

*English for Graduation: The Development of an Innovative Japanese University
Program Connecting ESP Courses with Graduation Seminar Topics*

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Abstract

The increasing importance of English as a global language as well as the recent attention to the merits of the integration of language learning with knowledge/content construction has led to the necessity for the inclusion of courses to satisfy these requirements. With this in mind, the authors' university asked them to develop an ESP program that would enable students to study content related to their graduation seminar subjects in English. They researched and developed new content-based English courses on topics seminar professors identified as important with the aim of providing students with the critical thinking as well as language skills necessary to discuss their graduation thesis topics in English. This paper will explain the process of constructing this new program including a needs analysis to determine specific topics for the new content English courses and the resulting fourteen content English courses divided into two categories: Comparative Cultural Studies and Intercultural Communication. Important caveats will be outlined. For example, overcoming perceived institutional barriers often occurring with the implementation of new programs; in this case the necessity to make the courses accessible to all third and fourth year students of various English language proficiency. The logistics involved in the successful resolution of this situation will be discussed.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes (ESP), Program Development, Collaboration

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Introduction

Part of the Japanese national education agenda is to promote internationalization by empowering students to enter the global community (Taguchi, 2014). Moreover, the Japanese government has been strongly pushing to promote Japan as an international tourist destination in recent years (Osumi, 2016). Thus, English language skills are becoming ever more important in both the workplace and daily life in Japan. Unfortunately, students generally do not possess functional English language skills because English related to their needs or interests is not typically taught at the high school or university level. Therefore, to accomplish the aims of internationalization, Japanese students need to develop functional English language skills that will help them navigate real world situations. In an effort to help students attain these skills, more and more Japanese universities are beginning to offer specialized courses with the goal of providing students with pragmatic competence in English (Taguchi, 2014). Similar to the linguistic challenges facing students, Japanese professors also have challenges when teaching content courses in English though (Bradford, 2015). As a result, English for specific purposes (ESP) and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) have become buzzwords in Japan as the government and universities look to promote learning practical skills that will enable students to join the global community. Like other universities across Japan, the authors' institution has become interested in introducing ESP courses into its curriculum. Throughout its history, the authors' university, which is located in the heart of Tokyo, has aimed to promote independence and to keep up with the changing world. The university's Faculty of Foreign Studies also has long established relationships with universities in other countries and a strong tradition of encouraging students to study abroad. The proposed establishment of ESP courses within the Faculty of Foreign studies is one of the ways the university is keeping these goals in mind, and continuing to educate students to think critically about the world around them and to enter the workforce with a well-rounded education that prepared them to succeed in the global community. The establishment of ESP courses has been discussed at the university in recent years, and in the 2020 academic year, the process of developing such courses began in earnest. This paper details the planning for introducing English for specific purposes (ESP) courses into the English language curriculum in the 2021 academic year.

What is English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

The ability to communicate in English is vital for professional success internationally as well as in local settings (Basturkmen, 2006). This necessity has become paramount, particularly with the increase of virtual communication for business and education during the COVID19 Pandemic. As a result, ESP has become increasingly relevant for English learners in non-English speaking countries. ESP is a learner-centered approach to teaching English as an additional language. It focuses on developing practical language skills and communicative competence in specific disciplines such as medicine, shipping, business, IT, and engineering (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998). Resulting from the demand for English in work settings and the necessity for tailored English programs ESP focuses on occupation/learner needs (Belcher, 2006) by teaching language skills using content altered to meet the needs of the learner and the requirements of their profession.

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) define ESP as “an approach to language learning which is based on learner needs. The foundation of all ESP is the simple question: Why does the learner need to learn a foreign language? ... ESP, then, is an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner’s reason for learning” (p. 19). There is no prescribed teaching methodology or materials in ESP, which permits the freedom and flexibility for the needs of the targeted learners to be dealt with appropriately. Coffey (1985) succinctly describes ESP as a “quick and economical” method of using the English language for efficient communication in employment or for the intention of academic learning.

