

## 報告

## 英語の特別学習プログラムの企画と実施について

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要約：本論文は、徳島大学「イングリッシュ・サポート・ルーム (ESR)」で 2011 年～2012 年度に行われた、英語の特別学習プログラムの企画、実施とその結果について報告する。これらのプログラムは、単に「英会話の練習場所」としてではなく、利用者に、大学の通常の授業では学習するのが困難な、英語の様々な分野でのスキルアップの機会を与える場所としての「イングリッシュ・サポート・ルーム」の地位を確立するために行われた。

(キーワード：英語，大学教育，英語学習，授業時間以外の学習)

## Planning Extra Curricular English Learning Programs

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Abstract: This paper describes the planning, conducting and results of extra-curricular English learning programs held at Tokushima university's 'English Support Room' (ESR) during the academic year 2011/2012. These programs were held in order to establish the 'English Support Room' not merely as a simple 'English Chat Room', but to really give ESR users the opportunity to improve their English skills in several fields which are either not being offered as part of a regular university syllabus or cannot be practiced sufficiently in university classes. (Key words: English, higher education, English study, studying time outside regular classes)

## Introduction

For Japanese university students English has become a very important subject. With steady globalization and international cooperation being the standard nowadays, many Japanese companies are demanding sufficient English proficiency of their employees. Unfortunately, as the results of regularly held TOEIC exams are clearly showing, many Japanese students are still lacking those skills.

Although Japanese universities are working to solve this problem, the unfortunate state of students' generally low English skills has still not improved. The reasons for the inefficiency of the language education offered at Japanese universities are manifold: (1) Classes for first year students are usually a size from 40 to up to 55 or more students, which is hopelessly overcrowded. This makes it impossible for the teacher to dedicate sufficient time for individual tutoring. (2) Instead of forming classes based on students' English skills, classes are formed by department affiliation, which results in classes having learners of mixed levels, ranging from 'Beginner's level' to 'Advanced learner's level'. In such mixed

classes, there can be no efficient language teaching.

(3) There is no clearly set goal for the level of English skills a university student should have by the time he/she graduates. Teachers in charge chose their courses' content without any guidelines or coordination with other colleagues, resulting in 'educational chaos'. Sometimes students end up relearning similar content taught in a prior English class as a result.

On the other hand, simply holding universities responsible for the lack of students' English skills would also be mistaken. Learning and acquiring a foreign language is a task which also requires the learner's efforts without relying wholly on the guidance of a teacher. Real language competence can only be achieved by individual effort outside of the classroom. And here the fault for not having sufficient English skills has to be clearly put on students. It is no empty claim to state that many Japanese students still haven't understood the importance of English for their own future and also that many Japanese students regard having to study English as nothing else but a nuisance. An even bigger problem is that Japanese

students, in general, do not dedicate sufficient time to studying outside of their classes. This lack of studying and practicing English is a cardinal sin, which urgently needs to be tackled by Japanese universities.

It is here that the work of Tokushima University's English Support Room (ESR) begins. The following report will show how it successfully manages to motivate students to study English outside of their regular classes.

### **(1) Creating a Fruitful Learning Environment for Self-Studying: Tokushima University's 'English Support Room' – From 'Self-Access Center' to 'Extra Curricular Studying Facility'.**

Tokushima University's English Support Room (ESR) (or also referred to as the Self Access Center by Fukuda/Sakata) was established in 2008 and has since enjoyed a high popularity among students. The original concept of the ESR was to create a space for self-studying and practicing English outside of regular classes under semi-autonomous conditions<sup>1)</sup>.

In order to create an English speaking environment, an 'English Only' policy was established. Accordingly, the center's visitors were required to speak only English during their stay in the ESR. This 'English Only' policy turned out to be highly successful. Students observed this policy without any complaints. Especially in the case of weaker students, the results of this 'English Only' policy were impressive improvements in their grasp of English as well as in their confidence of using English. With such recognizable improvements, these students' motivation to study more in depth also grew.

After three years the teachers in charge of the ESR changed. Then several problems of this ESR policy became obvious in spite of the successes mentioned above:

While communicating with each other in English doubtlessly improved students' grammatical competence and raised their general confidence to use English, students did not actually acquire real language competence. Most of the regular users were

not capable of expressing themselves correctly depending on a given situation. They still had an inability to lead an English conversation on a higher level. This became obvious in several situations. The general content of the English communication between students during their stay in the ESR could be generally described as friendly, superficial chatting about daily matters. Still, whenever more difficult or serious topics were raised, the students involved left the room to continue their conversation in Japanese out in the corridor. The volume in which these conversations were usually held made it also clear that the topics were not really private nor of an intimate nature. Another example for students' lack of English competence was when some of the long term regular ESR users 'communicated' with the new teacher in charge using inappropriate to outright rude language. In the case of most students, clear lack of language competence led to unintentional use of inappropriate language. However in the case of one student, the intent to insult the teacher was obvious. These examples strongly showed that, although not pleasant to admit, by just letting students chat in 'informal English' amongst each other, instead of also guiding them to use appropriate, situation dependent English, the ESR unfortunately failed to serve the students' need to acquire true, proper English.

