

# Tottori University First Year Communication English Program

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## **Introduction**

In April 2003, a new general education English program for all first and second year students was implemented. This was an innovation involving the complete reorganization of all general education English classes. Communication English was introduced for first year students whereby they would take an oral communication class once a week with a native English speaker (Communication English IA and IIA) and a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) class once a week with a Japanese English teacher (Communication English IB and IIB) for two semesters. (N.B. From 2006 on, the oral communication component and the CALL component will become administratively independent.)

This report focuses on the development and current situation of the Communication English IA and IIA courses—oral communication with native English speaking teachers—and reports on data that were collected about the program from teachers and students at the end of the second semester in March 2005. While the original impetus and model for this program draws on the experience of Ehime University in Shikoku, the general approach to designing and organizing the development of this program follows such guidelines as those proposed by Graves (2000) and Nunan (1989b).

## **Defining the Context and Assessing Needs**

The original conceptualization of Communication English IA and IIA was based on a perceived need for greater oral communication ability in English on the part of all students in all four Faculties at Tottori University. This was to be achieved through a large reduction in the number of students per class from around 60 to a range of 25 to 30, and a commensurate increase in the number of such classes that needed to be taught, from around 10 to 45. All teachers were to be native speakers of English. As more and more companies and organizations in Japan scrutinize the TOEIC scores of new graduates who are seeking employment, this new program was accompanied by a policy whereby all students entering Tottori University from 2003 onwards would be required to obtain a minimum TOEIC score of 300 in order to graduate.

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In accordance with current practices in similar programs elsewhere, there was also a clear desire to develop original teaching materials that could be specifically tailored to the needs of the students at Tottori University. These materials were to be developed by the native-speaker teachers who were charged with the responsibility of developing the program.

There were three significant concerns about the viability and effectiveness of the oral component of the Communication English program. First of all, there was a question about whether or not there was too great a range of abilities among the students entering the program that would make it too problematic to have classes that were not streamed according to ability, and thus whether or not it was viable to have only one textbook for all classes. Secondly, there was a question about whether or not it was possible to assign grades within an acceptable range of scores—particularly *within* each faculty—so that students were not excessively “rewarded” or “punished” depending on which teacher’s class they were assigned to. This is not simply an academic question aimed at addressing an abstract notion of fairness—given that a Grade Point Average (GPA) system was also being introduced, this issue has a direct bearing on the final GPA students would take with them when they left Tottori University.

Feedback was sought on these two concerns in order to find out if any changes in the program were necessary and related findings are discussed below. Thus, data were collected over the first two years of the program and more specifically at the end of the second semester of the 2004-05 academic year. This article will report on the findings of this data collection in terms of these issues.

The final issue is not something that anything can be done about within the bounds of the program itself but deserves mention here to provide relevant background information about the program. This had to do with just how much improvement in terms of TOEIC scores could be realistically expected given the approximately 20 hours of classroom contact each semester in the oral communication classes. Although viewpoints vary and individuals vary, one widely accepted estimate is that for students at a TOEIC level of 250, approximately 1 hour of study is needed for every additional TOEIC point of improvement, increasing to 2 hours per point of improvement at the 450 point level and 3 hours for every point of improvement at the 650 point level (<http://www.prolingua.co.jp/toeic.html>). No empirical data was collected to attempt to investigate this third point of concern, apart from some self-report comments from students on the degree of improvement they experienced, which are discussed below.

### **Formulating Objectives and Conceptualizing Content**

The two main stated objectives for the course were:

1. to develop students’ English communication skills
2. to promote students’ international awareness

One of the main factors in determining the objectives of the course had to do with the projected future use of communicative English by students commensurate with Brinton, Snow and Wesche (1989). As discussed above, one such “use” had to do with achieving certain TOEIC scores in order to graduate from Tottori University and meeting the requirements of prospective employers. Another such use was intended to enable students

to discuss their immediate surroundings in terms of the University, Tottori and Japan in general, in English. Whether they would be talking to foreign students, guests or visitors, or potential colleagues from overseas, the hope was that this ability could help students become even better equipped to take advantage of some of the opportunities in their immediate environment to further develop their communicative abilities in English.

The second objective builds on the first, and translates into possible projected needs for using communicative English in an international setting. Although there are a seemingly endless number of possibilities for using English in an international context, a few situations were selected to reflect at least some of the possible situations students and graduates might find themselves in. There was also an attempt to reflect the diversity, in terms of specialization, of the student body at Tottori University in these materials.

