

Some Reflections on the New Communicative Course

A First Step Towards Revolutionizing English Education ?

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The initial reaction by both staff and students to the new Communicative Course has been very positive. Staff comments indicate that attendance was much better than in Eigo II classes, motivation higher, and test results better. In the questionnaire administered to the students, an overall approval rating of 80% was achieved, and more than 50% of students indicated their interest in English had increased.

Key factors are probably class size, frequency of class and a higher level of expectation on the part of both teachers and students.

The first allows the teacher to keep the students more involved, to hold their attention better, and to give more individual help, allows more time for participation by individual students in whole-class activities, and permits a closer relationship between both staff and student and student and class, which creates an atmosphere more conducive to conversation and self-expression. It was quite noticeable that students got to know other students, and many of them became friends. In larger classes, it is quite evident that students do not know many of the other students in the class, and thus frequently have much less interest in communicating. Social cohesiveness may be an important factor in a communicative course in which language should ideally be used not just as a subject that has to be mastered, but as a medium for creating and managing human relations. Such an environment has been touted as essential for the development of communicative competence by many recent researchers. The ritual uses of discourse, an essential element in any "real life" communication, for example the negotiation of one's role in a group, can perhaps only develop within an appropriate social environment. The Communicative Course classes came much closer to providing such an environment than Eigo II classes have been able to

do.

Holding the class twice a week enabled a certain momentum to be built, that is students did not forget to the same extent what had been learnt before, because the interval between classes was shorter, and it was not necessary to spend so much time repeating and reviewing. With such a small class, it was possible to give regular homework, which could be used not only to consolidate what had been learnt, but as preparation for the following class. The teacher could check homework effectively and rapidly, allowing students to review in detail the accuracy of their grammar and appropriateness of their expression. Preparatory homework leads to more effective use of class time for actual practice using the language. In larger Eigo II classes preparatory work usually has to be done in class time, something that very much slows the progress of the class, and is uneconomical in terms of use of the teacher's time. However, of the students, only about 50% thought that having class twice a week was advantageous.

Although there was some variation on the students' side in relation to expectations, in the writer's class, the Intermediate Class, a class for which students had self-selected themselves, the expectation of students was higher on average than for Eigo II. In the questionnaire, over half the students said they had a strong desire to speak in the class and had made efforts to do so, just under half said they came well prepared, and close to 60% said their interest in English had increased during the class.

Despite the clear advantages of this type of course, as might be expected with a pilot program, there were many aspects that needed further thought and investigation.

The text book was one of the most obvious points of dissatisfaction both from the point of view of the students, only about 30% found it interesting, and to some extent from that of the teachers, even though they themselves had chosen it. Like the majority of books published abroad, it was designed for "general students", who, typically, are not perceived by writers as having the same needs, strengths or weaknesses as Japanese students. This means that the

balance of activities, the level of activeness expected of the student, and the grading of the different types of exercise are often not the most appropriate. For example, the warm-up exercises may demand that students express their opinion about some controversial topic, something Japanese are typically loath or not able to do even after they are warmed up, or the listening passage may be too fast and include a marked local accent, which puts it beyond the comprehension of Japanese students, for many of whom listening is a particular weakness. Conversely, the grammar exercises will often be too simple for Japanese, who typically are stronger than average in this area, or focus on problems that are not significant for students here, while omitting those that are. Even though some foreign publishers and, of course, domestic produce texts specifically for the Japanese student, it is very difficult to find a text that really fits the requirements of a communicative course, particularly for our class size, which, from the point of view of foreign course designers, who may have language schools in mind, and be thinking of a class size of 10 students or so, is rather large. Thus group and pair work still constitute major class activity types. There is a need for materials that most efficiently address the needs of Japanese students, with their unique English language background and the particular bias of the culture, in largish classes.

Many students said they wished for a smaller class, and a class size of 28, or in the case of the Intermediate class 31, severely restricts the amount of time individual students can speak with the teacher, and makes whole class discussion relatively ineffective.

As a result of the problems mentioned in the preceding paragraph, teachers are inclined to use the content of textbooks selectively, and to supplement them with a wide variety of materials and exercises considered appropriate for local conditions. This means that the actual course content may vary considerably from class to class, even though the text is unified, and this was reflected in the difficulty experienced in deciding the exact contents of the final unified test. Two solutions might be considered. One is to employ a third party test, of a relatively objective nature, designed to measure communicative competence in general, rather than progress over a particular curriculum. Another is to develop materials that are both more suited to the course requirements and to the

students, preferably with the cooperation and contribution of as many of the teachers involved as possible. It is perhaps too much to try and develop a whole text, but there is plenty of potential for developing good supplementary materials, and the sharing of such materials and ideas should be a central aim of the meetings of the teachers of this course. A library, or resource room, where such materials can be kept for copying, and which is available to all teachers of that course, should be developed, and in the case of the text being unified, would be likely to be very useful to all teachers. This would enable a more unified curriculum to be actually implemented and tested. However, the danger of teachers being compelled to work against their inclination or instincts has to be carefully guarded against. It is the experience of this writer that unified courses that are imposed without obtaining the real and full cooperation of those who actually do the teaching, tend to fare poorly and disintegrate over a period of time. On the other hand, where teachers have an organization that is responsive to their suggestions, and where good ideas are shared, they tend to become more highly motivated towards achieving success with the courses they teach.

