

Practicality in the English Communication Course: A systematic review

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Abstract

When a course aims to be practical, it is essential to measure its effectiveness. In the case of foreign language study at university, this will necessarily entail collecting data on a wide range of topics including proficiency gains, the extent to which students take advantage of what the institution offers them, and their post-graduation outcomes such as job-hunting.

Furthermore, investigating practicality requires a focus on the context in which the course operates. Examples of a contextual approach should include an acknowledgement of the composition of the student body, students' aspirations, and their overall satisfaction with the education they receive.

To this end, the English Communication Course at KSU has researched a number of aspects of its performance discretely: from 2011 to summer 2014, the first three authors of the current study produced 47 papers and presentations. Of these, six had direct relevance to the course and its outcomes. Each paper asked about what our students know, do, or achieve as members of the course. As we reach the end of our first four years of collaboration, we bring these elements together in order to form an image of what our course has achieved, and where it might go next.

Key findings of this synthesis are that the number of students applying to join the course has steadily increased, and that a majority of these students had known about the English Communication Course prior to entering the university; course members produce annual gains in proficiency scores; and – importantly – there are strong year-on-year results in terms of post-graduation employment rates. In 2014, for example, 24 Japanese Communication Course

students graduated: 1 entered graduate school; 3 moved abroad to study; and the remainder (83%) started work.

Asked to judge the practical nature of the course as they approached graduation, 90% of 4th grade students stated that their communication skills had improved since joining, that they were satisfied with their post-graduation outcomes, and that they would recommend the course to others.

In order to further improve our course and its results, this year we successfully applied for a 2 year fellowship to more deeply study language students' conceptions of satisfaction, in conjunction to which we are also increasing our focus on what we term goal-focused education.

Key words: *English communication; foreign language education; practicality.*

Introduction

When wishing to present an objective overview of a field or research question, a research synthesis is the tool of choice (Cooper, 2010); such syntheses are commonly used as a matter of course in fields such as psychology and medicine (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009) but were initially developed for education (Glass, 1976) and remain highly important to instruction and its improvement (Petty, 2009; Hattie, 2009). One common form is a meta-analysis, while another is a systematic review (Cumming, 2012). The major difference between these two is that a meta-analysis always seeks to combine quantitative data, while a systematic review may not necessarily do so: in fact, as Littel, Corcoran, and Pillai have noted, "empty" reviews – those that find no data has yet been published on a specific question – are extremely useful in planning interventions and allocating resources (Littel, Corcoran, & Pillai, 2008, p. 2). A second non-statistical use of a systematic review is to summarize past findings and direct future research with the aim of it "yielding a maximum amount of new information." (Cooper, 2010, p. 5). It is this final approach that we wish to take in our current paper; to summarize the enquiries its teachers have made into the course's effectiveness, and to then look to the future.

The course's first foray into examining its effectiveness was published in

2011. We thus start our search from that date, and move forward through time until the summer of 2014. In the time span in question, the first three authors have individually or jointly produced 47 papers and presentations between them. Topics have included successful study abroad programs, syntax, lexis, and academic skills development. Of these, six were relevant to course outcomes. Space limitations preclude us detailing the full search protocols and inclusion criteria, something we aim to remedy in a forthcoming paper in 2015. Interested readers may turn to Cooper's seven step approach to effectively collecting data (Cooper, 2010), or see Table 1, below.

Defining practicality is not easy: Howatt and Widdowson (2004) take about 70 pages to discuss its forms and implications; Swan suggests that it is best connected to cost, with classes conceived of as being a purchasable product (Swan, 2012, p. 67). For a discussion of operational definitions, see Borenstein, et al. (2009, p. 379-381). In this paper, we have considered practicality through its opposite: it is clearly impractical if students do not know about the course, what KSU can offer in terms of studying abroad, and if they do not attempt to benefit from their education. Thus, a practical education is one that is beneficial to its participants: students benefit when they have clear and timely information about the choices they have with regard to course selection, they benefit when they take appropriate actions, and they benefit if they put themselves in a better position with regard to their future. We could hypothesize that course knowledge leads to action, and thus to superior outcomes; forthcoming enquiries into course results may profit from studying where practicality, effectiveness, and benefit intersect.

As can be seen from the topics researched over the 3.5 years, we have focused on practicality in three domains: student awareness, student activities, and measurable student outcomes; in effect, what students know, do, and achieve while within the course. In some cases these topics were studied with more than one cohort, or were conducted longitudinally, thus providing a degree of assurance that data were not unrepresentative (Kakimoto et al., 2013). Table 1 provides a reference for which domains were included in each of the six works.

As can be seen from Table 1, course instructors have tried to capture what it

Table 1

Three Research Domains as Represented in Papers Meeting Inclusion Criteria

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Domain</u>		
	<u>Awareness</u>	<u>Activities</u>	<u>Outcomes</u>
1. Test scores			○
2. Study abroad opportunities	○		
3. Female students	○	○	○
4. Curriculum development	○	○	○
5. Student satisfaction		○	○
6. Student satisfaction	○	○	○

Note: Inclusion criteria = published since 2011; focused on course outcomes; no grey / fugitive literature.

is that students know about the educational opportunities on offer to them, the extent to which they engage with these opportunities and the outcomes that result from taking them. A majority of papers sought to understand more than one domain, and the themes pursued cover a broad range of the academic and experiential situations of relevance to foreign language learners.

Starting with awareness, then, Japanese students consistently report having heard of the English Communication Course at KSU while still in high school. Three studies found that 70 – 90% of Japanese applicants were aware of the course's existence prior to entering the department. In addition to this, the number of applicants has increased in a linear fashion since the course started, from 19 in 2009 to 39 in 2014. Both male and female students are very knowledgeable about both the course's offerings, and other university-sponsored programs such as job-training. 50% of female students reported an interest in Domestic Job-training, 65% in International Job-training, and 93% in the department's study abroad program (Carter et al., 2013, p. 75).

