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著者	SCURA Vincent, KAVANAGH Barry, MERES Richard, SPRING Ryan
journal or publication title	BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE FOR EXCELLENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION TOHOKU UNIVERSITY
volume	8
page range	61-68
year	2022-03
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10097/00134729">http://hdl.handle.net/10097/00134729</a>

## 【特集・寄稿】

## The New Normal: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Accelerated the Adoption of a New English Curriculum

SCURA Vincent<sup>1)</sup>\*, KAVANAGH Barry<sup>1)</sup>, MERES Richard<sup>1)</sup>, SPRING Ryan<sup>1)</sup>

1) 東北大学高度教養教育・学生支援機構

In 2020, the year of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tohoku University (TU) launched a new, unified English curriculum with the aim of better equipping students with the academic English they will need in their academic careers. Initially, few teachers fully implemented the new curriculum into their courses. However, during the first year of the pandemic, teachers were forced to adopt novel digital delivery systems and online data tools in order to present their courses in a socially distanced environment. Because teachers were forced to alter their teaching approaches drastically, many more opted to incorporate the new curriculum into their courses in 2021 than in 2020. This increase in implementation improved students' English skills, as evidenced by an increase in the average TOEFL ITP score.

### 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on higher education globally. The sudden onset of this disaster forced many educational institutions to make the shift from in-person to virtual learning. Furthermore, the pandemic's economic repercussions led numerous universities to make drastic changes to their budgets, with some even going so far as to eliminate entire academic departments and make redundant tenured faculty (Burki, 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020).

Although higher education in Japan avoided many of the calamities that this industry suffered in North America, Britain, and some Western European nations, it was nonetheless seriously impacted by the pandemic. While classes were only briefly disrupted, the transition to online learning in Japan was rather uneven, with schools in less affluent prefectures struggling to provide laptops to all students (Iwabuchi et al., 2021). Moreover, there were indications that many students experienced mild

trauma as a result of the lockdowns, which impeded their ability to learn (Iwabuchi et al., 2021).

These COVID-19 issues affected TU as well, although TU did make a relatively smooth and rapid transition from traditional face-to-face lessons to an online distance-learning format. Moreover, the TU Center for Language and Cultural Education (English Section) (CCLE (ES)) took advantage of the opportunity presented by the pandemic by making several much-needed digital delivery upgrades available to the TU English Teaching Faculty (ETF) in order to integrate a new English curriculum more fully into ETF classrooms. Prior to 2020, the ETF had embraced what was regarded as a “non-curriculum” curriculum, which left instructors largely to their own devices when it came to course design, content, and instructional methods. As a result of this non-unified curriculum, TU students' average TOEFL ITP scores had remained stagnant at under 500 points since the mid-1990s. This long-entrenched system made it unlikely that the

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\* ) 連絡先 : 〒980-8576 仙台市青葉区川内41 東北大学高度教養教育・学生支援機構 scura@tohoku.ac.jp

transition to the new curriculum would be effortless and unproblematic. The challenge of implementing the curriculum change was evidenced by the fact that only roughly one-quarter of the ETF were fully committed to teaching the new curriculum at its launch in Spring 2020. However, encouragingly, as of October 2021, the rate of participation is around 50%, according to internal surveying. Interestingly, this increase in participation rate co-occurred with a dramatic rise in the most recent TU TOEFL scores. The CCLE (ES) anticipates that even more ETF members will adopt the new curriculum in the forthcoming semesters, and preliminary data suggests that this correlation will likely increase TOEFL scores even further.

## 2. New Curriculum Overview

In April 2020, TU adopted a new required English curriculum to equip students with the academic English skills they will use in their upper-division and graduate laboratories. The objectives and core skills of the curriculum's courses are outlined below.

### English A1: Academic Reading and Vocabulary (First-Year Students)

Objectives: Improve reading and vocabulary-building skills. Acquire the ability to quickly recognize a text's main idea and key information.

Core Skills: Word Parts, Synonym Vocabulary, Skimming and Scanning, Summarizing and Paraphrasing

### English B1: Academic Listening and Speaking (First-Year Students)

Objectives: Acquire the ability to take notes. Acquire the ability to use common spoken academic expressions.

Core Skills: Note-Taking While Listening, Orally Summarizing from Notes, Interrogatives and Giving Opinions, Idiomatic Language

### English A2: Integrated Academic Reading and

### Writing (First-Year Students)

Objectives: Acquire the ability to identify a text's organization and logic. Acquire the ability to construct an academic paragraph.