Another problem was that while students whose English was on a lower level could indeed improve their English skills up to a certain degree, other students on an advanced level didn't profit as much. In these students' cases, there were hardly any recognizable improvements in their language skills, if at all. Their already high TOEIC scores didn't become any better and their linguistic competence didn't show any improvements.

Given this background, it was felt that keeping the ESR on the level of being 'just a place to come and chat in English' wouldn't really help ESR users to improve their English skills. An approach focusing on aspects other than just 'oral English communication' was necessary. Furthermore, with the availability of a

long running and highly popular ‘English Chat Room’ program on Tokushima University’s Josanjima campus, an extra daytime ‘Chat Room’ was not necessary.

The main challenges when it came to bringing the former ESR to this new level and establishing it as an ‘English studying support facility’ were as following: (1) Giving potential users a reason for visiting the ESR by offering interesting and useful new programs that focused on aspects other than just oral communication. (2) Developing efficient English learning programs that would also offer an attractive ‘fun appeal’.

## **(2) Developing Extra-Curricular Programs**

The basic approach when it came to developing such extra-curricular ‘special programs’ was to offer programs focusing on aspects of English studies which were not available in the regular university syllabus nor practiced sufficiently in regular university held English classes. In order to guarantee participants of these special programs as much profit as possible, these programs should also be held in small groups with a maximum of ten participants.

Deciding which programs were to be offered, turned out to be a mixture of trial and error, as well as going for the obvious. In case of the latter, asking ESR visitors which aspects of their English skills they wished to improve provided sufficient data for possible programs. Consulting with English teaching colleagues from other University departments added some further valuable information.

In case of the students’ replies, most students wanted to improve their pronunciation. This was interestingly followed by the wish to learn how to write official letters like application forms, etc.

Teaching colleagues also voted for pronunciation help and asked for programs to help students improve their ‘reading understanding’ skills.

In order to work on the aforementioned problem of many ESR visitors not having real language competence due to their overuse of ‘informal English chitchatting’ a ‘Polite English’ program was developed.

Finally, in spite of the reservations of one English teaching colleague who felt that ‘students didn’t like writing’ (!), a Creative Writing course was organized. Here the idea was to offer ESR visitors to try out something totally new, since at that time ‘Creative Writing’ was not being taught as a regular English class at Tokushima University. The conditions for holding a successful Creative Writing course were especially conducive on account of a professional, published American writer living in Tokushima being in charge of this program.

Deciding how many sessions of each program should be held was another challenge: While about ten units for each program would have certainly been a very effective solution, in the end each program was held between five and six times. Here again, students’ input was the decisive factor; Most students who were asked about how many sessions they felt would be good for such a ‘mini English program’ replied that ten sessions would take away too much of their time already reserved for other activities.

In order to learn more about the efficiency of these special programs, the necessity for improving the programs’ content for future use and getting feedback on how participants felt about what they had achieved by taking these programs, students were given questionnaires or interviewed at the end of the programs’ last sessions. The replies received form the base of most of the data presented below.

## **(3) Conducting of Special Programs and Results**

Based on this background, the following special programs could be held at the ESR in the winter semester 2011:

- ‘Daily Just Talk’ (free English conversation practice with native speakers from different English speaking countries), held from Monday to Friday for three hours (=three 60 minutes units)
- ‘Polite English’ (held six times, one unit 60 minutes)
- ‘English Pronunciation’ (held six times, one unit 60 minutes)
- ‘Writing Official Letters’ (held five times, one unit

60 minutes)

- 'Reading Understanding' (held five times, one unit 60 minutes)
- 'Creative Writing' (This course was given a four session trial by the end of summer semester in order to find out whether there was any interest in this class at all.

(a) 'Daily Just Talk'

One of the first programs introduced shortly after the opening of the ESR in 2008 was the Just Talk program. In 60 minutes sessions, students could practice English conversation with native speakers from different English speaking countries in a casual environment. From its start up until now, this program has been very popular with students. This popularity, on the other hand, also turned out to be a problem; As Just Talk was originally conceived to give students a chance to practice English in a small group with no more than five participants, the program's steadily growing popularity led to conditions with sometimes ten or more students wishing to participate in one session. This problem became even more severe when English teaching colleagues realized the positive potential of this program and sent their students as a homework assignment to participate in Just Talk sessions. In order to cope with this situation, from winter semester 2011 on the Just Talk program was enhanced from daily two hours to three hours per day<sup>2)</sup>.

