

Winds of Change : Development of Small Group English Courses

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Abstract

In spring 2004, major changes took place in the English curriculum at Kawasaki Medical School. Half of the courses changed from a large course format using a single textbook to a small class one employing a variety of teachers and textbooks. In this paper, we report on why and how these changes came about and on further changes that have been made in the 2005 curriculum. **Key words:** curriculum, course content, individualized attention, goals, blended learning

The need for English as a means of communication for Japanese doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel is expanding year by year. It is required for communication internationally with others in their own fields, for doctor-patient and nurse-patient communication in dealing with foreign, non-Japanese speaking patients, and in the doctor's role as an author of papers for foreign medical journals and a presenter at international conferences.

To more effectively provide medical students with the skills for this communication, the English curriculum at Kawasaki Medical School is in a process of transformation. In spring 2004, the first winds of change began to blow through the Department of English, altering in many ways the English curriculum as it had existed for many years. In this paper, the changes that took place at that time, why and how they happened, and further changes that were made in 2005 are described.

Before curriculum revision, first, second, and third year students received lessons in English from two Japanese teachers and the first author of this report. First year students had three classes per week, second year students had two, and third year students had two, but every other week. The course content in the classes taught by the native speaker consisted of study of medical terminology and a video-based course dealing with the language and culture of either the United States or Great Britain. The content of the courses taught by the Japanese teachers tended to complement the medical aspect of the native speaker's classes. However, in the last few years prior to 2004, the content in the first and second year of the latter courses had no medical content. Students

expressed displeasure not only with this course content but also with a problem facing colleges and universities worldwide, large classes. For learning in general, but especially for language learning, smaller is better.

Studies have shown large classes to be characterized by a lack of student attentiveness, lack of student-teacher interaction, and a lack of effectiveness. Many teachers become concerned that they are neglecting the needs of their students as individuals. To teachers, according to Xu Zhichang in a report on large English classes in China, students are not people but merely faces¹⁾. In large classes taught by a teacher who shares a common language with his or her students, such as Japanese, a large amount of talking tends not to be in English. Okazaki, in a paper on learning to write well in medical English, observed that the general dislike of English by Japanese students is based on the way it has been taught. Students have not been taught to communicate, to write or to speak, but to pass tests²⁾. In part this seems to be due to class size.

Small classes are characterized by more student-teacher interaction, the opportunity for students to participate in class, individualized attention, and, for the teacher, easier course management and more options for teaching techniques³⁾. Achilles⁴⁾, in an article on small classes, observed that a small class can be a family.

Early in 2004, the Curriculum Committee of Kawasaki Medical School decided that at least some of the English classes in the first and second year curriculum should be smaller and that the course content should be more relevant to the students' future role as doctors. The Committee decided that class size would be reduced by employing a number of part-time teachers, both native speakers and Japanese. Five specific goals were set for these courses. In a number of courses they would eventually overlap. The goals were set to prepare students to participate better in an international medical environment. They were: the teaching of basic conversation skills; the teaching of presentation skills required for giving speeches or oral presentations, such as at international medical conferences; the teaching of composition skills for the writing of short reports, which would provide students with practice towards the creation of longer medical papers; preparation for the TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), and introduction of the language and culture of one English-speaking country. The last goal has been and is being pursued in the large classes taught by one of the authors, but in a small group setting much more is likely to be accomplished. In the process of pursuing these aims, the Committee urged that the culture of the Western medical world also be introduced.

These decisions regarding smaller classes and the goals listed above were made in February 2004, leaving a short time until the beginning of the 2004

academic year. However, during this time, textbooks were selected, teachers were chosen, suitable classrooms were found, and the numbers of students in each course were decided on. However, the shortness of time made it impossible to undertake work on two additional goals, which, in retrospect, probably would have made the courses more successful, especially those for the second year students. The first of these goals was to place students in the courses according to their level of English ability. The second was to provide students with an opportunity to choose which course they would like to take.

Textbooks were selected by obtaining examination copies related to the aims set by the Curriculum Committee, with particular emphasis being placed on medicine, health, and science. Many textbooks could achieve the Committee's aims, but did not deal with these topics. Students were also found to be more motivated to study when the topics were related to these three areas. We also attempted to select books on these topics which were at a level of English not too difficult or too easy for the students.

The age and limited background of the students was also taken into consideration. The majority of students in the first and second year courses are between 18 and 20 years old with little or no experience in two goals—presentation and composition on medical topics. Therefore, it was decided that through the new courses we would try to teach speaking and writing skills that would make students more comfortable in speaking and writing in English. Incidentally, these are also skills they need to develop in Japanese. Hopefully, this will make the prospects of writing English medical papers and presenting them at international conferences less frightening.

