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Reimagining the English Language Institute's Course Outcomes: A Distributed Leadership Approach

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Abstract

This paper describes the multi-year process of revising the course outcomes of the first- and second-year courses in the language institute of a university in Japan to produce culturally and linguistically diverse students (Johnson et al., 2015). A brief history of the institution's curriculum reforms frames this effort in various pedagogies including multiliteracies and competence-based learning. The revision process utilized a distributed leadership approach (Spillane, 2006) to give various levels of stakeholders within the institution, from first-year lecturers to coordinators and principal lecturers, the opportunity to collaborate, to develop and clarify more specific aims, and to address gaps and redundancy to better streamline the outcomes across the courses.

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Introduction

Curriculum reform is an important part of education systems that are charged with preparing students for an environment increasingly being shaped by global trends such as international trade, increasing diversity within communities, burgeoning online societies, greater accountability and transparency, and a sharper focus on equity and quality (Pont, 2018). In a general sense, educational curriculum should reflect the broader social and political agreements borne out of these trends and serve as guidelines for what should be learned and what should be taught (Gouëdard et al., 2020; Stabback, 2016). From this perspective, curriculum reform is a highly necessary function and is in need of constant evaluation and implementation. This sentiment is reflected in the efforts of over 40 countries participating in the OECD-led Education 2030 project - an ongoing international investigation exploring the skills and competencies needed for learners to compete in the 21st century (Gouëdard et al., 2020; OECD, 2018). One such country engaged in these investigations is Japan, which operates on a 10-year cycle, where the educational curriculum is evaluated and updated to meet the needs dictated by these evolving global trends. In 2011, this movement initiated an overhaul of the curriculum outcomes at the English Language Institute (ELI) of Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) to align with educational goals outlined by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Science (MEXT) to create more "globally adapted students" (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, n.d., para 4).

This paper outlines some of the changes at the ELI, and how a push toward distributed leadership has helped to involve all lecturers in the development of new student learning outcomes (SLOs) as a way to help them better understand and become more invested in the most recent curriculum reform.

Background and Context

The ELI at KUIS was formed in 1989, two years after the university opened. Its role was to provide a uniform curriculum based on a communicative approach (Johnson, 1989). During the early developmental years, the ELI began to define itself as a center for curriculum development and research followed. In 2000, after receiving a grant from the Ministry of Education to pursue curriculum research and the development of instructional materials, one of the foci of the curriculum became a “personal” curriculum that helped learners to develop autonomy inside and outside of the classroom (Johnson, 2008). At this time, there were only a handful of lecturers so it was relatively straightforward for them to collaborate on curriculum design. As the ELI grew, however, this collaboration became more challenging.

A discussion at the higher management levels (the Director and three Assistant Directors) about a revised curriculum began in 2011 when the ELI was asked to submit put in an application for a MEXT’s Project for Promotion of Global Human Resource Development Project. The goals of this project were to “overcome the Japanese younger generation’s ‘inward tendency’ and to foster human resources who can positively meet the challenges and succeed in the global field as the basis for improving Japan’s global competitiveness and enhancing the ties between nations" (MEXT, n.d., para. 1) as a way “to internationalize universities and foster globally adapted students” (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, n.d., para 4). This resulted in the need to review the existing framework and curriculum, which involved developing an advanced track, the purpose of which was to provide more support for students wanting to study abroad. The ELI felt that these students needed not only a variety of texts and tasks but something crucially different; i.e. different literacies to enable them to deal with different situations. The multiliteracies framework was decided upon based on internal discussions on how to best support students in an increasingly globalized society. The three interrelated constructs

for the new ELI curriculum became Autonomy, Interaction, and Multiliteracies, or AIM (Johnson et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2016). Autonomy reflects the importance that the ELI and KUIS place on students becoming autonomous learners and developing control over cognitive (Zimmerman, 2002), metacognitive (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and affective (Hurd, 2008; McCombs & Whisler, 1989) dimensions. Interaction reflects the nature of language and learning, in which communicative, intercultural and symbolic competences and capacities are important. Finally, multiliteracies represents the direction of the reimagined ELI curriculum.