ESP vs. English for General Purposes

University English classes in non-English speaking countries such as Japan tend to focus on English for general purposes (EGP) rather than focusing in students’ interests or English needs. As a result, they do not spark interest in language learning because students do not make a connection between the language being learned and real-life situations (Guo, 2012). While EGP courses might offer learners the opportunity become proficient in the language, ESP classes or programs are in direct contrast to EGP courses because they are:

1. Designed to meet the specific needs of the learners.
2. Related in content (themes and topics) to disciplines or specific occupations.
3. Use authentic work-specific academic materials.
4. Promote cultural awareness and seek to improve intercultural competency.
5. Deliver intermediate and advanced level language training.

Generally, the learner enrolled in an ESP course is an adult and is expected to have had the opportunity to study basic English language skills prior to starting the course. As Lorenzo (2005) comments ESP focuses on teaching language in context rather than on grammar and general English skills. In other words, ESP focuses on the task, specific vocabulary, and communication as opposed to the mechanics of grammar and syntax. Therefore, it is considered more appropriate for learners at intermediate English level (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013) than for lower level learners.

Another major difference between EGP courses and ESP is that in ESP, learners are generally learners in a position where they will need English language skills to communicate professionally or to be able to perform job-related tasks (Basturkmen, 2006). This necessity may be considered as a built in motivational tool that serves as a driving factor behind ESP (Lorenzo, 2005). Students in ESP classes are generally aware of the purpose(s) for the English they are learning, and having already oriented their education toward a specific field, whether in post-secondary education or in occupational settings, view their English training as complementing this orientation. This is in direct contrast to most general English courses where often the reason for studying the language may be unclear (Hutchison & Waters, 1987). ESP allows learners to take advantage of their prior subject knowledge enabling them to ascertain a real-world context for the vocabulary and structures they are learning (Paltridge & Starfield, 2013). In the case of the authors’ university, the subjects of the ESP courses will align with students’ third and fourth year graduation seminar topics. As described below, planning an ESP curriculum requires many steps to ensure the courses meet institutional requirements, the stakeholders’ needs are addressed and the courses succeed.

Planning a New ESP Program

The authors' university began talking about establishing an ESP program several years ago when the university president began to promote "B's Vision," which is a plan to offer students the chance to learn both EGP and ESP. The aims of B's Vision is to help students improve their practical English skills and to motivate them to learn English because they will develop the skills to communicate in English in a variety of situations, including those related to their academic and future career interests.

To begin developing the ESP program, faculty members with ESP/CLIL and English for academic purposes (EAP) backgrounds were hired to help transform the curriculum and develop new courses connected to the implementation of B's Vision. In April 2020, a General English Education Committee was established. Within the committee a team of four professors consisting of the ESP/CLIL and EAP specialists, a member of the International Liberal Arts program, and a member of the International Business program was created to undertake the planning and implementation of ESP courses at the university. The ESP/CLIL and EAP specialists were familiar with the concept of ESP as well as curriculum and course design. The faculty members from the International Liberal Arts and International Business programs were also integral to the team because they had worked at the university for many years, and therefore knew the process for making and approving curriculum proposals as well as challenges that might arise when planning curriculum changes. They also had long established connections with the graduation seminar professors in the Faculty of Foreign Studies, which helped create a bridge between the English language professors and the content professors.

Next, the ESP team needed to tackle which level of study the new courses would be introduced at. While the university president had indicated that he would like students to be introduced to ESP early in their university career, the ESP team determined that the best way to begin introducing ESP into the curriculum would be to connect the third year content-based English (CBE) courses, which are currently offered to the graduation seminar topics that are taught in Japanese. Connecting CBE content with seminar content was a logical choice because many of the seminar teachers wanted their students to be able to communicate in English about the topics they study in relation to their graduation theses. Making this connection would also help ease the introduction of ESP because the ESP team would not need to go through the lengthy process of seeking approval to add new courses to the curriculum. Instead, existing courses would simply be renamed and the course content changed to meet the seminar student needs. After the new CBE courses are established, the ESP team will begin to investigate the best way to introduce ESP to first and second grade students at the university, which will eventually become part of the proposed Communication Masters Series that will encompass EGP, English for business purposes, EAP, ESP, and English communication for sustainable development goals (SDGs). Thus, completing the implementation of B's Vision.