Core Skills: Connotative and Denotative Meanings, Suggestions, Inferences and Implications, Paragraph Writing, Collocations

### English B2: Integrated Academic Speaking and Listening (First-Year Students)

Objectives: Develop pragmatic competence. Acquire the ability to discuss academic topics.

Core Skills: Tone of Voice, Speech Acts, Fluency and Pronunciation, Discussion Strategies

The CCLE (ES) firmly believes that the realization of these objectives and acquisition of the core skills listed above will be reflected in higher TOEFL ITP scores.

## 3. Adoption of Google Online Delivery Environment

While some universities in Japan struggled with the transition to virtual learning in Spring 2020, TU did not. In the case of TU English classes, the success of the transition can be attributed to the CCLE (ES) adopting the Google online data environment, which was done to enable convenient delivery of learning materials to the ETF. For instance, the CCLE (ES) created a Google shared folder for the courses English A1, A2, B1, and B2. For each core skill, there are folders containing teaching materials, such as practice sheets, homework, quizzes, interactive videos, listening files, and tests. Each core skill folder includes a set of PDF student files, and, where necessary, MS Word answer files for teachers. Teachers can use all materials as-is, but they can also modify them or simply use them as inspiration in developing their own similar materials.

The adoption of the Google online data environment for virtual instruction was particularly

germane to TU's successful transition to online learning. The pandemic afforded the opportunity for the CCLE (ES) to shift from traditional paper-based face-to-face instruction to common, easy-to-use, and free online tools such as Gmail, G-Classroom, G-Meet, G-Forms, G-Sheets, G-Calendars, G-Docs, and YouTube. It should be noted that while not technically part of the Google infrastructure, the Zoom virtual meeting platform integrates seamlessly with G-Calendars. Therefore, Zoom is considered to be an integral component of the aforementioned Google ecosystem.

Though these resources existed long before the pandemic, the CCLE (ES) seized the opportunity presented by the pandemic-induced paradigm shift in education. The CCLE (ES) not only took full advantage of these online tools but also avoided many of the problems associated with the rapid adoption of previously unknown, expensive, and complicated virtual learning platforms. Some instructors and students were already familiar with the Google Suite and were comfortable integrating these tools into their daily teaching routines. Those who were not quickly adapted to the technology in this "new normal" of university education. As such, despite the worry, uncertainty, and confusion of early 2020, English instruction at TU proceeded relatively seamlessly via the new online learning environment.

It can be speculated that the Google online system also made it easier for many ETF members to implement the new curriculum sooner than they had thought would be possible. Moreover, this ease of use could be one of the factors responsible for the anticipated increase in the curriculum participation rate, which is expected to reach 50% in the Fall 2021 semester. Hopefully, the effectiveness of the new curriculum and the abundance of online teaching materials, coupled with the easy-to-use Google delivery system, will encourage even more instructors to implement the curriculum into their

lessons heading into Spring 2022. It is also crucial to mention here that, according to the ETF feedback survey, the provision of the new highly structured curriculum and corresponding learning materials was incredibly helpful to the original 25% of early adopters as they navigated the "new normal" imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 4. Class Implementation: A Conduit for the New Curriculum

In an article in the *Mainichi* newspaper Suzuki (2020) reported the results of a survey of university faculty members at 66 institutions throughout Japan that found that many teachers and students were unfamiliar with the technology used to deliver online classes. However, TU's decision to move from traditional to digital classes was discussed and planned prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. In fact, this move was reflected in the university's adoption of a "Bring Your Own Device" (BYOD) policy for students in English language courses prior to the COVID-19 crisis. Because students were already required to have internet-capable devices on hand during lessons, the transition to an online environment at TU as a result of the pandemic was perhaps not as disruptive or unsettling as it was at other universities in Japan (See Kavanagh, 2021).

From this perspective, TU administrators viewed the COVID-19 outbreak as an opportunity for, rather than an obstacle to, the implementation of the new curriculum. In some instances, the change in delivery mode did mean that teachers and students had to become acquainted with the Google Suite and Zoom, but this did not necessarily involve a steep learning curve. The relative ease of adoption was in part due to the fact that the tools within the Google ecosystem were not new to many teachers, who were already using them as part of their preparation for the BYOD policy. For teachers who were not as technologically experienced, the change presented a

chance to learn these practical skills quickly and implement them into their lessons immediately. Many teachers have since reported that they have no intention to return to paper-based delivery of lesson materials once the pandemic has ceased and that they will continue to employ a digital approach to the delivery of lesson materials, grading, and classroom management.