The MEXT grant was awarded in 2012 and the implementation of the new curriculum began in 2013. With regard to the Education 2030 project investigations, with which MEXT's proposals were aligned, an observable effect is the recent shift away from content-based curriculum towards a competence-based curriculum (Bergsmann et al., 2015; Wesselink et al., 2010). This shift denotes the view that students need to develop high competency in multidisciplinary skills and knowledge that are directly connected to problem solving and critical thinking, as opposed to memorisation of subject-specific knowledge (Gouédard et al., 2020). This shift is an attempt to equip students with performance-oriented capabilities that allow them to achieve specific goals and navigate a changing and uncertain future (Mulder, 2001), a view shared at KUIS and one that influenced its decision to create curriculum outcomes based on teaching a multiliteracies framework and instilling autonomy in its students. The timeline for creating the new curriculum guidelines in the ELI was very short and necessitated the Assistant Director of Curriculum at that time to lead the process. When deciding how to provide a tangible and measurable system within which a multiliteracies curriculum could be developed, the following eight overarching course outcomes (OCOs) were established: Awareness of self as learner, Textual awareness and control, Criticality and interpretation, Textual fluency, Interactive capacity, Interpretation and expression of multimodal meaning,

Lexico-grammatical control, and Intercultural capacity.

From 2013, coordinators and lecturers were tasked with reviewing materials to align with the new multiliteracies framework. However, the decision to choose the multiliteracies framework and the design of this new curriculum came from the top down. It was also, unfortunately, a framework most lecturers were unfamiliar with. Consequently, in the years that followed, even as coordinators later worked under the guidance of the newly appointed Assistant Director of Curriculum and passed on information to lecturers, much confusion was evident.

Challenges with the new multiliteracies curriculum

When the OCOs were first introduced, the coordinator structure at KUIS was organized whereby coordinators were in charge of overseeing courses (and lecturers) within one of the four departments at KUIS (English department, International Communication department, the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, and the Department of Asian Languages). This meant that they were often responsible for courses that they had no experience teaching. Nevertheless, in 2016, those course coordinators began to overhaul the generic descriptions to be more meaningful for the six courses. However, in 2017, two major changes occurred in the university. First, the three Assistant Directors of the ELI were replaced with six Principal Lecturers (PLs), two of whom were responsible for Curriculum and Assessment (C&A). Second, coordinators were responsible for individual courses rather than a variety of courses, often across departments. These courses are: Freshman English/English for International Communication 1, Foundational Literacies/Sophomore English, Media English, English for International Communication 2, Academic Literacies: Reading and Academic Literacies: Writing.

These two changes helped to open lines of communication between the Director, PLs, coordinators and lecturers. The coordinators are responsible for supporting lecturers,

assuring that top-down course recommendations were heard by lecturers, and for relaying bottom-up concerns and ideas to higher administrators; first among them, the PLs. One of the items for coordinators to further tackle that year was the course specific descriptors of the OCOs. These were finalized at the end of the 2017 academic year through communication between the two PLs of C&A and the six coordinators (who had received input from lecturers).

However, by 2019 it was becoming clear, through pre-meetings before lesson observations and during course meetings, that lecturers did not fully understand the meaning of the OCOs or how to tangibly implement them into the courses. Appendix 1 provides a generic description of the OCOs, and although these were adapted in 2016-2017 to be more specific for each of the six courses, they did not explicate the course outcomes in the revised version.