A related difficulty is the clarifying of the real objectives of a “communicative course”. While the general aim may appear obvious, the actual implementation, with definition of goals at the level of each 90-minute class, or for so many hours, is much more difficult. That the objectives are not clear is made apparent by the fact that less than 50% of students said they understood what the class objectives were. This may be inevitable where skills, for example listening, are being developed through work with text of which the content is less important than the activity based on it, which may be designed to encourage learners to develop, for example, listening for gist. This lack of clarity may be the greater in the case of students for whom the study of language has, in preparing for university exams, been very purposeful and aimed at the mastering of discrete points of grammar, items of vocabulary, or spelling, where the aims are quite clear. The approach of foreign textbooks, and to some extent foreign teachers, to language learning is often far removed from that with which they have been familiar.

To deal with this problem, it may be motivating and helpful to students to give them some orientation as to what the course aims to do, how it will be apprao-

ched, and what strategies they could employ to best avail themselves of this environment, which is new to them and places expectations on them as students which at first may seem threatening or difficult to deal with. It could also be helpful to get students to make clear their own motivations so that these can be more effectively responded to in class style and content. Many of them have only the most general of goals, for example they wish to communicate with people from other countries, but have not thought about what concrete steps they might need to take, nor what sub-goals or targets they might set themselves towards the achieving of their aim. In ESL literature, these steps are described as “metacognitive strategies” and are closely associated with successful learning.

Simply put, it means we would help our students both clarify and develop their own objectives, which, along with orientation about how to approach the communicative course, would be a step towards getting the students more focussed, directed, involved and prepared.

The degree of difficulty experienced in adjusting to this type of class is often related to previous experience. Within one class there were experiences ranging from having lived abroad for several years, attending international school and graduating from college abroad to having never had a foreign teacher or been outside Japan. Although there is not always an exact correlation between such experience and ability to communicate in English, in the case of these classes, where students entered either the lower or intermediate class according to their wish, the differences were very great. This presented real problems. For example, there were students who could understand 70-80% of a regular CNN news story after a couple of listenings, while others struggled with fairly simple shopping dialogues on the textbook tape. This meant it was very difficult to keep both ends of the spectrum interested because the concept of a unified curriculum forbade allowing students to do completely different work, and allowing widely different activities also threatens to break up the social cohesion of the class, which, for reasons adduced above, may be important in creating a suitable classroom environment. A need for some kind of placement test is suggested to avoid extreme imbalance, and even a certain degree of flexibility in course contents to accommodate degrees of ability. While placement procedures should assess ability, it does also seem reasonable to have some mechanism for students' wishes and motivation to be taken into account. A

sensible appreciation of these factors should largely solve the problem mentioned above.

Such reflections raise the question as to what advantages are to be gained from a unified curriculum in relation to a communicative course. The idea had obvious appeal, but communication style and the motivation to communicate are both very individual matters not, perhaps, able to develop within a tightly defined or imposed framework. The most frequent request made by students was for more opportunity to just talk, and the exercises which provided them with the opportunity and motivation to do that were the most popular. Role play, discussion and conversation exercises received much more positive ratings than textbook and grammar exercises. Listening too was very popular. The difficulty is how to unify the content of a skills curriculum, and how to measure the skills which are developed by exercises of this type in an objective way, particularly speaking.

Towards the latter aim, an interview test was given twice, once in the summer, once at the end of the year, to all students in the communicative course. This proved very motivating for the students, but extremely time consuming and very difficult to grade in a unified way, since teachers were forced to grade individually without any clear standardization. The value of such a test as a motivator seemed clear, but objective grading of the performance would require training and preparation by the teachers. Objective evaluation of the ability to communicate is likely to be extremely difficult, but the attempt to do so has the advantage of forcing clarification of suitable criteria and thus helps to define objectives. It may be that other criteria than testing of achievement, for example amount of work done, attendance and participation will be considered more important by some, but a suitable evaluation of what competency a student actually possesses, is also required.