The next step in course development was the selection of teachers. Finding appropriate teachers for the courses was harder to achieve than it probably would be in large cities such as Tokyo and Osaka, which have an ample source of native-speaking and Japanese English teachers. Medical schools in smaller cities do not. We also wished to obtain teachers living in the vicinity of Kurashiki or Okayama. Time and these factors narrowed down our choices.

All teaching candidates, foreign and Japanese, were interviewed for approximately 90 minutes each, were shown a number of textbooks that had been selected, and were asked which course they would feel most comfortable teaching. Three of the four Japanese teachers, all in the first year courses, used material that they themselves had chosen, one being a textbook co-authored by the authors of the present report. Two teachers who joined us from the Department of Biochemistry used books related to the biological sciences and science in general. Professor Nagita used a collection of articles on medical topics recently in the news with emphasis on reading and composition skills.

One of the foreign teachers of the first year class chose a special medical issue of the magazine "English Zone" and the other teacher, from New Zealand, decided to teach the video course, "Zoom In On New Zealand". In the second year class, two new courses were formed, one for TOEIC preparation and the other for discussion and debate.

Our goal had been to replace the original courses of more than 50 students with one teacher in both the first and second year classes with six small group courses of about 10 students each for both years. In the end, we were only able to get five teachers for the first year and two for the second year. While first year courses were certainly small group courses (11-14 students), the second year courses were smaller (25-30 students), but not small enough.

At the end of the 2004 academic year, a survey of the success of the courses was made. In questionnaires, the students were asked to evaluate their textbooks, teachers, and the courses in general. They were not asked to "grade" their teachers but rather to give us their impressions of how effectively the material had been presented to them. Student response as determined by the surveys as well as by teacher observations throughout the year was good in the first year courses, but was mixed in the second year ones.

In the first year, only 15% of the students expressed some dissatisfaction with the courses and 54% of the remaining students were quite satisfied. In the second year, however, 35% were dissatisfied and only 34% were quite satisfied (Figure 1). Both first and second year students showed a strong desire to choose courses themselves (80-90%). A majority of students in both classes felt the small group courses were good. Regarding English skills preferences, interests varied, but the strongest desire was to improve speaking skills, while the weakest was to improve writing skills. Regarding teacher preferences, nearly half of both the first and second year students preferred a native speaker

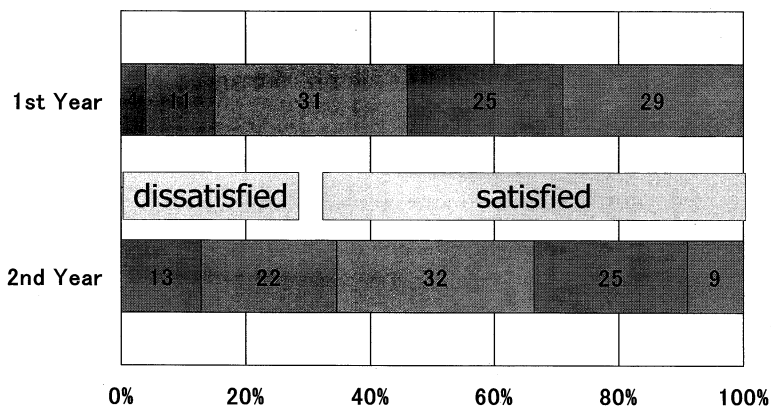


Figure 1 Satisfaction with the course and textbook

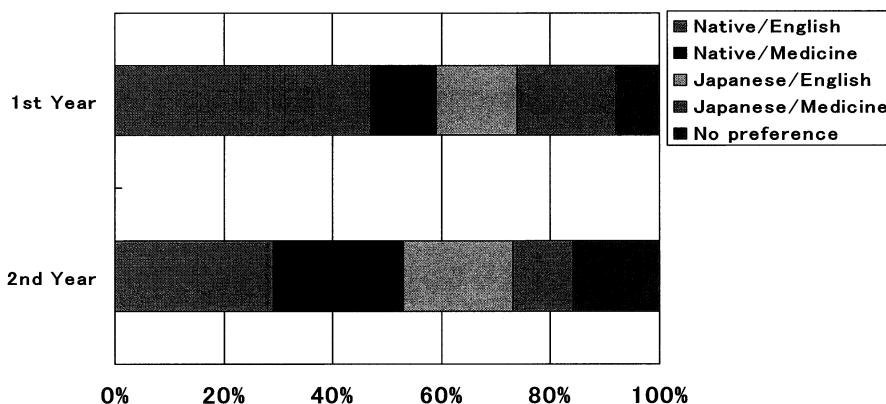


Figure 2 Teacher preference (Nationality/Major)

first, but a stronger desire for a native speaker with medical knowledge was expressed by the second year students. This may have been due to the fact that the second year courses focused on TOEIC preparation and discussion and debate of general topics rather than on medical or scientific material (Figure 2).