Since 2018, the revised OCOs have been introduced to lecturers in their initial orientation sessions before they begin teaching at KUIS, and are referred to in course meetings throughout the year. In some courses, the OCOs are referenced by number (#1-8) in the lesson plans in the ELI's shared Google Drive, but after time passes, many lecturers seem to have forgotten what these numbers refer to. For some lecturers, their next clear interaction with the OCOs occurs when planning their official observation in the first year of their initial two-year contracts. At this time, the lecturers are asked to formulate a lesson plan based on the materials provided in a shared folder on Google Drive, and meet with one of the PLs of C&A to discuss the lesson plan, materials and observation goals prior to the observation of their lesson. However, it was evident in some of these pre-observation meetings, when instructors had to explain which goals or outcomes their lesson would address, that the lecturers did not always understand the connections between the OCOs and the lesson content. Furthermore, it became apparent that some veteran lecturers occasionally demonstrated indifference to the existence of the OCOs

and expressed confusion to their connection to the course materials when planning new materials to go into the shared Drive. This was observed by coordinators through monitoring their work developing new materials or updating existing materials as part of a curriculum course development group they belonged to each year.

The list of eight OCOs did not provide enough details, examples, or even connections to the existing materials. Since lecturers are encouraged to use the materials provided in the shared Drive and to base any personal adaptations off those existing materials, it is imperative that lecturers not only understand the OCOs and how they are reflected in the materials, but also that they understand what adaptations would be considered acceptable in the ELI curriculum.

The process to reform the outcomes began when in early 2020, one of the PLs of C&A (hereto referred to as the PLCA) met with Allen Luke, one of the founding members of the New London Group who coined the term multiliteracies, an approach to literacy theory and pedagogy. They discussed at length about a project (Luke, 2018) that brought teachers in a school in Queensland, Australia to work together, grouped by year grades/levels so as to map out what was being taught, as well as how and when it was taught to get a grasp of what the curriculum foci was for each respective student year group. In this consultation, Luke suggested using a similar approach for the proposed ELI curriculum review, emphasizing that going in and telling lecturers what to do was not the most effective way of working, and that lecturer collaboration would be key to the success of this project.

The first challenges were to think about how to collect data for all of the courses and disseminate it. Whilst it might have been ideal to have all lecturers come together in one place, as they did in the aforementioned Queensland project, this was not viable for the ELI, given the 60+ lecturers employed and the fact that most lecturers taught at least two of the six core classes. Another challenge was that 2020 marked the beginning of the

Covid-19 pandemic and any meetings would need to be conducted online.

Process

As there was no intention to discard the original eight OCOs, the new outcomes needed to be in line with what the older outcomes had prescribed based on the curricular expectations of the university. The new outcomes themselves needed to be easily understood and implemented by any newcomer to the ELI courses. In order to do this, it was vital to get lecturer and administrative feedback. Thus, a distributed leadership approach was actuated. Here, the distribution of influence from multiple implementers at different levels would become more horizontal (Burns & Köster, 2016) with different stakeholders exerting more agency and leadership over the reform process of which they are a part (Lemke & Harris-Wai, 2015). Bachmann (2016) asserts that managing these stakeholders effectively “encourages trust and collaborative efforts, which lead to positive exchanges and economic outcomes” (p. 21).

Thus the process began with each of the coordinators working with the PLCA to create a comprehensive list of potential outcomes. The list was based on the OCOs as well as the coordinators’ own teaching practices and materials and was reviewed by the PLCA to ensure it was in agreement with the curriculum.

These potential outcome lists were then presented to lecturers in regularly-scheduled mandatory meetings for each of the courses. There, course lecturers reviewed the lists and discussed each outcomes viability based on what they already did in their classes or added what they thought should be included, whether in practice at the time or not. They were also asked to edit wording as needed. Distributed leadership is a key factor in effective reform, as it utilizes the expertise held at all levels of the organization and acts as a way to engage, prepare, inspire and embolden those traditionally thought of as passive actors who are told how and what to teach (Gouedard et al., 2020; Viennet & Pont, 2017). Therefore, all lecturers were encouraged to voice their opinions. Since the course

coordinators and the PLs also teach in one or more of the courses, they were also included in these focus groups. Coordinators then collated the feedback and shared the possible new outcomes with each other. Along with the PLCA, they looked at all of the outcomes to identify any obvious gaps or overlaps.