All the teachers in charge of this program had a proven track of teaching English at university level and in the private language-teaching sector. This professional experience turned out to be an important asset, since this professionalism of all the participating teachers prevented the Just Talk sessions from becoming a simple hour of chatting: Due to the teachers' skills, students of all levels of English were able to participate in these sessions and were challenged depending on their level. As the personal background of all of the teachers in charge offered much more besides an abundant professional English teaching experience, participating students could also

learn a lot about cultural and international matters.

In order to offer students as much variety of native speakers as possible, daily Just Talk sessions were planned so that every day at least two teachers from different English speaking countries were in charge.

Assessing the results of a program focusing on oral communication is, unfortunately, a difficult matter; With students being free to attend the program whenever they felt like doing so, it is impossible to track participating students. Given this background, an assessment of the results unfortunately comes down to one's personal observations and impressions.

As the teacher in charge of managing the ESR, this author is in frequent connection with many visitors of the ESR who also regularly attended the Just Talk sessions. Although doubtlessly being a very subjective opinion, those students participating regularly in Just Talk sessions showed, in this writer's humble, professional opinion, a significant progress in their general language competence: This competency showed itself from improved fluency to a very clear command of using correct English in differing situations. In one very special case, a student who was originally on the level of an upper beginner, participated during summer semester every day for one hour in these Just Talk sessions. By the end of the semester, this student had made such significant progress, that he was hired as a teaching assistant to help out in the ESR.

Just Talk is doubtlessly the most popular extra-curricular program of the ESR. Still, in order to make this learning program even more efficient and to give students of the different departments the opportunity to speak in English about topics related to their field of study. Therefore, more theme-oriented Just Talk sessions will be offered in the academic year 2013/2014.

(b) 'Pronunciation'

This program was started due to the strong interest expressed by English Support Room users. When planning the Pronunciation program's content, it felt

best to focus on the needs of Japanese learners, in spite of the English Support Room also being used by foreign exchange students of Tokushima University.

Hereby the goal was not to teach students to perfectly sound like American or British native speakers; The teacher in charge – hailing himself from the United Kingdom – approached teaching pronunciation by using a ‘lingua franca core’. This is a pronunciation syllabus for English as an international language, but focuses especially on the problems Japanese learners are having when it comes to pronouncing English words.

This course was held six times which was deemed to be a sufficient number of classes for such an intensive course. Six students of English levels ranging from upper beginner to advanced learner took this course. All participants continued to regularly attend each course session. The teacher in charge devised the course so that most of each unit’s time was dedicated to actively practicing pronunciation.

Participating students’ feedback on this course was also very positive; When asked to give a rough self-assessment on what they had achieved by the end of this program, all participants claimed not only to have made major improvements in their pronunciation skills, but also to have learned how to individually continue to work and improve problems with pronunciation.

Four of the participants suggested it would have been good had the course had more than six units.

#### (c) Polite English

The objective of this program was to better prepare students to identify culturally sensitive situations and enable them to interact with the appropriate language in the appropriate register. In the program’s first session cultural differences and taboos between Japan and the USA were discussed. Focus was hereby naturally put on the USA. Furthermore, roles, relations, environments and their effect on language were discussed. At the end of (each) session students could decide which topics they would like to cover in the

following units (one topic per unit.).

Topics chosen were: (a) apologizing, (b) complaining, (c) holidays, (d) shopping and (e) tipping. Each unit was then structured into (1) topic discussion – (2) relevant exercises – (3) role plays – (4) reviews and observations.

Eight students joined this program, all of them attending each of the program’s sessions. The participants’ feedback was throughout (mostly) positive. All of them agreed about the practicality of the program’s use and claimed to have learned many aspects of how to use appropriate, situation dependent English. Several participants expressed their regret that this kind of course, which taught aspects of English that were really useful in everyday life, was not held as part of the regular university syllabus.

#### (d) Writing Official Letters

This program was also offered due to the request of ESR users. With E-mail having become a major form of communication, the interest in learning to write in English might indicate that some students are aware of the fact that in their future professions, they will probably have to use more written English than spoken English.

The program’s content was as following:

- 1) Describing friends - correcting common mistakes in writing.
- 2) Writing an email - learning how to use linking words (but, although, however, so and because)
- 3) Telling a story - position of adjectives and adverbs.
- 4) Writing a postcard - using synonyms in writing.
- 5) Filling in a form.