Paperless online lesson delivery, coupled with the BYOD policy, is not only good news for the environment, it has also accelerated the teaching staff's acquisition of the IT skills that will be required in a post-pandemic teaching environment. In this sense, COVID-19 directly accelerated the curriculum shift in terms of both lesson delivery and teacher training, as the pandemic conditions incentivized more teachers to implement the new curriculum by adopting novel digital delivery systems.

## 5. Student Feedback on the *Pathways to Academic English* Core Skills and TOEFL Results

Several TU instructors who implemented the new curriculum in the Spring 2021 semester asked students to provide feedback regarding their learning experiences. At the start of the semester, students were asked to write down their goals for their English B1 Academic Listening and Speaking course. At the end of the semester, they were asked if they had managed to achieve these goals, and specifically how the core skills explained in *Pathways to Academic English*, along with the accompanying teaching materials, had impacted their learning outcomes.

The following comments are selected excerpts from the responses from students enrolled in three English B1 Academic Listening and Speaking courses. The comments are organized according to each core skill followed by students' comments regarding TOEFL results.

### Core Skill B1.1 Note-Taking While Listening – Student Comments

“…Note-Taking greatly contributed to improving my English skills. In addition to helping me understand speakers, my discussion in English improved…”

“…Thanks to this class, my English skills have improved. At the end of this class, I made my next goal. The goal is to naturally and easily note-take and summarize in English. This class will increase my motivation to study English…”

### Core Skill B1.2 Orally Summarizing from Notes – Student Comments

“…Note-taking and orally summarizing from notes was a new experience for me. This discovery will be useful when I learn any kind of language from now on. Thank you for explaining in detail…”

“…Through the class, I wrote a lot of English notes. I was not very good at it at first. However, I think that I was able to grow a lot by learning how to organize main points and support points. And it was also a very good experience to tell and convey my notes to everyone…”

### Core Skill B1.3 Interrogatives and Giving Opinions – Student Comments

“…The Interrogatives and Giving Opinions chapter lesson and activities really helped my presentation skill through the activity of communicating with my classmates. This ability or skill is exactly what I wanted to improve. In other words, I could achieve my goal…”

“…I was able to meet my goals throughout this class. From Chapter B1.3 (Interrogatives and Giving Opinions) I could get confidence speaking with other students about our opinions. It was useful because I thought I would improve my speaking skill, and it was a chance to try to express my ideas clearly and logically…”

“…Conversations with other students in English

were very good for me. I have not had much experience talking with other people in English before. Chapter B1.3 lessons gave me more confidence. So, the experience had a positive effect on me…”

Core Skill B1.4 Phrasal Verbs and Idiomatic Expressions – Student Comments

“ …I enjoyed learning about various English expressions through the class and being able to speak and listen to them thanks to Chapter B1.4 Phrasal Verbs and Idiomatic Expressions. The explanation of the class was easy to understand and helpful…”

“ …I got to know idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs, rhetorical questions, embedded questions. They have enriched my expressions. At the beginning of this class, I wanted to improve my listening and writing skills, so my goal was accomplished…”

TOEFL Results – Student Comments

“ …Through the discussions, I was able to take notes while listening and then summarize and verbalize from the notes. Also, the weekly homework assignments helped me improve my TOEFL score …”

“ …After reflecting on this class, I want to challenge TOEFL soon. Phrasal Verbs and Idiomatic Expressions gave me some confidence in natural English, which I think will be helpful for my next TOEFL exam…”

“ …Thanks to this semester’s English class, the heavy practice of idiomatic phrases helped us to study for TOEFL. I met my goal. I want to continue to study English for my future…”

Though this is a small sample drawn from hundreds of comments, generally, students perceived the core skills as both practical and beneficial – in particular,

because studying the core skills helped them to improve their TOEFL scores. These are very welcome observations, and this encouraging feedback suggests that teaching the core skills is highly correlated with the realization of curriculum goals.

**6. TOEFL Results – The Data**

As previously discussed, the TOEFL scores at TU prior to the implementation of the new curriculum were quite mediocre, hovering at just under 500 for the last few decades. Furthermore, previous internal TOEFL-ITP reports have shown that English classes at TU have had very little impact on students’ average TOEFL scores (e.g., Tohoku University, 2015). However, with the recent implementation of the new curriculum in Spring 2020, TOEFL scores have risen significantly. As Table 1 below demonstrates, TU students who took the examination in both August 2020 and December 2020 exhibited an average increase of 18.4% in their overall scores.

