The Process of Updating the Bunkyo Gakuin University 1st and 2nd Year English Curriculum Stage 2: Moving Forward

Wendy M. Gough＊• James Broadbridge＊＊•
Takako Moroi＊＊＊• Koichiro Asa＊＊＊＊

Abstract

At the outset of the 2021 academic year, the English Skills Curriculum Team at Bunkyo Gakuin University was established to review the first and second-year English language program and revise the curriculum with the aim of improving student motivation and helping students of all language abilities attain satisfactory learning outcomes. English Skills coordinators, Skills teachers, and students were surveyed in the summer and early fall of the 2021 academic year. Then after presenting the survey results to faculty at an in-house faculty development session in January 2022, the remaining professors within the department were surveyed to find out their views of the strong and weak points of the current English Skills curriculum. This paper reports the results of the stakeholder needs analysis, which points to a need to move away from the department's required TOEIC graduation score, focus more on learner needs, and design courses that connect the goals and objectives of the department, the individual classes, the instructional strategies employed, and the means of assessment to achieve curriculum alignment.

Introduction

In the 2021 academic year (AY), the Curriculum Team (CT) was established with the goal of reviewing the first- and second-year curriculum in the Bunkyo Gakuin University (BGU) Faculty of Foreign Studies English language program. The aim was to improve student motivation and language learning outcomes. A major influence on the decision to implement this reform was to achieve curriculum alignment with the English language program. While there are ample

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＊ Associate Professor／Education: Curriculum and Teaching
＊＊ Associate Professor／TESOL
＊＊＊ Assistant Professor／Educational Psychology and Technology, Instructional Design
＊＊＊＊ Associate Professor／CALL

opportunities for students to learn English within the program, there was a need to help students understand how various courses fit together. When goals, instructions, and assessments are aligned, students easily understand the relevance of their courses and see how they help achieve their language goals.

A multi-year review was begun in AY2021 to analyze the current classes and devise a plan to enhance learning experiences for all BGU students in the Faculty of Foreign Studies, including high and low achievers. AY2021 was spent carrying out a needs analysis of the program, which involved collecting data in the form of surveys given to key stakeholders (current 1st and 2nd year students, part-time faculty who teach the English Skills classes, and English Skills program coordinators), as well as an examination of TOEIC data taken from the past ten years. This paper should be read as a follow-up to Moroi et al. (2021), which provides a full description of the formation of the CT, an overview of the project, the process of conducting the needs analysis, rationale for decisions made during this process, and description of the methods used to conduct the analysis. The findings detailed in this paper were also reported to the department in a Faculty Development session on January 12, 2022. This paper examines the results of the data collected through the needs analysis process and discusses what this means for the English Skills Program. It then highlights areas that require focus in the future reforms of the first- and second-year English Skills Program.

Needs Analysis Results Summary

First and Second Year Student Questionnaires: Perceptions of the English Skills Program

In order to analyze the current state of the language program, opinions of a number of stakeholders were collected through questionnaires, and previous cohorts' test data were examined. The aims of the student questionnaire were threefold. The first aim looked to ascertain views of participants' current and future desired English levels. The second aim was to examine participants' views of the effectiveness of the current first and second-year English Skills program, and their satisfaction with it. The final aim of the students' questionnaire was to discover learners' motivation and attitude towards their English classes within the Faculty of Foreign Studies. To this end, the MUSIC model of academic motivation (Jones, 2018) was used to collect and analyze data from students so the CT could better understand what motivates them and how well the program helps maintain their motivation. The MUSIC model of academic motivation is a research-based model used to identify problems that thwart motivation and intentionally design a positive and motivating learning environment (Jones, 2018). Due to constraints of length, this paper will examine the first two aims and results from the MUSIC model will be examined in a future paper.

Current and Future English Level

Students' current and future desired English level was ascertained by introducing participants to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). We adapted the Japanese version developed by the British Council (British Council, n.d.) and added descriptions of more specific skills to each level. It was given to students participating in the study. They were then asked to choose their current level of English ability and the level they wish to achieve upon graduation. Results can be seen in Table 1 with numbers corresponding to the CEFR level, A1 being equal to 1, C2 equal to 6. Results show that participants see their current level as being equivalent to CEFR A2 for both first and second-year participants, but second-year participants rated their language ability higher than first-year students (2.50 compared with 2.25). Participants show a strong desire to improve their English level across both groups, with their collective goal being to achieve a high CEFR B2 level. First-year participants have a slightly higher aim (4.95) than second-year participants (4.72), but both are still in the high CEFR B2 range. One point of note when examining these figures is the lower response rate from second-year students with just 121 responses by second-year students compared with 163 responses from first-year students. The methods used to collect data were reliant upon many factors such as cooperation from the university's teaching body, therefore it is impossible to say that this fall in the number of responses is a sign of a fall in motivation or investment in the program and language ability, but it is one that cannot be discounted and should be noted.

