrollments probably suffered in all of these courses as a result. In the case of *Discussion strategies and skills*, it is possible that students in the English Literature course found similar courses on offer within the department, and students in other departments did not find this course

suitable.

One course that had been very popular in 2009 was *Understanding English through fairy tales and fables*. With consultation with the teacher of that class, the class was divided into two themes for 2010: *Understanding culture through children's literature* and *Understanding culture through Cinderella stories*. The original course was retired. To replace the movie-based course, the student surveys were consulted, and a new course, entitled *Festivals and holidays around the world*, was introduced. Unfortunately, enrollment fell again, and it became clear that the introduction of new courses only would be insufficient to encourage students to enroll in the elective classes on offer.

Course enrollments are now scrutinized on a yearly basis and courses may be combined, reconfigured, or retired. For example, the *Listening to music in English* course has been combined and reconfigured with *Understanding TV shows in English* to form a new course, *Enjoying English media*. New courses usually run for at least two years prior to changes being made in order to allow word of mouth testimonials from students to circulate, potentially leading to higher enrollments.

In addition, the full-time staff has taken on the responsibility of preparing the syllabus and selecting class materials for the courses. This became necessary with the introduction of an online syllabus entry system with multiple checks and balances that made the process difficult in terms of teachers accessing and entering data in different ways. The full-time staff is aware of the necessary formatting of information within the syllabus and are thereby more easily able to standardize and check the format and content of each syllabus.

Consultations and discussions with teachers are held in order to ensure that selected teachers are comfortable teaching assigned classes.

Textbooks are discussed, and if a teacher has found an alternative text that they believe would better suit the aims of the course and the level of the students, they are encouraged to suggest it. The syllabus prepared by the full-time faculty members is forwarded to the relevant teacher for checking and further comment prior to it being entered into the computerized system. Full-time faculty also provide possible teaching ideas and lesson plans, as well as articles that they have uncovered which are relevant to the theme of the course, upon request.

During discussions, it was suggested that perhaps students were less likely to enroll in courses for which there was no Japanese description. Therefore, Japanese descriptions have been added to the syllabus so students are able to make decisions about classes without needing to read a lot of information in English first. Once they decide on a class theme, they can concentrate on reading the appropriate syllabus only. In addition, a handout in Japanese advertising elective course offerings is prepared and given to all first year students in the final class meeting of the year so they are aware of subject choices prior to having to choose subjects in the new academic year. Course descriptions of less popular courses are reviewed and, if necessary, rewritten in order to draw student attention to the content and course goals.

The curriculum renewal and development measures were initially undertaken for courses taught by native English speaking teachers. However, all elective courses are now regularly reviewed, and the entire program is reaping the benefits.

Results of curriculum renewal and development

This combination of actions has resulted in increased student enrollment,

especially in second year elective classes since the 2011 academic year, as can be seen in Table 2. The number of classes offered at the second year level has fluctuated over time, but has increased over the past three years (see Table 3 below).

However, the change in enrollment for third year subjects has been less impressive, as can be seen in Table 2. A brief glance at the number of classes that are offered at the third year level in Table 3 shows that there has only been one class at this level each semester for the entire term of this study.

There are a number of possible reasons for the lack of interest in enrolling in an elective course at the third year level, discussed in Bradford-Watts (2010) and Hicks (2010). Briefly, at Kyoto Women's University, students tend to "load up" with elective subjects in the first semester of their second year. They choose their subjects primarily by when classes are scheduled, if they look interesting, or in order to earn credits necessary for graduation, as well as a desire to study English for future travel or employment, or simply for personal interest. In higher grades, students may prefer to focus on studies more closely related to their major, and may have already filled their language course requirements.

Students enrolling in the third year elective subject may do so for one of the above-cited reasons, but there has, to date, been no study of this group, therefore no conclusions can be reached. This suggests one possible action step that may be implemented in the future to learn about the needs and interests of students completing their second year elective courses and planning for further English study within the university. It may be that more relevant subject themes are identified and these courses also become increasingly popular.