As to the results of this course, according to the teacher in charge of this program, the most positive outcome was somewhat indirect; From the beginning of the course, the teacher introduced codes for self-corrections. For example, 'T' was tense, 'P' punctuation, 'Sp' spelling, 'Prep' preposition, 'WO' word order, etc.. The teacher would mark up errors in the participants’ work and they would try to self-correct themselves. This was done each week and



students became noticeably better at doing this. As for the other writing, an objective evaluation turned out to be difficult because the program was rather short and specific writing activities, such as writing an email, could be done only once. On the other hand, students' competence in self-correction improved and was the most positive outcome from this course.

The students' feedback on this class turned out highly positive. Interestingly, while students replied that they had improved aspects of their writing, none of them mentioned their improvement in being able to self-correct their writing.

#### (e) Reading Comprehension

In spite of having a highly experienced and popular teacher in charge, this program turned out to be the one with the least positive resonance: Two students came to the first introductory session, but didn't show up in the following sessions. Still, the reason that this program didn't fare so well in its reception should not necessarily be reduced to students' lack of interest in this subject matter. Probably, the bad timing of this program – which was held in January – could certainly be another factor for its lackluster reception.

#### (f) Creative Writing<sup>3)</sup>

This course was given a short trial of four 90 minutes during the late summer semester. The intention behind this trial period was to find out whether there was any interest in this class at all and to see whether this course could be held in a way that students of all English levels could participate in it. The positive feedback given by the six participants of these trial sessions led to extending the 'Creative Writing' program in the winter semester to thirteen two hour units.

During the winter semester, seven students participated in this program under the supervision of published, professional author Suzanne Kamata. Participants could learn aspects of professionally writing and editing fiction in English. They also learned to appreciate and discuss literature.

By the end of this program, five of the participants had written short stories, which with some slight editing, were in publishable condition. The publication of a journal containing these pieces unfortunately, could not be realized due to financial strains.

### Conclusion

This report described the proceedings of establishing a study oriented learning facility by offering students the opportunity to work outside their regular classes on improving their English skills.

This report also showed that in order to raise students' motivation to study English outside of their regular classes, simply offering a space where they can study after class is not enough. Besides factors like accessibility and an enjoyable atmosphere, students need another reason to use/visit such a facility. Enjoyable 'Special Programs', focusing on the needs and interests of students, giving students the choice to decide what they want to study and how much time they want to dedicate to learning seem to be a good possible strategy to motivate students to efficiently use such an 'extra-curricular studying facility'.

With the exception of the 'Reading Understanding' program, all the special programs held at the ESR during the academic year 2011/2012 reached their original goals. Programs were regularly attended by students who in their feedbacks clearly expressed that they not only enjoyed the courses, but also could improve aspects of their English skills. While the number of participants in each program was satisfying, raising these numbers to fully reach each program's capacity will be the next task when some of these programs will again be held in the academic year 2012/2013.

Shortly after the start of these 'Special Programs' the number of visitors to the ESR began to rise to averagely 30 – 40 students per day. Several of these visitors have, by now, become regular ESR users. Considering that in the academic year 2011/2012, the ESR's policy changed radically from the former SAC (Self Access Center), as described by Fukuda/Sakata,

resulting in many former users not visiting the new ESR these numbers are highly satisfying. Nonetheless, it is too early to speak of success. As stated above, the capacities of all of the Special Programs offered were not fully used. The content of these Special Programs also leaves much space for further improvement. As to the use of the ESR itself, in spite of the limited space the ESR has, it should not be a problem to accommodate up to about 60 users per day. Also many self-studying installations (ESR media library, self-study corner) are not used as much as they could and should be. Here, further strategies need to be developed to attract more future users – a task also to be handled during the academic year 2012/2013.

## Notes

- 1) This well-intended experiment unfortunately ended with many unsolved problems as can be read in Fukuda, Steve T. / Sakata, Hiroshi (2012) Improving Learning Environments From the Student Perspective: An Exploration With Users Of A Self Access Center. *Journal of University Education Research*, 9, 114 – 122. Both authors didn't take into account that unguided self-autonomy also requires maturity and sense of responsibility on students' sides in order to lead to success. In their study both authors list an amount of problems (littering/anti-social behavior etc.) at their SAC, which originated due to students' incapability to handle self-autonomy and which doubtlessly could have been avoided with a sufficient guidance by a teacher. While acknowledging these problems both authors do not offer any solutions to these problems.
- 2) Since then this program has even more grown, with presently (2012/2013) four hours of 'Just Talk' being offered on daily base.
- 3) For a more detailed description of this course's content and proceedings, see Günther, Dierk (2012) 'Creative Writing' – Efficiently Teaching Japanese Students the Joy of Writing in English. *Journal of University Education*, 9, 98 – 106

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