Table 1. Current and Future English Level

	Current level	Desired level at graduation	Desired increase
1st Year (n=163)	2.25	4.95	2.67
2nd Year (n=121)	2.50	4.72	2.25
Total (n=284)	2.36	4.83	2.49

Effectiveness and Satisfaction

In order to discover student views on the effectiveness of the English Skills program, participants were asked the question: *Do you think the course was effective?* This question was asked for each of the four key required courses in the program: Reading, Writing, Integrated Skills (IS, a basic English grammar and vocabulary course), and Communicative English, using a 6-point Likert scale where 1 meant *I don't think so at all*, and 6 meant *I strongly think so.* In a similar fashion, in order to discover student satisfaction with the individual courses, students were asked to respond in a similar way to the question: *Are you satisfied with the course?*

Average scores of answers to the two questions from each individual course can be

seen in Tables 2 and 3. In terms of effectiveness, the average for all courses in both the first and second year was positive. First-year courses saw little range in views, but second-year courses were found to differ slightly in that participants found the Reading course to be most effective (5.18) and the Writing course the least effective (4.08). In terms of student satisfaction, once again, first-year courses were viewed similarly with little variance among the four courses (Reading 1a received the highest response with 4.68 and Integrated Skills received the lowest with 4.50). Again, the second-year classes had a wider range of scores with Reading 2a being rated highest for satisfaction at 4.96 and Writing the lowest (3.92). This satisfaction score for Writing was the only score that averaged negatively.

Table 2. Effectiveness of the English Skills Program

	1st Year, Spring Semester	2nd Year, Spring Semester	Total
Reading	4.68	5.18	4.89
Writing	4.64	4.08	4.39
Integrated Skills	4.67	4.24	4.51
Communicative English	4.61	4.59	4.60

Table 3. Satisfaction with the Current English Skills Program

	1st Year, Spring Semester	2nd Year, Spring Semester	Total
Reading	4.68	4.96	4.80
Writing	4.52	3.92	4.25
Integrated Skills	4.50	4.24	4.40
Communicative English	4.53	4.59	4.55

Skills Coordinator and Teacher Surveys

The English Skills coordinator and teacher online surveys were administered in July and August, 2021. The coordinators and teachers were asked to evaluate the current class design including textbooks, class activities and assessment tools, support from the Skills coordinators, and their overall perception of the effectiveness of the courses. The Skills course syllabi were also evaluated and compared with the survey data as a means to try to understand the broader picture of what occurs in the BGU Faculty of Foreign Studies English Skills courses.

Faculty of Foreign Studies Professor Survey

English Skills courses are only part of the overall curriculum in the BGU Faculty of Foreign Studies, and all of the professors in the department are vital stakeholders in the curriculum.

Therefore, the CT felt it was important to understand their points of view on the issues or themes resulting from the preliminary English curriculum evaluation. Therefore, in January, 2022 the CT led a faculty development session that explained the status of the curriculum evaluation based on the timeline devised in the spring semester of 2021, when the team began the project and the results of the first stages of the evaluation. Following the presentation of our findings, professors in the department were asked to answer a survey to tell us their concerns and opinions of the topics presented. Eleven professors responded to the survey, giving their thoughts and opinions on the current TOEIC 500 graduation requirements, the use of the *Eigoshikaku Koza* course that gives low-performing students, who cannot reach the TOEIC 500 goal, a back-door entry to graduation, desired learning outcomes related to The Diploma Policies 1 (the ability to actively participate in international society in English) and 3 (the ability to cooperate with people from different cultural backgrounds based on an understanding of the diversity in culture and society), ideas about how to help students develop learner identity in general as well as English language learner identity, and ideas for new courses. The feedback is summarized in the Appendix.

Data Analysis

Student, TOEIC, Skills Teacher, and Coordinator Data

Students. It appears that the current cohort of students feel their courses are engaging and are motivated to study English. The data from our surveys suggest that the students are aware of their current level of English and have a desire to improve within their time at the university. They aim high with the achievable goal of becoming a high CEFR B2 (upper intermediate) English user. Overall, participants rated their English Skills classes positively in terms of effectiveness and satisfaction. These points are key, but we also feel that student perceptions are not always useful for predicting the quality of education, especially considering the issues related to the relatively high percentage of students who have difficulty achieving the required TOEIC 500 graduation score.