One important factor in creating new courses is the ability to change the curriculum to more suit learner needs, including a broad focus course design (Dudley-Evens & St. John, 1998). In other words, the new ESP courses require both understanding the students' English language needs as well as cooperation from faculty, curriculum coordinators, and administrators at the university. Since preparation of an ESP program should include an analysis of the stakeholders' needs (Long, 2005; Hutchison & Waters,

1987), carrying out a needs analysis was paramount for the planning and implementation of the new ESP courses. Therefore, the first step in the ESP project after deciding which courses would focus on ESP was to determine the needs and expectations of the seminar professors and the students. To conduct the needs analysis, the ESP team created an online survey to determine the topics covered in the graduation seminar courses and the types of English communication the seminar professors wanted their students to learn related to those topics. Purposeful Interviews (Cresswell, 2015) were also conducted to gain deeper insights into student needs and faculty expectations of the proposed ESP courses. Finally, department and Faculty Level meetings were held to discuss the results of the needs analysis and determine the viability of creating ESP courses that taught English content related to the graduation seminar topics. Results of the needs analysis showed the seminar topics relate to international issues, information is often in English, students need skills necessary to interact in English with the topics, and there was a feeling that connecting skills to engage with content in English would help students meet the university's TOEIC Test graduation requirement. After analyzing the topics the seminar professors listed on the survey, the ESP team created fourteen new course titles that will become the topics of the new CBE/ESP classes: American Studies, British Studies, Japanese Studies, Children's Studies, Gender, Political Science, SDGs for International Cooperation, Race, Tourism, Economics, Organizational Behavior, Cross-Cultural Management, Information Science, and SDGs for Business. The international nature of these topics reflect the focus of the seminar classes as well as the university's aim of developing globally minded citizens.

Creating New CBE/ESP Classes

Once the English needs were determined, the ESP team was tasked with creating courses to cover the ESP topics. Previously, the aforementioned CBE classes taught content in English, but they were not directly tied to the overall curriculum and goals of the Faculty of Foreign Languages, nor were they taught by content specialists. Also, even though these courses were a required part of third year English language studies in the university's curriculum, students needed a TOEIC score of 400 or above to enter them. Thus, some students were not able to enter the CBE courses. Therefore, the new CBE/ESP courses were divided into lower and higher levels for each topic, which will allow all of the third year students in the university to study content English related to their graduation seminar courses.

Another factor in creating the new courses was to encourage communication and collaboration between the ESP and seminar professors. As a means to encourage collaboration, the ESP team received approval to reschedule the CBE/ESP classes so they would correspond with the seminar class day. This will also help create a sense of 'parallel with experience' (Belcher, 2006) for the students. In other words, moving the classes to the same day the seminar classes are taught serves three purposes. The students can learn content related to their seminars in English as well as their seminar topic on the same day, thus reinforcing both the language and content they were being taught. The students' motivation to learn English might also be enhanced because they would be able to connect content being taught in Japanese with their new English skills from the CBE courses. Finally, the part-time CBE teachers would be on campus on the same day as the seminar professors. Therefore, the opportunity for collaboration between content professors and ESP teachers would be enhanced.

Conclusion

This paper outlined the impetus for and planning curriculum changes to introduce ESP at a Japanese university as a means to motivate students and promote higher level practical English language skills. The ESP team spent the 2020 academic year planning the changes, preparing the courses, and hiring new instructors to implement the courses in the 2021 academic year. They also planned an online ESP Symposium featuring two well-known ESP practitioners in Japan to introduce both ESP and the new courses to the wider community both inside and outside their university. Fully understanding that the new courses will need to be revised during and after their first year depending on student interest, the connection of the ESP contents to the graduation seminar topics, and student ability to learn Content-English as well as practical skills to engage with the content, the ESP team will monitor the instruction and devise methods to promote interaction between the ESP and seminar professors. When students and professors can return to the university after the pandemic, the ESP team plans to create an ESP space at the university where graduation seminar and ESP professors can meet to collaborate on course contents, share materials, and otherwise help each other find ways to meet the students' content English needs. Finally, the ESP team will continue to hold ESP Symposia to discuss the progress of ESP and implementing courses that connect to B's Vision, new research into content-based English instruction, and the future of ESP courses at the university.

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