Table 2. Rising enrollments in English elective classes

	2011	2012	2013
2 nd year, first semester	560	758	885
2 nd year, second semester	229	288	432
3 rd year, first semester	41	25	61
3 rd year, second semester	25	19	41

(Source: White Paper on Foreign Language Communication Classes, 2013)

Table 3. Number of classes per semester

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
2 nd year, first semester	16	19	19	19	19	16	15	18	20	22
2 nd year, second semester	12	20	9	9	9	7	7	9	11	12
3 rd year, first semester	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
3 rd year, second semester	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

(Compiled from *White Paper on Foreign Language Communication Classes*, 2009 & 2013)

Problems

As with any renewal effort, there have been issues and challenges. The first that we encountered was relying so heavily on the reported preferences of students for subject themes. There is a difference in identifying a subject that might be interesting to study and actually selecting one to

study based on future plans and personal interests. This gap has led to difficulty in implementing some courses over the years. Especially with the oral communication course entitled *Understanding English through movies*, preparation to implement the course was extremely time-consuming and ultimately futile, since materials and activities had been prepared with a much higher student enrollment expected. Following the first class meeting, the teacher was forced to rethink each activity so it would be appropriate for the small number of students who enrolled in the class, essentially doubling the preparation time. Faculty need to rely on a balance of reported student interest and their own experience and cognition as teachers to decide the kinds of elective courses to offer.

Effectively briefing new teachers who take over elective classes after a teacher leaves the school has also proven to be a challenge. Keeping in contact with members of staff as they move through a course is important in developing institutional memory. With only the syllabus and materials, new teachers need to start the course design process again, and any information transferred to them when they first arrive may be lost in the overall busyness of starting a new job at a new university. It is probable that collecting lesson plans or descriptions of approaches or tasks from current instructors would enhance the transfer of courses from one instructor to the next.

Finding appropriate teaching materials and texts has also been challenging. There are no published texts that are a good fit for some of the new courses that have been introduced, and in courses that use materials published in other countries, it has been found that they can be difficult to use because their focus is not on the Japanese context. We have been very fortunate that our instructors have spent so much time over the years building a collection of primary and supplementary materials and

activities that have resulted in their courses being well-regarded by the students.

However, the biggest challenge that has been faced in increasing student enrollment in classes has been the time lag between the first class of a course in which many students have enrolled and when the class is able to be divided into smaller, more manageable classes. In some cases, teachers have struggled to teach to classes of more than 100 students for two or three weeks until classes can be split and other teachers scheduled and briefed on how to co-teach the course. Any measures that can reduce this time lag would be gladly welcomed.

The one other area in which improvement would be invited would be in increasing student enrollment in third year level classes. Since student enrollment in these courses remains relatively low, more research is necessary to ascertain the reasons for the relatively low enrollment rates as well as ways in which the enrollment rates may be improved.

Conclusion

The strategies that were implemented in order encourage student enrollment in courses conducted by the department included:

- Conducting surveys of first year students
- Developing syllabus and selecting materials for use in class in response to survey responses and, more recently, also according to faculty experience and cognition
- Meetings with potential teachers to support them in the implementation of the syllabus and use of materials, and more recently, keeping in contact with current teachers during the semester to develop institutional memory of approaches, tasks, and materials

- Advertising the courses each year to first year students
- Ensuring course descriptions also include Japanese explanations so students can make informed decisions more easily
- Rewriting course descriptions to make them sound relevant and interesting to the students

Because curriculum development is ongoing, further changes will be forthcoming. Research is an essential element in gauging future directions in which the elective program may be improved for our students, and in investigating trends in enrollments and student intent to enroll in higher level courses. The process has been successful to date, and we hope for further improvements in terms of the issues that have been identified above, as well as in student interest.

The development of the new Foreign Languages homepage is another potential means of communicating information about elective courses. It may be possible to post sample materials and tasks or student comments about courses. The development of this resource to support our efforts is also ongoing.

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