In addition to these stated objectives—which are more cognitively-oriented—there was a more affectively-oriented objective—to provide students with the opportunity to see for themselves that they are already capable of carrying out a variety of communicative interactions in English. The aim here was to not only foster greater confidence on the part of students, but also to encourage them to continue to improve their communication skills in English beyond the bounds of this particular course. On the one hand, the course helps students to see the kinds of opportunities that are present in their immediate university environment, and on the other allows them to see the kinds of opportunities that they can seek out for themselves beyond the university, and in some cases beyond Japan. The learning materials for the course were developed with all these objectives in mind.

### **Developing Learning Materials**

It was decided to develop two separate textbooks which would each aim to meet the above objectives, albeit with different foci. The first textbook, “English to the World I” begins with content directly related to students at Tottori University, such as discussing personal information and learning about Tottori University in English. This is followed by other topics such as Jobs, Movies, Places, Science and Technology, and News that also relate to students’ daily lives and immediate interests and concerns. This textbook concludes with lessons that deal with discussing Japan and Japanese-related topics in English, and also the world at large.

The final unit of the first semester textbook also serves as a thematic bridge to the second semester textbook, “English to the World II” which focuses on five separate simulated trips overseas, each taking two class meetings to complete. The first trip goes to England on a home stay (revised in 2005 to be a home stay in Kenya), the second to the US on a study trip, the third to Korea for an Asian Youth Forum (AYF) conference, the fourth to Australia on a working holiday, and the fifth to Renison College in Canada to study English. The final unit involves returning to Tottori with a friend made at Renison College and relates to showing foreign guests or friends around Tottori as well as introducing them to various aspects of life and culture in Japan.

In designing the particular tasks in the textbooks the authors drew on a number of resources, including personal experience with self-developed materials, examples and models in existing EFL textbooks, and an array of materials development and language learning resources such as Brown, (1994); Brown, (2000); Cohen, (1990); Lightbown and

Spada (1988); Nunan (1989a); Nunan (1992); Savignon (1983) and Savignon and Berns (1984).

The two textbooks written for this program have been revised and rewritten at the completion of each semester to further improve them and make them alternately more accessible, challenging and relevant as the feedback from teachers and students suggests. Several teachers have taken part in the further development and rewriting of the materials.

Along with editing and rewriting the textbook, a new classroom CD has been separately recorded and produced using the voices of Communication English teachers as well as some Tottori University students—both domestic and foreign. This provides students with a greater variety of voices and accents and also makes it possible to have students listen to model dialogs.

### **Designing an Assessment Plan**

For assessment, there was a clear desire to have the evaluation activities tied as closely as possible to the pedagogical goals and activities that the course was based on, on the one hand, while on the other, there was a strong desire to have assessment activities that could augment and support these goals and activities by providing students with opportunities that would encourage them to further develop their communicative skills. For the first two years, students were assessed on four basic criteria: participation (also taking attendance and lateness into account), a written assignment, an oral presentation and a final test.

Initially, the final test was a written test that was the same for all first year students, using two different versions. However, the written test as a whole proved problematic as this provided the opportunity for some students to be “overly enthusiastic” in trying to find out what was on the test from other students from other classes on other days who had already taken the test. At times students wrote responses for one version of the test on the other version indicating that they were not responding to the test before them at all, but to answers provided by students who had previously taken and recorded their responses to the alternative version.

For a number of such reasons, the written test was discontinued after the first semester of 2003 and was replaced with an oral interview test, that each teacher developed themselves for their own classes, along the lines of Ehime University, where all grading is the responsibility of individual teachers (Davies, Yanagisawa & Orimoto, 2002). To allow for a 5-6 minute interview test, one-to-one between each teacher and student, it was necessary to hold the interview test over two weeks, with one half of the class taking it the second to last week of the semester and the other half taking it the following final week.

After two years experience with written assignments and oral presentations, it became apparent that in order to provide students with sufficient preparation and practice for these activities, too much class time was being used which was drawing attention away from the interactive communicative goals of the course. Thus, from April 2005, the written assignment and oral presentation were replaced by a one-hour written mid-term test, that includes some listening activities as well. Once again, individual teachers are responsible for developing their own particular mid-term tests, and in this way the earlier problems with a pencil and paper test have been averted.

### **Organizing the Course**

Although there had been oral communication classes available to some students prior to 2003, which were also taught by native speakers, those classes were much larger—often in excess of 60 students—and were planned and organized by the individual teachers responsible for each class. With the new program, it became necessary for teachers to coordinate their teaching and assessment to a greater extent. Given that Communication English A and B were also joint parts of the same course, there was also a need to coordinate the grading of individual students for the A and B components to form their final grade.