Sol (2021) believes that the willingness of those in various leadership positions is one of the important requisites of successful implementation of a distributed leadership approach. Additionally, he states that “professional unwillingness” is a potential obstacle that institutions may face. Therefore, a concerted effort was made to avoid a negative reaction from lecturers towards the task. Spillane and Diamond (2007) report that education research seems to demonstrate that schools with a younger and/or “less stable staff” typically have school leaders with more direct leadership styles compared to schools with an older and more stable staff. The ELI likely falls into the former category as the instructors are on limited contracts that are renewable for a maximum of six years. Especially in such cases, though also generally speaking, great care must be taken to ensure the proper implementation of a distributed leadership approach (Harris, 2014; Sol, 2021). If not, it could be seen, as Lumby (2013) argues, as simply a fad; one which attempts to pass more work onto teachers for few rewards.

In the original plan, in an effort to make the outcomes more digestible, effective, and achievable, it was decided that the SLOs would be written as “Students will be able to...” statements (SWBATs). To do this, coordinators utilized course development groups. These course development groups are small groups of lecturers tasked with furthering research or curriculum development in one of the ELI courses each year. Each lecturer is required to be a member of one of the course development groups, which are typically overseen by the coordinators. A course development group from each course was charged with taking the new list of outcomes created by lecturers, coordinators and PLs and turning them into SWBATs. This allowed for lecturers to have further input into the SLOs as

well as making newer lecturers and the ELI at large aware of this process. This distribution of leadership was an important component of reforming the curriculum at KUIS as the organization considers teachers, to be a high-level asset that should be at the center of reform implementation. Contemporary literature and empirical research is increasingly observing a positive relationship between ‘distributed leadership’ (Crowther et al., 2009; Harris, 2014; Sol, 2021) and high performance, organizational improvements and student achievements in many schools (Hallinger & Heck, 2009; Harris, 2014; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2009).

Throughout the process of converting the lists into SWBATs, the coordinators and the PLCA had regular meetings with the course development groups and each other to review what had been done and offered suggestions and feedback when necessary. Once the task was completed, the coordinators reviewed the revised document and the final draft was shared with lecturers to receive any final feedback. After the new SWBATs were reviewed and finalized, the course development groups took the new outcomes and matched each one to the OCOs, thus ensuring that the SWBATs matched the requirements set out in the curriculum.

Finally, guidelines for course design in the 3rd and 4th year elective classes were also considered. These courses are designed with Murray and Christison’s (2020) framework for producing performance objectives. In addition to SWBATs, they include two additional components: how students would demonstrate what they have learned, and conditions for practice. See Appendix B for an example.

Deciding how the final document would look opened up more discussion as to how to make it accessible to all lecturers. This included numbering as well as color-coding to make it more accessible to people who are color blind. Once again, however, the congenial spirit of a group of colleagues working together helped to strengthen working relationships and brought finished product closer. The final product was shown to the lecturers in each

course one more time at the end of the 2021 academic year for any final feedback, and the new SLOs were officially presented at the beginning of the 2022 academic year.

Successes & Challenges

Each coordinator and the PLCA wrote short vignettes reflecting on the successes and challenges they experienced since starting the process of creating SLOs in collaboration with the ELI lecturers. After examining each vignette, the following four themes emerged.

Theme 1: A Lack of Understanding and Confidence

Both lecturers and course coordinators did not understand the OCOs very well and had difficulty determining if their lesson plans were connected to the OCOs. If asked about it in a meeting, a class observation, or a course development group, some lecturers lacked confidence in explaining how the OCOs fit a particular lesson plan. Some coordinators admitted that at the beginning of their coordinator role, they were equally lacking in confidence even though they were expected to explain the OCOs to new lecturers.

Theme 2: Focus Group Discussion Led to Deeper Understanding

Coordinators and the PLCA agreed to administer a focus group discussion in course meetings to initiate a discussion about the current OCOs. The lecturers were invited to take notes on shared Google Documents, and this process allowed coordinators and PLs to see how lecturers understood, interpreted, and utilized the OCOs in their lessons. Lecturers were invited to suggest suitable objectives for the courses they taught.

