

## Current Status and Future Direction of the English Program at Biwako Seikei Sport College

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### Abstract

Biwako Seikei Sport College (BSSC) opened in 2003 with an initial enrollment of 180 students. The current annual intake in 2009 was approximately 330 students encompassing a total student body of about 1050 students. Since 2003 the English program has been loosely structured, enabling academic freedom to the teachers in terms of textbook choice and provision of syllabus. With the introduction of additional English elective courses available to students in the third and fourth year the present lack of cohesion amongst teachers courses are proving to be somewhat problematic in several ways. With twenty-six English classes per semester which include English-I, II, III, and IV it is important that the students receive a unified skills approach to improve their English proficiency. This report aims to highlight the present circumstances, future directions and potential advantages of a coordinated English program at this institution.

Key words : English program, language proficiency, English courses, teachers

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## Introduction

In this globalizing world the significance of English is increasing not only in traditional English speaking countries but also Asian neighbors close to Japan. Presently there is more non-native English speaker communication in the world than native speaker communication and this trend is predicted to continue. With the global nature of sports, the widespread use of English is becoming more important and relevant to the students at BSSC. The prevalent use of the internet for searches in English is significant, considering that approximately eighty percent of all English communication is taking place directly through email. Furthermore the spread of English in Japan has been seen by greater inclusion of English loan-words entering the Japanese language.

In light of this it is necessary to provide students with a structured program targeting the four basic skills as English learning fundamentals for present and future study.

In selecting suitable candidates for this institution, various entrance test procedures are carried out such as interviews, written and physical tests in addition to reported recommendations and scouting for sports members. Therefore the student body comprises a broad cross-section of English proficiency.

As part of Liberal Arts Education students are required to complete a ten credit-point language condition: English I-reading and grammar (4 cp) taught by Japanese and English II- communication (4 cp) taught by native speakers. One yearlong subject is worth four credit-points

and the students must select a language to complete the two final credit-points.

Throughout the several years of English learning prior to university the emphasis has been on 'study' or 'learning' of the English language. It is proposed that a shift from English 'study' to English 'use' would not only aim to improve their communicative ability but also improve confidence, motivation and enable students to incorporate their latent English knowledge to practical usage.

## Current Status

Japanese students' English proficiency is low compared to other countries such as China and Korea where the majority of English classes are taught in English and at an earlier schooling stage than in Japan. English has often been used as a gatekeeper for university entrance and much is centered upon translation, reading and writing tests and knowledge of grammar. As a result the focus on English spoken communication is lacking, especially in the latter years of high school and as a consequence the students have had minimal communication opportunities. In addition, the students lack strong motivation for general academia including English but exhibit a strong passion for their selected sports.

As part of Liberal Arts Education at BSSC, various elective languages are offered such as Korean, Chinese, French, and German in addition to English which is mandatory in first and second year. Both freshman and sophomore students are given an in-house English placement test before the start of semester.

The students' English ability is variable,

with about eighty-five percent of students graded as high beginner and approximately ten percent as low intermediate. In this group there are also students who entered this institution based on high school recommendations for their sports ability and as such were not required to undergo standard testing procedures. In such cases some students have very limited English skills as they were not required to study English in senior high school.

### **English-I**

A total of twenty-six English classes are provided by this institution per semester for English-I, II, III and IV. English-I consists of twelve classes which vary in size between 25-30 students per class. At present the three Japanese English teachers conduct the majority of the English classes in Japanese and provide their own syllabus. Different approaches and target areas are offered by the teachers who also employ different level course textbooks and means of assessment. In 2007 English-I remained a first year subject while English-II was transferred to second year in order to offer English courses to students in all years of study.

### **English-II**

Similar to English-I, English-II consists of twelve classes which vary in size between 25-30 students per class. Currently the four English-II course teachers share a common syllabus but employ various textbooks, supplementary materials and activities. As a result different teachers place differing and variable communicative emphasis on particular themes, content and activities. This creates inconsistency in terms of the means of assessment and resultant

communicative proficiency. The consequence of this has proven to be somewhat problematic for those students electing to undertake English-III and English-IV whereby, due to the smaller class size, the students are not streamed and their discrete skill and overall English competence levels are variable. Furthermore, current scheduling permits students to undertake both English-II and one of either English-III or English-IV concurrently in second year. Therefore these students with comparatively less communicative practice are in the same class as those who have gained further proficiency skills by already completing one year of English-II communication. These abovementioned factors have a significant impact on the course structure, lesson planning and the students involved.

### **English-III and English-IV**

From second year onwards the students may undertake various elective languages and often select English-III and English-IV in order to complete their remaining two credit requirement.

These courses began in 2004 and are offered as content-based communication classes. They provide an integrated approach to learning English as opposed to typical discrete skill (the four skills) language based methods. Attempts have been made to incorporate greater relevance and interest, directed to sport students. This is combined with the use of critical thinking skills and discussion which was implemented not only for present circumstances but also to potentially have a positive impact for the students' future lives in a more holistic sense.

These classes originally focused on discussion topics concerning health and lifestyle issues and sports. Beyond this they have evolved to integrate movement with language, presentation skills, English peer-teaching and demonstrations of sports, and more recently the topic of Ki and a guest presenter for the Alexander Technique workshop lecture. Various topics have provided evidence of improving motivation and enjoyment of English learning, such as yoga and peer-teaching (Jugovic, 2008).