How well awareness translates into action is not easy to study; however, as a course we try to track what students say they want to do in comparison to what actually happens. To date, approximately 30% of the International Job-training students studying in Australia each year come from the English Communication Course (Carter et al., 2014b). Furthermore, in 2013 90% of 3rd grade female students took part in goal-focused activities such as a KSU sponsored internship, one of the varieties of Job-training, or the exchange program (Carter et al., 2013, pp. 77-78), which closely matches their self-

reported awareness of, and interest in such programs. As such, the students can be seen as very much invested in their own educations. If this is true, and if there is a constructive alignment between their actions and their outcomes, it should hold that Communication Course students' results are worth investigating.

Reporting of the students' outcomes take two main forms: test scores and job-hunting results. Since 2014, we have begun to report on their post-graduation goals more widely as a number of other options interest our students, such as continuing their education or moving abroad for personal or professional reasons. In terms of goal-achievement, the graduating class of 2014 has done well. 24 Japanese students graduated: one entered graduated school in Japan; one embarked on a working holiday; 2 moved abroad to study; the remaining 20 all entered the workforce. Based on discussions with them, it would appear that each achieved his or her first choice of goal. Table

Table 2

4th grade students' post-graduation outcomes

<u>Outcome</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>%</u>
Graduate school	1	4
Working holiday	1	4
School abroad	2	8
Found work	20	83

Note: N=24.

2 shows the percentages of students' post-graduation outcomes.

An earlier study of females at four different time points showed a similar pattern (Carter et al., 2013) in that 85% of graduating students entered the workforce: at the time that paper was published the national average for female students finding work was 75.6% (p. 78). Thus, it appears that female students, who comprise a majority of our members, are in a strong position when it comes to securing work or pursuing other goals as they graduate.

The same study also featured female students' test scores. With regard to the TOEIC test, in their 2nd grade (in other words, their first year in our course), female students improved from an average of 395 to an average of 537 from April to January, a gain in excess of 140 points. An earlier study focused on

the other test KSU commonly uses, the TOEIC Bridge. Second grade students ($N = 16$) taking this test moved from an average of 132.88 to 151.13, a positive change of 18.25 points (Kakimoto et al., 2013). As such, then, data over time suggest that students entering the course will make major gains as measured by proficiency tests. Figures 1 and 2 show a graphical representation of the students' test score gains.

One less traditional outcome that we recently began to investigate is the question of whether students are satisfied with their education as course

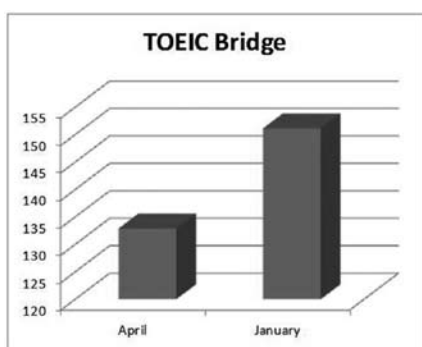


Figure 1.

2nd grade TOEIC Bridge score increase.

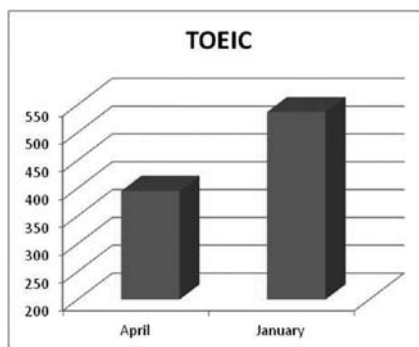


Figure 2.

2nd grade TOEIC score increase.

members (Carter et al., 2014a; 2014b). 9 out of 10 students stated that they believed the course had improved their communication skills (Carter et al., 2014a, p. 60). Qualitative data from our work into student satisfaction suggests that there may be a virtuous circle in which satisfied students produce better results, which in turn increases their satisfaction. This “happy-productive” model has been extensively investigated in employment situations, and has been applied to first language education (Cotton, Dollard, & de Jonge, 2002); our results suggest that it may additionally hold true for foreign language learning at university.

Overall, student outcomes in the course are measurable, appear to be connected to the opportunities KSU provides them, and, increasingly, are backed by theoretical underpinnings. It is in connecting theory with actual practice that we believe new knowledge aids us most as we seek to further improve our course's effect on student satisfaction and its impact on their

ability to reach their goals.

Conclusion

We made the claim that a practical education is one that leads to benefits for the learners. Furthermore, three potentially beneficial domains have been researched in some depth; course awareness, students' activities as they pertain to language or career development, and measurable outcomes. If these three are aligned, students may have an easier time of reaching their goals both during their time in the course, and after they graduate.

Analysis of six co-authored works showed that the following areas had been researched discretely with one or more of our cohorts: the extent of the course's penetration into students' awareness while still at high school; the extent of 1st grade students' awareness of study abroad opportunities offered by the department and by KSU; the extent to which students' standardized test scores increase as they progress through the course; the extent to which female students actively participate in their own education; the extent to which male and female students successfully conclude their job-hunting activities; the extent to which students successfully reach their post-graduation goals; and, the extent to which students are satisfied with their education over their three years as course members.

As suggested by the "happy-productive" model, students whose educational opportunities afford them the chance to create satisfying work will psychologically be in a better position to successfully define and pursue meaningful pre- and post-graduation goals. As course instructors, one challenge for us is to create these opportunities; and a second is to continue working on improving our understanding of such goal-focused education and its links with student satisfaction.

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(*) denote studies used in the review.