Theme 3: Collaboration Led to the Creation of New SLOs

The coordinators collated the notes from the focus group discussions and created a list of SLOs based on the original OCOs. The list items were rephrased into SWBATs for ease of understanding. The PLCA and coordinators discussed this list in-depth and then presented it to the lecturers to obtain feedback. The lecturers discussed whether the

list of SLOs was desirable, reasonable, and achievable. The lecturers seemed open to incorporating the SLOs into their lesson planning and curriculum development tasks. These results reflect documented examples of the positive effects of a distributed leadership approach, namely increased trust across departments within organizations, and increased teacher innovation, engagement and understanding of materials (Crowther et al., 2009; Huber, 2004).

Theme 4: The Next Step is to Evaluate the SLOs in Coordination with Current Curriculum

One of the coordinators, who started this process about one year earlier, indicated that her lecturers continue to evaluate the difficulty and effectiveness of the eight SLOs in her course. Other coordinators have not begun this process yet as the new list of SLOs was only debuted a few months prior to this writing.

Future direction

Following from the observed benefits of distributed leadership (Crowther et al., 2009), an important extension of this project is to establish clear and actionable communication channels to help review and evaluate the reformed SLOs at all levels in the ELI at KUIS. Conducting further surveys and discussions across all levels of management can not only help to ascertain whether the reformation has achieved the goal of successful outcome and multiliteracy implementation within course design and teaching, but it can also promote sustained lecturer engagement and development (Crowther et al., 2009). Another way to collect actionable data is through class observations and case study reports from individual lecturers. The latter tool has been used extensively in contemporary literature to help develop and support assertions within the field of distributed leadership (Aczel et al., 2017; Coenders et al., 2010; Crowther et al., 2009). In the context of the ELI at KUIS, these leadership roles include course coordinators and principal lecturers. Case studies reporting the experience of the individuals in these

positions during the reformation process would be insightful and useful in future evaluation and implementation.

Another key stakeholder is the student body who spend two years undertaking the target courses in the ELI. Evaluating the success of the SLOs reform lies primarily in their ability to understand them and produce evidence of this understanding. A number of effective activities and measurements that could effectively collect this evidence are: giving the students a pre- and post-course checklist or survey of the outcomes that respectively orient and re-orient them, assigning student journals that reflect on their understanding, and designing activities or assignments that produce examples of successful outcome production (Johnson & Nelson, 2022). In addition, for both students and lecturers, it would be beneficial to ascertain the effectiveness of the SLOs annually so that adjustments can be made as necessary.

Conclusion

Utilizing virtually the entire body of ELI lecturers and coordinators to revise the eight OCOs has brought some tangible benefits. With the average KUIS lecturer teaching for six years or less, there is always a wide discrepancy between experience levels during any given year. Rather than simply implementing top-down revision, and risk streams of communication collapsing, all lecturers were involved in creating, or at least approving these more detailed SLOs. Including the stakeholders in this way allowed those with less experience to be made more aware of the OCOs and what was expected from their courses, and simultaneously allowed those with more experience to be able to voice their own beliefs and practices. Filtering these discussions again through the coordinators and PLCA allowed for verification that the designed course goals and the lecturers' own directives were not diverging or losing focus. It is hoped that these revised outcomes will make it easier for future lecturers to grasp the OCOs and to incorporate them into their classes

and materials.