### **Motivation**

Student motivation is a multifaceted and variable problem which is often viewed as a student flaw. When living in a non-English speaking society, students often fail to see the pressing need of English study. The teachers' role in understanding the overall learning environment and fluctuating motivation of the students is equally important, as is the possibility that the teacher can unconsciously have a demotivating effect on the students (Dornyei, 2005). For example, the role of psychological variables regarding individual learner characteristics such as personality, willingness to communicate as a result of the educational culture, learner styles, affect and language aptitude all influence the social English learning process (Jugovic, 2005). The focus on written tests and grammar translation in high school for university entrance tests has created the situation that English is mostly viewed as a necessary subject for study, as opposed to use. According to results reported by Yashima (2000) the major factor is instrumental, referring to career and examinations as the driving force for

Japanese learners of English. Therefore many students have a general reluctance to speak due to low self-confidence.

Stimulating the student's interest with engaging and useful activities can improve motivation (Arnold & Brown 1999). Study abroad programs have also been known to improve the motivation of students to study English. Additionally, activity based "use" of English for practical purposes such as writing emails and letters has a high utility value by being consistent with modern day communication and may serve as a motivating effect.

### **English Needs**

The main purpose of English study for Japanese students in general is for career and examinations. The majority of BSSC students will not require a direct need for English in their respective employment fields. As such most of the needs are centered upon communicating with native and non-native speakers, traveling and understanding cultures of the target language community. The rapid growth of non-native English communication throughout the world and the use of the internet may connect greater numbers of Japanese to the rest of the world. A minor percentage of students targeting graduate school entrance are required to pass an English component entrance test and as such will require specialized English. This need is usually incorporated in seminar classes of their selected majors as an additional study.

It is important for non-English major students to maintain and slightly improve their existing level without the emphasis to overly exceed their perceived capability, in

other words not targeting or placing expectations beyond their reach. In so doing the students can gain communicative confidence. If teachers target an English level which is beyond the students' reach this can have a de-motivating effect in both the short and long term.

### **Summary of Problems**

As outlined, the various inconsistencies amongst the teachers' approaches can adversely impact the English learning success of the students in future elective courses at this institution. The various drawbacks of the current situation implies that prospective teachers have limited knowledge of what content-based topics and emphasis upon discrete skills were covered, in addition to the degree of communicative emphasis that was designated. Ultimately this creates variable discrete skill English competency amongst the students from different classes which places difficulties on the design and potential success of elective non-streamed courses.

### **English proposal**

The aim is to enable the students to attain a higher level of proficiency in all areas of the English language. For the majority of students the first-year and second-year compulsory English courses, consisting of about 90 hours of instruction may be their final formal English learning experience after many years of English study. In light of this, positive and successful English learning experiences are critical for their learning success and potential continuation of English use. This also has a significant bearing on the enrollment numbers in the elective English

classes available to students in second, third and fourth years.

### **English-I**

The first stage of the English curriculum transition is to employ an appropriate and interesting textbook with content that students are willing to communicate about. This would enable students the opportunity of engagement and desire to express their opinions actively as opposed to being typically passive recipients. This can be achieved by providing the language necessary for the weakest student to do the task. Various grammar points could be learned incidentally and implicitly as opposed to typical discrete item teaching.

The benefits of a coordinated approach are numerous. As the teachers would be using the same textbooks they may be more inclined to work collaboratively, discuss pedagogical issues, share supplementary materials, and be encouraged to partake in reflective teaching practices and self-evaluations all of which may benefit staff development and professionalism.

Quality standardization across all the classes in terms of content, assessment and testing could also be implemented in order to ensure a favorable consistency for all students regardless of their level of English. To improve listening skills a greater focus on "teaching English in English" would be highly advantageous. Teachers of the future elective courses would also be familiar with the previous content and grammar taught to students. This would enable further themes and language points to be reviewed, elaborated upon and would also avoid duplication of topic areas.

### English-II

Both English I and English II serve as a foundation for the elective 14 week English-III and IV content-based subjects. By introducing one set textbook for all the classes, improved consistency of English skills and content could be provided. As outlined in English-I above, the advantages of a coordinated approach would also apply to the situation in English-II.

As the first stage of the English program transition takes place and is analyzed, it is possible that the future syllabus contents may incorporate additional methods, topics and approaches. For example, integration and use of CALL-computer activated language learning for teaching discrete skills such as listening and pronunciation and facilitating projects and presentations to promote communication and speaking skills and student motivation.

### English III, IV

The utilization of a coordinated single syllabus for both English-I and English-II could be advantageous for the design and implementation of content for the elective courses. It is envisioned that proficiency would improve, there would be less disparity among the students and as a result, higher level content and communicative opportunities could be successfully implemented. It is anticipated that the students may gain confidence and a greater desire to pursue English.

### Conclusion

As outlined in this report, the English program at this college has been

implemented through stages of academic freedom since 2003. The current English I and II programs as it stands lack cohesion amongst the teachers and as outlined would benefit in numerous ways from a greater coordinated approach. The improvement of teacher professionalism and collaboration could also be realized and the current difficulties encountered by students and teachers could be more readily addressed. By implementing a unified approach it is envisioned that the students' overall English proficiency would improve, they would be able to utilize their English for practical communicative purposes and be able to function with more confidence in this increasingly English- world.

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