Table 1. Scores of students who took TOEFL in both August and December

Score	August <i>M(SD)</i>	December <i>M(SD)</i>	Change <i>M(SD)</i>	t-test statistics
<b>Total</b>	500.5 (39.8)	519.0 (36.4)	18.4 (26.1)	<i>t</i> =23.53, <i>p</i> <.001
<b>LC</b>	47.6 (4.5)	50.8 (4.8)	3.2 (3.4)	<i>t</i> =30.99, <i>p</i> <.001
<b>SWE</b>	50.3 (4.9)	52.2 (4.4)	1.9 (4.0)	<i>t</i> =15.79, <i>p</i> <.001
<b>RC</b>	52.3 (5.2)	52.8 (4.0)	0.5 (4.7)	<i>t</i> =3.42, <i>p</i> =.001

\*N=1,108 (LC = Listening Comprehension, SWE = Structure and Written Comprehension, RC = Reading Comprehension)



Of course, the average score increase between the August and December 2020 TOEFL examinations can be partly explained by the fact that the students had already familiarized themselves with the content of the test and had had several months to study and brush up on their weak points. However, when one compares this data to that of the last 11 years, there is a startling increase in the overall TOEFL scores between 2009 and 2021, which is especially pronounced in the 2019–2020 period. This data is presented in Figure 1 below.

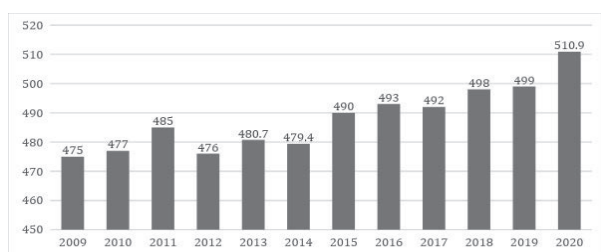


Figure 1. Average TOEFL Scores 2009 – 2020

When the raw data from 2020 is compared to the previous ten years of TU students' TOEFL results, it is apparent that there has been a dramatic positive change in recent years. These results are especially noteworthy considering that far less than half of the entire ETF adopted the new curriculum in Spring 2020 (Spring & Okada, 2021). Because close to 50% of the ETF have agreed to implement the new curriculum by October 2021, it is not overly optimistic to predict that TU students' TOEFL scores will increase even more in the upcoming months and years. Moreover, as it is the stated goal of the CCLE (ES) to encourage the entire ETF to incorporate the new curriculum in their classrooms by April 2023, it may also be argued with confidence that TU TOEFL results will improve further.

The recent dramatic increase in the TOEFL scores may be due to other factors, such as Japan's implementation of a rather restrictive lockdown

during the COVID-19 pandemic, which, compared to previous years, gave students much more time in which they could study and prepare for the TOEFL examination (Ali, 2020). It is also possible that the recent uptick is an anomaly that can be attributed to multiple other factors – for instance, increased capability among the student body in 2020 compared to previous years. However, the preliminary data strongly indicates that these improved scores are the result of the partial implementation of the new common English curriculum at TU.

## 7. Conclusion

The launch of the new unified English curriculum at TU happened to coincide with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This, coupled with the decades-long existence of a “non-curriculum” curriculum, was perhaps the reason that initially only about one quarter of the ETF opted to implement the new curriculum in 2020. However, as the pandemic persisted into 2021, more teachers may have felt compelled to implement the new curriculum as part of the adoption of a novel digital delivery system that was necessitated by the shift to online classes. In any case, despite the overall uncertainty that ensued as a result of this shift, the need to make drastic changes to teaching approaches led to more teachers adopting the new curriculum. Arguably, a result of the curriculum's implementation is a rise in the overall TOEFL scores of TU students, and the initial data makes it clear that this new system has the potential to supercharge TU TOEFL scores in the upcoming months and years.

While the initial data is encouraging, the CCLE (ES) will nevertheless redouble efforts in several arenas to ensure further progress. First, the CCLE (ES) has adopted an action plan to ensure that the new curriculum is fully implemented by all ETF members by Spring 2023. Second, it will be necessary to improve *Pathways to Academic English* by further

refining the courses' objectives and core skills. Furthermore, the CCLE (ES) will need to augment the common "shared materials" so that they are appealing to all ETF members. It will also be imperative to promote paperless content delivery, as many instructors and students have become accustomed to this practice over the last few months, and it is certain to be a defining feature of the "new normal" in higher education going forward. Finally, the CCLE (ES) will also work to increase the number and quality of curriculum seminars, faculty development sessions, workshops, in-house online instructional videos, and other interactive training tools and programs. In this way, the CCLE (ES) will be prepared to remedy any curriculum, material, and delivery issues as they become apparent.

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