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Appendix A

A Generic Description of the Eight Course Outcomes in the ELI

1. Awareness of self as learner	Students will understand their own strengths and weaknesses in English spoken interaction and in textual analysis/production. They will be able to take control over their own learning with strategies and resources for measuring success in implementing those strategies.
2. Textual awareness and control	Students will be able to approach a variety of authentic texts and understand the social aspects of those texts: how author, purpose, audience and context shape textual form, content, and design with respect to different genres. Learners should recognize and control for rhetorical mode in varying capacities in listening, reading, speaking and writing for narrative, exposition, description and argumentation.
3. Criticality and interpretation	Students will be able to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources of information, especially with regards to online sources, and start to think critically about texts they choose and produce.
4. Textual fluency	Students will engage with a variety of topics and texts with sufficient fluency to aid communication with users of English and participate successfully in class work/discussions.
5. Interactive capacity	Students will participate in both short and extended interactions based on personal experience and social/cultural issues utilising a variety of roles, texts, and pragmatic strategies for appropriate communication with other users of English.
6. Interpretation and expression of multimodal meaning	Students will display an understanding of how meaning is created in different texts. Learners should be able to analyze and create/present graphs, charts, PowerPoint slides and other linguistic and/or visual representations of meaning that exist in texts.
7. Lexico-grammatical control	Students will demonstrate a repertoire of lexico-grammatical knowledge and awareness that furthers communicative capacity in both written and spoken language.
8. Intercultural capacity	Learners should develop an understanding and sensitivity towards other cultures that fosters effective communication while, when necessary, being able to deploy a critical lens in the evaluation of the target culture.

Appendix B

A Sample of the New SLOs from the Foundational Literacies course

Reading

Learners will be able to do the following in pairs, groups, or individually through group reading, discussion and targeted activities.

- Demonstrate understanding of a variety of textual genres (procedural, informative, etc.) (2)
- Demonstrate understanding of key genre features in written texts (2):
 - Demonstrate understanding of how layout and visual signifiers influence meaning (6)
 - Identify author's purpose and audience (2)
 - Identify structure and organization (2)(7)(6)
 - Identify key language features (2)
 - Identify key vocabulary (2)(7)
- Demonstrate understanding of main ideas and details of a written text: (2)
 - Sentence, paragraph, and longer texts (2)
- Use reading strategies to engage with a written text: (4)
 - Skim/scan (4)
 - Use textual clues (headers, formatting, etc) (6)
 - Critical reading strategies (highlighting, note-taking, etc.) (2)
- Use strategies to evaluate sources for reliability. (3)
- Identify strategies used to avoid plagiarism (citation, referencing, paraphrasing, etc) (3)(4)
- Demonstrate understanding of broader cultural context in which a written text is situated:
 - Identify cultural influences: author's background (I.e. geographic location, gender, age, nationality, etc.) (2)(8)

Writing

Learners will be able to do the following in pairs, groups, or individually through reading, analysis, discussion and production activities.

- Summarize and paraphrase a written text: (4)
- Use the writing process to produce texts in target genres (4)(2)
 - Pre-writing: brainstorming, organizing ideas(6)(2)
 - Writing: draft writing, peer/self evaluation, make revisions/proofread (2)(3)(4)(7)
 - Post-writing: self-evaluation/reflection (1)(3)
- Demonstrate understanding of plagiarism and use strategies to avoid plagiarizing task completion: (2)(3)
 - Understand appropriate **APA formatting** (citing sources, making a reference list) (2)
- Use appropriate academic vocabulary in writing (*see course guide for target vocabulary for each unit*) (7)
- Use appropriate academic register in writing (7)(2)
- Use appropriate grammar in writing (*see course guide for target grammar for each unit*) (7)

Classroom Interaction & Communication

Learners will be able to...

- Participate actively in class discussions / activities through group and individual reading and writing analysis, discussion, and practice. (5)(3)

Self-Evaluation

Learners will be able to do the following through individual, pair and group analysis, discussion and production activities.

- Use strategies to reflect on the writing process, vocabulary use, genre understanding, and grammar. (1)(3)
- Use strategies to reflect on accuracy and fluency in writing. (1)(3)
- Use strategies to reflect on reading skills and experience. (1)(3)

Key:

1. Awareness of self as learner
2. Textual awareness and control
3. Criticality and interpretation
4. Textual fluency
5. Interactive capacity
6. Interpretation and expression of multimodal meaning
7. Lexico-grammatical control
8. Intercultural capacity

Appendix C

Structure of the ELI