The results of the surveys were used to make adjustments in the 2005 English curriculum. The two objectives that could not be carried out in 2004 because of time limitations; that is, to place students in courses based on their level of English ability and to give students a choice regarding the course they would take, were achieved. The English ability level of incoming first year students was determined by the administration of a placement test (a shortened version of the reading and structure sections of the TOEIC) during their orientation week (Figure 3). The English ability of second year students was based on their final combined grade for first year English. Regarding the choice of courses, a summary of the courses, who would be teaching them, and their difficulty was given to incoming first year students during orientation and the teachers introduced themselves. Students were asked to number their choices in order of preference from 1 to 6 (Figure 4). Students moving into the second year were given a similar summary and made choices. Fortunately, English ability and choice correlated fairly well, and students were, in most cases, placed in courses of their first or second choice.

The small group courses had definitely been successful in the first year class, but the bigger group courses in the second year class had not. In 2005, one teacher (an American) was added to teach both first and second year courses. Another native speaker, the New Zealander who had taught a first year course, has also been teaching a second year course. The third foreign teacher, from Sweden, has continued to teach both first and second year courses, but with new textbooks. Three new teachers completed the teaching staff for

the second year class. Of the seven Japanese teachers with courses in either the first or second year classes, three are from this school's Department of Biochemistry, one is from Kawasaki College of Allied Health Professions, one is from Kawasaki Senior High School, and two are recently retired high school English teachers. The small course teaching staff presently stands at ten. The number of students in each course in both the first and second year classes is from 9 to 11 students.

In the first year class, three courses have been continued from 2004, those

平成17年度1年生 英語テスト H17.4.12(火) (総題5教) No. 1
川崎医科大学 答案用紙 学籍番号 _____ 氏名 _____

KAWASAKI MEDICAL SCHOOL
2005 ENGLISH COURSE PLACEMENT TEST

In this test you will have the chance to show how well you understand written English. There are three parts to this test, with special directions for each part. You will have forty minutes to complete the test.
 このテストは、あなたの英語の理解能力を示す機会を提供するものです。このテストには3つのパートがあり、それぞれ特別な指示があります。あなたは40分以内にこのテストを完了する必要があります。

Part I

Directions: Questions 1-30 are incomplete sentences. Four words or phrases, marked a, b, c, d, are given below each sentence. You are to choose one word or phrase that best completes each sentence. Then, on your answer sheet, find the number of the question and mark your answer.
 指示: 以下の1-30の質問は、不完全な文です。各文の下にa, b, c, dの4つの単語またはフレーズが示されています。各文を最もよく完成させる単語またはフレーズを選択してください。その後、回答シート上で質問番号を見つけ、正解をマークしてください。

- The president of the company has _____ arrived in Huzhou and will meet with the Minister of Trade on Monday morning.
 a. just
 b. already
 c. still
 d. yet
- Please _____ your flight number at least 24 hours _____ advance.
 a. book
 b. choose
 c. use
 d. cancel
- Ms. Liang gave a long _____ in honor of the retiring vice-president.
 a. speech
 b. sign
 c. spend
 d. speaking
- The customer was told that no _____ would be made on weekends to reduce the central air flow system.
 a. shift
 b. delay
 c. change
 d. suspension
- The CEO's presentation was difficult to understand _____ he spoke quickly.
 a. because
 b. despite
 c. although
 d. so that
- Contractual interest _____, because they are signed.
 a. most of the time
 b. during
 c. through
 d. throughout
- Although the report gives definitive answers, wise managers will look for _____ own methods of solutions.
 a. they
 b. their
 c. one's
 d. their

Figure 3

taught by biochemistry teachers and the video course on New Zealand. An easier textbook was chosen by the third Japanese teacher in this class. The other two courses taught by foreigners respectively deal with medical terminology from a different approach to that taken in large classes and with guided English conversation on health and medical topics. In the second year class, because of scheduling difficulties, there are four courses taught by Japanese; that is, a course concerned with cell biology, two dealing with both science and medicine, and one on discussion and debate. This last course is taught by the same