A total of 45 classes were organized into 10 different periods each week. As a rule there were 5 classes being taught at the same time, but in some instances there were only 3 or 4 classes. Two new foreign instructor positions were established for two native speaker teachers who each taught a total of 10 classes per week—one of the classes in each of the 10 time-slots—to help existing full-time faculty and part-time staff cover all the new classes.

Students who failed Communication English through insufficient attendance were required to retake the course the following year as well. If they attended sufficient classes, but obtained a final score of less than sixty, then they were required to take a one-week (15 classroom hours) intensive course at the end of each semester.

### **Questions about the Program and Student Feedback**

As noted above, there were two main questions that needed answering. First of all, is the range of communication ability among students so great that the use of one textbook for all students creates an inordinate problem that might require streaming? Secondly, is it possible for teachers to grade students in a reasonably consistent way so that students are not unreasonably advantaged or disadvantaged according to which particular teacher's class they are assigned to—keeping in mind that with small classes of 25 or so there will always be some overall disparity in abilities between different classes even within the same faculty and/or department? Another way of putting this second question is to ask whether or not we can reasonably ensure that with 45 classes all based on essentially the same pedagogical material, there can be an acceptable reduction in the disparity in the grading between teachers that was apparent with some general education English classes prior to 2003.

The following table shows some of the basic data related to the grading in the program to attempt to answer these two questions.

Average score for all 45 C.E.IIA classes	75.2			
Highest average score among the 10 blocks of classes	80.4			
Lowest average score among the 10 blocks of classes	69			
Greatest discrepancy between averages of individual classes among the 10 blocks of classes	74	71	70	61
Least discrepancy between averages of individual classes among the 10 blocks of classes	77	77	77	

The average score of 75.2 for all 45 Communication English classes fits well within the range of 73 to 77 that was mandated as a target range for the program. The highest average score for the five classes that made up one of the 10 blocks of classes was 80.4 while the lowest average for another block was 69. These two particular blocks were from different faculties and this disparity does not appear to be unreflective of the underlying abilities of the students in the various faculties at Tottori University as the average TOEIC scores for first year students from the four faculties at the end of 2004 also indicate:

Faculty of Engineering	369
Faculty of Regional Sciences	396
Faculty of Agriculture	435
Faculty of Medicine	494

Of greater concern is the degree of the differences between individual classes within the same block of classes. On the one hand, in some blocks there was absolutely no difference between the averages in the classes, as seen with the average of 77 for three different classes in one block. Several other blocks were almost as consistent as well. Yet on the other hand there has to be some concern over one class in one block registering an average grade of just 61, while the other classes in the same block had more consistent averages in the low to mid 70s. The teacher for this class did not show a similar tendency in other classes and discussion with this teacher seems to indicate that this particular class exhibited some atypical characteristics that made it hard for the class as a whole to engage in the kinds of learning dynamics that are typical of the other classes in the program. In other words, this appears to be an isolated case and not part of a larger pattern.

At the end of the second semester in February 2005, a selection of students—amounting to almost 20% of all first year students—were asked to fill out anonymous questionnaires in Japanese that asked them for their views on different aspects of the program and themselves. This sample drew on at least one class in each of the 10 blocks and thus it constitutes a convenience sample, rather than a random sample. However, it does appear to have face validity as a representative sample. The results of that feedback are presented in summary form and discussed below.

The language in this textbook was	a. too easy for me.	3.74%
	b. about right.	92.99%
	c. too difficult for me.	3.27%
In this class my English communication skills	a. improved a lot.	3.76%
	b. improved a little.	86.38%
	c. didn't improve.	9.85%

The answer to the first question appears to offer strong support for the notion that students on the whole are neither unduly handicapped nor advantaged by the dual effects of no streaming on the one hand and the use of a single textbook for all classes on the other.

The way the second question was answered is less straightforward. First of all, it is of concern that almost 10% of the student body felt that their English communication skills did not improve. Of course, this is immediately offset by the fact that just over 90% did report some improvement. However, this also needs to be tempered by the observation that almost all of this 90% reported that there was only a little improvement and only slightly less than 4% reported a lot of improvement. Perhaps there were too few choices for students to choose from in the way this question was designed and a fourth choice intermediate between a. and b. may have provided a better indication of just how much students felt their English communication ability improved.

These students also provided feedback on the following items indicating their degree of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale with 5 indicating complete agreement and 1 indicating complete disagreement. The results are reported as mean scores for each item.