The questionnaire made students evaluate their progress in various aspects of language competency half way through the course. Just over 40% felt their listening and speaking skills had improved, and approximately 30% felt their pronunciation was better. In terms of writing, about 30% felt they had improved, in terms of reading about 12%, and in terms of grammar about 15%. Although

results of a final questionnaire are not available, it is likely that this figure would be considerably higher at the end of the year.

Although there were many advantages, as listed earlier, at least from the teacher's point of view, in the more intensive study allowed by a twice weekly course, there were also potential disadvantages and matters that need more thorough inquiry.

Meeting students twice a week, if a good relationship is built up, which in general seems to have been the case, allows more natural conversation to develop with the closer relationship. However, it also can put a strain on those who find themselves unhappy in the class or indifferent, the latter still being quite a large number, and could do the same for the teacher. The term system could ensure that this possible danger is avoided, but at the same time, it may cancel out any advantages that may accrue from building up good relations. In an ideal situation, it might well be advisable to allow students the option of expressing a preference for staying with the same teacher or group. As mentioned before, in the case of communicative skills, the social interaction in the classroom may be more important than in other types of course.

A matter that needs more investigation is whether intensive courses really produce better results in all types of language course and over the full period of the students' university life. Several questions could be more scientifically investigated. The following questions suggest themselves. Does having a course twice a week lead to double the improvement or more or less than that? If we compared students who had studied for two years twice a week with those who had studied for one year four times a week, what kinds of difference would we find? If, at the time of graduation, we tested the English ability of students who had studied intensively for a short time with those who had studied at a more leisurely pace over a longer time, who would perform better? At what point in their university career do we wish students to reach a peak of language ability? Language is habitual and grows rusty with lack of use. These questions are important in relation to society's view of graduates from the university.

One more matter that needs to be urgently addressed is that of how students

who do make great progress in communicative ability in the first year will be able to enhance or use that ability during the remaining three years of their student life. The value of the initial boost to ability is likely to be greatly enhanced if suitable channels for further development are provided, such as content courses in English within the student's specialty. The reduction of the total number of English classes, particularly in some departments, seems to have the potential to undo whatever advantages may be gained by the new curriculum, and appears to run contradictory to the generally stated aims of trying to raise the general English ability of students. No one would argue with the concept that more, not less time is needed to develop language skills. The design and implementation of a new English curriculum is directly affected by these major policy decisions, and they impinge directly on the purposes and aims of teachers in the classroom. At the moment it would appear that the future does not offer a great deal to students who have undergone intensive English study in the first year, except for a small number who will continue in special classes. This may reduce the motivation of the first year students, and one wonders what will have become of their skills three years down the road.

An option that this writer would like to strongly propose is the setting up of a self-access study center. Such centers, if well-equipped with multimedia computers can enhance students involvement with the language, and are, once set up, cheap to operate. The attractiveness of such centers for students can be appreciated by nothing the heavy use made of the computer center outside classroom time, or of the video booths at Niiza. Good use of such a facility would help solve problems of classroom space and scheduling, and allow students to continue their language studies into the third and fourth years. They would be particularly effective for improving listening skills, an essential component of communicative competence. On a more mundane note, the facilities at the Ikebukuro campus are less than ideal for the purposes of language teaching, whether in terms of classroom layout or audio-visual facilities, and this may detract from the effectiveness or attractiveness of communicative course classes, especially as the program becomes larger and more classrooms have to be used. In view of the time lag involved, it might be a good idea to take measures at once to assess what facilities are really necessary, and draw up a plan to make the needed improvements. Failure to do so may imply to staff that

there is less than full commitment to improving language education.

The place of the Communicative Course within the whole curriculum needs to be clarified, as do the expectations that are held of it. In a limited sense, the course has made a very good start, and won the approval of both students and teachers. Long term success may depend on how well some of the issues raised are addressed.

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**Making More of Students' Motivation
to Learn English**

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Having taught at Rikkyo University for six years, I have long felt that students in regular English 2 classes were not being given an adequate opportunity to develop their potential as English speakers, for two main reasons: classes meet only once a week, and enrollments are too large. Class sizes of 50-60 students may be suitable for lecture classes, but not for English conversation which, to be taught well, requires the active participation of each student. This was brought home to me by the occasional English 2 classes I had with 30-40 students, as well as by my free-elective colloquial English classes, also with small enrollments. The level of attention and cooperation among students in these classes was higher, and instruction was more effective as a result.

As a teacher of the pilot communicative course this past year, I am even more convinced that simple logistical changes have a big influence on what happens in the classroom. The two major changes are class sizes of 30-34 students and twice-weekly meetings. Among other things, these changes tell students that their class--and the subject, English communication--matters. As a result, students try harder and make more progress.

From the teacher's standpoint, meeting a smaller number of students twice a week allows a greater sense of familiarity and involvement. I was able, for