希望調査票 (全員提出)	新入生用。				
平成 17 年 4 月 12 日。					
平成 17 年度英語コース受講希望について。					
<p>第 1 学年の英語については一部コース分けの小クラスとなります。あなたほどのコースを希望しますが、テストとアンケートの結果を参考にしてコース決定しますので、希望順に数字を入れてください。ただし、最終的なコース決定は教員団の協議の結果行いますので、その点はご了承ください。</p>					
<input type="checkbox"/>	総合英語コース+ 志村 直子 / 健康に関するトピックス <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%;">Reading 70%</td> <td style="width: 33%;">writing 15%</td> <td style="width: 33%;">その他 15%</td> </tr> </table>	Reading 70%	writing 15%	その他 15%	
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<input type="checkbox"/>	科学英語コース+ 伊谷 直也 / 英語で学ぶ自然科学 <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 66%;">Reading 80%</td> <td style="width: 33%;">writing 10% その他 10%</td> </tr> </table>	Reading 80%	writing 10% その他 10%		
Reading 80%	writing 10% その他 10%				
<input type="checkbox"/>	科学英語コース+ 藤村 孝士 / 英語で学ぶ医学・生化学 <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%;">Reading 70%</td> <td style="width: 33%;">writing 10%</td> <td style="width: 33%;">communication 20%</td> </tr> </table>	Reading 70%	writing 10%	communication 20%	
Reading 70%	writing 10%	communication 20%			
<input type="checkbox"/>	総合英語コース+ D. Baxter / New Zealand の文化・生活 <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 25%;">Reading 50%</td> <td style="width: 25%;">writing 25%</td> <td style="width: 25%;">Speaking 15%</td> <td style="width: 25%;">Listening 10%</td> </tr> </table>	Reading 50%	writing 25%	Speaking 15%	Listening 10%
Reading 50%	writing 25%	Speaking 15%	Listening 10%		
<input type="checkbox"/>	総合英語コース+ G. Godwin / 医療・健康に関するトピックス <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">Reading 50%</td> <td style="width: 50%;">Communication Skills 50%</td> </tr> </table>	Reading 50%	Communication Skills 50%		
Reading 50%	Communication Skills 50%				
<input type="checkbox"/>	医学英語コース+ J. Palmer / 医学専門領域の英語 <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="width: 25%;">Reading 40%</td> <td style="width: 25%;">writing 10%</td> <td style="width: 25%;">communication skill / listening 25%</td> <td style="width: 25%;">speaking 25%</td> </tr> </table>	Reading 40%	writing 10%	communication skill / listening 25%	speaking 25%
Reading 40%	writing 10%	communication skill / listening 25%	speaking 25%		
+印はコース確定を意味す。					
第 1 学年	MD10 A B 氏名				

Figure 4

teacher who taught it last year but with a more elementary level book, which he indicates has worked satisfactorily. The American teacher is teaching a video course from ABC News, which includes a number of medical stories. The New Zealander has been teaching English and culture in a video course using the motion picture "Forrest Gump" to deal with events in recent American history. The world of emergency medicine in the United States is the focus of a course taught by the remaining foreign teacher.

The TOEIC preparation course was dropped from the curriculum in 2005. It or a TOEFL (Test of English As A Foreign Language) course may appear again after the manner in which it should be taught is thoroughly considered. Two questions regarding a TOEIC course need to be asked and answered. First, is the TOEIC important enough for an entire course? Second, should it be taught to all students rather than one group?

What conclusions can be made about the success of the small group courses in 2005 and what can be done to improve them? What else can be done to further improve the English curriculum?

Regarding the first question, teacher comments in grading meetings have indicated that the majority of students are satisfied with class size. However, once again, some teachers feel that another textbook might be more appropriate and the search for such textbooks is going on at the time of this writing. More time, if teachers can find it, also needs to be devoted to discussing student progress during the term. As was the case at the end of the 2004 academic year, surveys will be done again. The Department of English has an English Department website from which students can obtain information on tests and can download homework assignments. This has been primarily used for the large classes, but small group course teachers will be encouraged to use it more in the future. In 2006, the same six teachers, three Japanese and three foreigners, will teach both first and second year classes.

Regarding the second question, plans are now underway to make changes in the large classes. The first change will occur in the 2006 curriculum. Then it is hoped with the completion of a multimedia center in 2007 that, with suitable software, students will be able to work independently at their own level and speed during part of a class period and then together with the teacher during the rest of the period. This type of class situation is called blended learning. Beyond this, further expansion of the English curriculum would require that either compulsory or elective courses be added to at least the third and fourth years of the six-year medical course. Also worth consideration would be the inclusion of occasional English seminars on the preparation of English medical papers and giving presentations at international medical conferences in the

graduate course.

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