I enjoyed the communication style of this course.	3.91
I studied hard in this class.	3.71
I think English will be very important for me in the future.	4.21

From the students' answers to these three questions, it seems reasonable to conclude that students 1. feel very strongly that English will be an important part of their future, 2. saw this class as an enjoyable way to help them prepare for that future (keeping in mind their earlier self-reports on the degree of improvement they experienced) and 3. put a reasonable amount of effort into their learning in the program.

An even smaller sample comprising only three classes, one each from the Faculties of Medicine, Engineering and Agriculture, were asked some additional questions as well, as outlined below.

The level of the class was	a. too high for me to learn well.	9.09%
	b. about right for me.	89.39%
	c. too low for me to learn well.	1.51%
The pace of the class was	a. too fast for me to learn well.	7.57%
	b. about right for me.	90.90%
	c. too slow for me to learn well.	1.51%
The lessons in this class were	a. not challenging enough for me.	10.60%
	b. about right for me.	84.50%
	c. too challenging for me.	4.54%

Although these responses had more to do with the particular teaching/learning dynamics within their particular classroom than teaching materials or course design, they do more or less underscore the observations made above about the level of the language used in the textbook.

Finally, students also indicated the degree of their agreement with these two statements on a 5 point Likert scale similar to the table above.

I really want to be able to speak English well.	4.21
I am more interested in getting a high TOEIC score than being good at communicating in English.	2.86

Once again, it seems reasonable to conclude that students really do want to speak English well, and in fact feel far more strongly about this ability than attaining a high score on TOEIC, recognizing of course that these two interests are far more complementary than mutually exclusive.

In these three classes students were also given the opportunity to write down any feedback they had about the class in either English or Japanese. Many chose not to make any comments, and several took this opportunity to offer “thank yous”, “goodbyes” and other comments to the teacher, (“Outside the class the teacher talked to me and I was happy. It helped to study English.”) but there were others who gave some considered feedback about the class. By far, the most common kind of comment had to do with a renewed sense of interest and intention for continuing their studies in English:

“...I have much time to learn English now. So, I will learn English more actively in the spring vacation.”

“Through this class, I’ve come to think that I wanted to be a good English speaker.”

“I would like to learn more English and about English using country.”

“Even with just ordinary English, I was able to develop my communication ability in English. It’s a useful class.”

“I became not shy to speak English.”

“From now on too, I want to use English actively.”

“This was the only class where I could use English, but if I don’t continue, I won’t be able to talk in English.”

These comments, when taken together, offer some evidence of the affective goals of the program described above, that aimed to encourage just this kind of response, having been met. There were some generally positive comments as well:

“I really don’t like English. But I enjoyed this class very well.”

“There aren’t chance to speak English in daily life. So this class is important for me and fun.”

There were also a few negative comments:

“There were too many vocabulary items in the interview test.”

“The class became monotonous after the second half of the course and I lost the motivation to study.”

“The test was at the same time as the tests for the other classes.”

“I wasn’t keen on talking to others in English in the first period on Monday morning.”



Finally, in many of the classes, teachers asked students if they would be interested in taking a second-year oral communication class in English if it were available and teachers reported that overall a majority of students indicated that they would be interested. Some specifically referred to that in their comments as well, ("I want to take next class in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.") To that end, there is now one advanced oral communication class available for second year students.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions for the Future**

Overall, it seems reasonable to conclude that the program has been largely successful. As noted above, the 20 hours of classroom contact per semester is unlikely to be able to bring about any hugely noticeable improvement in communication ability in English and expectations in that regard need to be realistic. The aims remain to further develop students' communicative ability and raise their international awareness, and as explained above, to give students some kind of vicarious experience of using English in realistic communication to allow them to see that they can indeed function in English at a certain level, and that if they wish, in the future, they could become even more functional in English either in Japan or overseas as their needs determine.

In terms of the future for communication English education at Tottori University, there seem to be two contrasting trends related to emphases on communication English. On the one hand, with the reformation/transformation of the Faculty of Education into the Faculty of Regional Sciences the role of training teachers to teach English and the associated opportunities for students to major in English have become significantly reduced. On the other hand, it is highly significant that the other two faculties at the Koyama campus, the Faculties of Engineering and Agriculture, are showing ever greater interest in advancing the English communication ability of their graduates. In line with this, it seems prudent at this stage to investigate the possibility of making further efforts to expand communication English education beyond the required first year classes in a way that takes into account this shift in emphasis among the faculties at the Koyama campus.

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