TOEIC issues. The failure of a number of students to reach the TOEIC 500 graduation requirement is a significant issue within the department and university because one possible implication is that there are elements of the current curriculum that are not effective in meeting the desired course outcomes of the program. It appears that the TOEIC graduation requirement can act both as a barrier to success and as an endpoint to many students' English education during their years at university. Students seem to be motivated to achieve 500 on the TOEIC, but while this number is intended to be a minimum requirement from which students are expected to push on, it can also be perceived by students to be an endpoint. The TOEIC issues show a need to reform the curriculum to better meet student learning needs, improve learning outcomes, and

maintain motivation to continue studying. Incentives have been built into the program related to achievement on the TOEIC test, such as small cash prizes for individuals who have increased their score by 150 points or more over an academic year, and more substantial cash prizes for obtaining a score of 800 and 900. However, for those learners who start with a low language level at entry, these figures may remain out of reach and act more as a demonstration of the impossibility of improvement rather than spur them to study more.

Skills teacher surveys. Analysis of the Skills teacher survey responses shows that teachers in the program work enthusiastically to encourage our students and teach engaging lessons using innovative activities. The teachers and coordinators also felt sufficient levels of support within the program and generally agreed that the class contents and materials were suitable for BGU students. At the same time, some Skills teachers noted a lack of teacher training for the English Skills courses. This is possibly due to the recent changes in coordinator roles combined with stable teaching staff and the lack of physical contact due to the COVID-19 Pandemic pushing many teachers online. Before the pandemic, the coordinators of the Skills courses hold meetings with the teachers they supervise at the beginning or end of each semester and made themselves available to meet with teachers, discuss class activities, advise teachers on teaching and evaluation strategies, and help troubleshoot problems that arise in classes. There were fewer opportunities to consult with coordinators during the pandemic, so it may simply be a lack of familiarity with the coordinators' expectations that has driven these comments.

From the program perspective, there does not seem to exist a system in this school for evaluating teachers or holding them accountable for what occurs in their classes unless a student complaint is received. In this context, the types of activities utilized and the amount of English used in the classes vary greatly depending on the teacher. Evaluation methods are also not standardized, which might cause confusion for students because they could have difficulty understanding the expectations of their teachers or English explanations of said expectations. Thus, while we continue to strongly encourage teachers to teach each class to the best of their ability and to bring in their own particular knowledge and experience, there appears to be scope for better coordination of courses, and teacher training needs to take place in an effort to ensure more consistent assessment and learning outcomes.

Coordinator surveys. Another issue that was noted in the coordinator and teacher survey and syllabus analysis is that while each course within the English Skills Program has unified syllabi, there is scope for improving these syllabi to clarify goals and objectives, highlight learner outcomes, and make a more unified approach across the whole program. Currently, as a whole, it is clear that changes have been made to specific courses over time by different coordinators that have supervised the Skills courses, which has led to a lack of focus and direction from a program

perspective. The current syllabi outline desired outcomes, such as the reading and IS class syllabi, including weekly topics or textbook activities, other syllabi are quite open to interpretation by the teachers. For example, the writing class syllabi list the types of essays students are expected to learn, but they do not outline how or when feedback will be given to students or how their essays will be assessed. This leads to differences in the amount of homework as well as the amount of feedback that is given to students. For example, one teacher might follow a strict process-writing teaching method with students completing multiple drafts and receiving written feedback at each stage. Another teacher might focus more on group work, peer-reviewing, and less structured writing such as journals. Similarly, the reading and Communicative English course class goals and objectives are unclear, leading teachers to have only a vague understanding of the desired learning outcomes and the best way to achieve them.

A lack of unity across the Skills classes could be problematic as students might not be able to see how the contents of each course interconnect with other English Skills courses or how they relate to their goal of improving their language ability and the department graduation requirement of reaching 500 on the TOEIC. Students may also find it difficult to understand the expectations of the Skills classes and how the skills learned in one class can be applied in another. As indicated above, a further issue across the Skills classes is that there is not a consistent policy regarding the amount of the target language (English) to be used in the classroom. The lack of such a policy leads to some teachers teaching primarily in Japanese and others teaching primarily in English. This might lead some students to question why they are studying English in a department of foreign languages if the target language is not the primary language used in the classroom, which could then affect student motivation to learn.

Professor Survey Feedback

Graduation requirement. Feedback from professors in the department provided great insight into their needs and perspective. A number of views were expressed in relation to the TOEIC graduation requirement. The CT agrees that the required score is too low in principle. Students who enter our university have a variety of academic strengths and weaknesses, and some students are not suited to standardized tests such as TOEIC. Because of the difficulty in reaching TOEIC 500, some students do not reach this goal by their third year of university. The requirement also puts stress on those students as well as their seminar teachers when they should be focusing on completing their graduation thesis, fulfilling other graduation requirements, and searching for future work. Thus, we hope to devise an evaluation system such as a digital portfolio (ePortfolio). ePortfolios allow students to carefully select their academic accomplishments, reflect on them, and organize them into a coherent collection of their work (Harver et al., 2019). In our context, it

can be tailored to student strengths, show their overall improvement in English over the course of their four years at BGU, promote learner autonomy and identity, and help maintain motivation to study. At the same time, the portfolio system will ease pressure on students and seminar professors and allow students to focus on their graduation theses in their 4th year.

Other points such as participating in English speaking and writing contests that allow students to showcase their skills, learning about other cultures, learning other languages, using materials suitable for student level, etc. that were noted in the professor survey conducted after the January FD session are already being implemented in the English Skills Program. For example, in the 2021 academic year, the English speech contest restarted after a break due to the COVID pandemic, and the writing contest has continued to be popular among teachers and students for over twenty years. Students also learn about other cultures through taking courses taught by teachers from various countries, visiting the Language Learning Commons (LLC) and Chat Lounge where they can access free materials for studying English, and practice speaking English and other languages they are learning with partners from around the world, and many of our students take a second foreign language. Each English Skills course uses textbooks suitable for students of differing language abilities and the coordinators of these courses either set the textbook for certain level classes or advise the teachers on suitable textbook choices for the level they teach. Likewise, many English language teachers emphasize communicative and cooperative learning through group activities and projects in classes. That said, the CT recognizes these points as valid and plans to take them into consideration as we draft the new curriculum.

Discussion

While the CT was happy to see that students and teachers are generally satisfied with the courses, course materials, and support received from the Skills coordinators, it is clear to the CT that the syllabi need revision. Also, the CT feels a system of teacher training and accountability needs to be implemented as a means to address issues of consistency within each specific English Skill class as well as across the curriculum. Level-specific syllabi need to be designed and skills taught in the classes need to be more unified so that they are repeated and reinforced across the curriculum. This will not only help students improve their English language skills, but it will also help them see how their courses are interconnected and that English is useful in a variety of communicative situations. Introducing clear language levels across the English Skills Program will allow course contents, activities, and evaluation to be better tailored to students' English levels, which will hopefully promote better learning outcomes and increased motivation since the focus would be more directly on student needs and interests. Students would have the opportunity to move up in the class levels, which would act as a reward for studying hard and further motivate

them to improve their English language skills.

Goal structure. Presently, the CT feels BGU Faculty of Foreign Studies students' learning experiences have an excessive focus on *Performance Goals* (i.e., TOEIC scores) with rewards and consequences based on performance. Research tells us that such a focus can lead students not to value the process of learning or putting forth effort because repeated failure leads to learning avoidance (Bong, 2008). A shift to an increased focus on *Mastery Goals*, where students are encouraged to be the best they can be, will lead to increased motivation and positive learning outcomes (Wolters, 2004).

The present curriculum also seems to place a strong emphasis on the students at the top, who can easily achieve graduation requirements, and those at the bottom who receive help to pass the graduation requirements. It seems students in the middle who are not eligible for the cash incentive or for the *Eigoshikaku Koza* course may feel they do not receive the necessary support in comparison to the high and low achievers. This could be demotivating and possibly lead to a reduction of effort and thus a lower chance of success. We feel that there should be equal focus on all students who enter BGU, and a greater effort should be made to help students achieve greater outcomes with our support. These outcomes can be achieved by leveling the classes, aligning the curriculum across the Skills courses, and moving to a graduation portfolio as a capstone project. In this way, students are expected to focus more and would benefit from courses more suited to their particular needs and interests. The student, teacher, and coordinator surveys have given the CT insights into the positive points of the current curriculum as well as room for improvement.

Curriculum alignment. It is our belief that the current program is misaligned. There needs to be a connection between the goals and objectives of the department, the individual classes, the instructional strategies employed, and the means of assessment to achieve curriculum alignment (Wijngaards-de Meji & Merx, 2018). Because we believe the current curriculum is misaligned, it might be difficult for students to understand the purpose of studying, how their English studies are connected to other courses they take within the department, and also how it relates to their futures. By aligning the goals of the English classes with those of the department, students will have a clearer picture of what is expected from them and how to achieve satisfactory outcomes. Aligning instructional strategies amongst the classes will enable instructors to reinforce what students learn in each class by recycling topics, vocabulary, structures, and other aspects of the courses which will help the students realize a connection between what they are studying in their courses and also understand more realistic uses of the language they are learning.

Conclusion

The CT believes motivation needs to be addressed from a learning perspective creating a goal structure suited to individual student needs. Creating a curriculum catering to student needs and the best learning environment possible for all BGU students will lead to a more motivated student body and more successful learning outcomes. Shifting our educational goals away from the TOEIC graduation requirement will help our students experience far more learning success, which will lead to increased motivation and in turn to greater effort and further success. Creating such an environment will help students not only with their English studies but also with all their academic studies and with their future aspirations because students will understand how to set goals, monitor their improvement, and accomplish what they set out to do.

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