

The Evolution and Implementation of a Public Speaking Course

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Abstract

In 2008 a public speaking course was implemented in the Small-Class English Program at Kawasaki Medical School. This course was designed to provide second grade students with public speaking skills that could be applied in both English and Japanese. The English lecturers also hoped that this course would increase the English speaking confidence levels of the students and would promote a more positive attitude towards studying and using English in general. In this article I will detail the need for this course, the English teaching/learning environment, student attitudes and reactions to the course, the course setup and its unique assessment procedures, and alterations made to the course to improve it further.

Key words: EFL, student needs, curriculum, public speaking, practical assessment

1. Introduction

As educators we have the responsibility to assess and focus on the needs of our students. Unfortunately, in Japanese education levels below university this often means an unflinching concentration on what Takanashi called “English for Entrance Examination” (EEE) at the expense of communication skills¹⁾. Since English is a core component in both the senior high school and university entrance examinations, students and their parents often identify the most important outcome from English as a foreign language (EFL) education as the ability to enter a “good” senior high school or a “good” university²⁾. Due to the absence of speaking tests within the entrance examinations, this type of English education is made up of

grammatical points in decontextualised sentences rather than skills that would be useful in a student’s future, such as oral communication. The dedication to EEE results in university students who, after six years of English tuition in public schools, can pass exams but barely speak a word of English, much less converse in the language.

2. Student Needs

When students begin tertiary medical study their needs shift from a focus on EEE to skills that are applicable to their future profession as doctors. Since English is “the” foreign language in Japan³⁾, Japanese people will have to use English more frequently in the future as they increasingly come into contact with foreigners

- this is particularly true of Japanese doctors. Therefore, English speaking skills are a core need for students in tertiary medical education.

Teaching speaking skills is difficult because, due to the single-minded devotion to EEE, Japanese students enter tertiary education severely lacking in English oral communication skills. Perhaps because of this- coupled with the restrictions of large classes in the past- speaking has been the least focused on of the four language skills in Kawasaki Medical School. This situation changed in 2008 when, as the team leader of the Small-Class English Program (SEP) I implemented a public speaking course for the second grade students. This occurred because the Kawasaki Medical School English department identified public speaking ability as an essential skill for our students. The skills taught in this course were applicable to numerous situations from presenting at conferences, hospital departmental presentations, right down to one-to-one doctor-patient communication in English.

In 2010, Kawasaki Medical School shifted its foreign language instruction focus towards writing. This meant the public speaking course was not offered to the second grade students in that academic year. However, in testimony to the strengths and practicality of this course (as well as an acceptance that oral communication is important for Japanese medical students) the public speaking course will be re-implemented at the second grade level in April 2011.

3. The Small-Class English Program

In 2004 the SEP was implemented, which had an average of 10 students per teacher in each class. Initially, the six courses offered at

the second grade level of this program were separated by difficulty and course topic. The students enjoyed having a choice of subjects and being provided with extra assistance in the lower level courses, but these two positive attributes created topic relevancy issues and assessment inequality within the program. Students complained in annual course reviews about this inequality, writing statements such as:

If I had a teacher likesensei, who makes easy tests and is an easy marker, then I would have received an A instead of a C.

This issue created the necessity to design a course with assessment parity. In 2008 this was achieved through the implementation of a "one for all" public speaking course in which the students used the same textbook, studied the same material and were examined by the same test. The outcome of this was course grades that reflected the true abilities and efforts of the students.

4. The Second Grade Public Speaking Course

To accomplish the English department's goal of providing the students with public speaking skills it was essential for the EFL staff to be unified and literally working on the same page. To achieve this, teachers met each week to collaborate on lessons and assessment. It was paramount for the teachers to synchronize their lessons so all students received the same skills simultaneously to ensure the practical assessment procedure worked smoothly. The team environment that developed, along with the well written curriculum, supported the teachers and enabled them to relax and insert some of their personality in

lessons- which was something the students really responded to. It was vital the teachers were seen as approachable because their role was mainly in guiding the students through the topics and activities of the lessons; acting as facilitators not lecturers. This is contrary to the norm of Japanese tertiary education of students passively receiving information in the form of lectures, with few chances to apply any of the skills or theories focused on in lessons practically. The student-teacher ratio of the SEP created an excellent setting for the students and teachers to engage in this new course and method. While this course increased the students' public speaking skills it also prompted them to form more positive attitudes towards English (see Fig 1.) This was an unexpected and pleasing outcome because Japanese university students often enter tertiary education with a negative attitude towards English after facing six years of the yakudoku method in junior and senior high school²⁾.

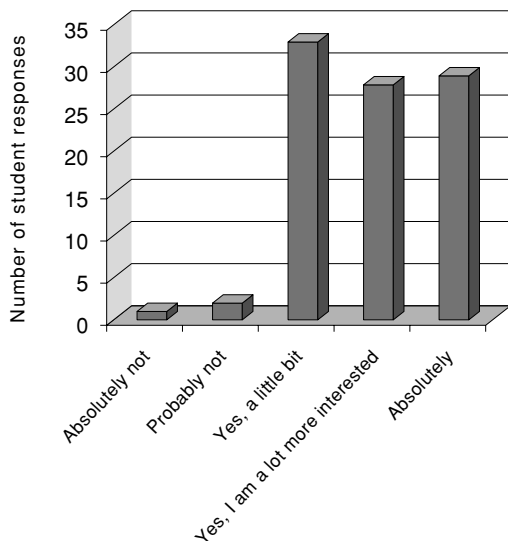


Fig 1. Are you more interested in English because of the public speaking course?

Since there were so many practical exercises in every lesson the students had frequent chances to reinforce the skills that were focused on in lessons. The students got to use the language practically, rapidly gaining new skills and raising their confidence in speaking English. This course also promoted confidence growth in the following ways:

- Initial speech topics were open and 'user-friendly', providing students presentation subjects they could be expected to have some interest in. The fourth and fifth presentations were more defined and relevant to the students' medical studies. Speech topics were arranged in the following order:

1. A famous place in Japan
2. Sport
3. Music and Movies
4. A health or medical topic- i.e. diet, alcoholism, or the dangers of smoking
5. Medical conditions and diseases - i.e. cancer or obesity

- The first four speeches were performed in pairs, which provided the students with the support of a partner (It was compulsory for students to work with a different partner for each of the paired speeches. This enabled them to develop different skills through working with a variety of people. It also meant that students could not select a more able partner who could "carry" them through the practical assessment.) The final speech was the only piece of practical assessment carried out individually.

- The practical assessment was based on a graduated system where the assessment

weighting became heavier as the year progressed and as students developed their skills and confidence.

The speech weightings were the following:

0% for the first speech

5% for the second speech

10% for the third speech

15% for the fourth speech

20% for the fifth speech

To increase objectivity and create equality in the practical assessment students were not assessed by their classroom teacher. Furthermore, they were assessed by a different teacher for each piece of practical assessment. Students performed their first speech in front of their classroom teacher, but this speech did not contribute to their final marks (see above) The first speech was merely an opportunity for the students to practice and for their teachers to identify problem areas and assist in helping the students resolve them before the weighted assessment began. The presentation assessment rotation table shown in Fig 1. was designed specifically for the practical assessment in this course. For each new presentation the students moved to the next teacher on the table in a clockwise direction. For example, Rapley-sensei's students presented their first speech in front of him and then their second speech was assessed by Ohara-sensei, Palmaer-sensei assessed them for their third presentation and so on... This system meant teachers were not assessing students they had established an emotional connection with- good or bad- thereby increasing assessment objectivity.

The marking sheets used in assessing the

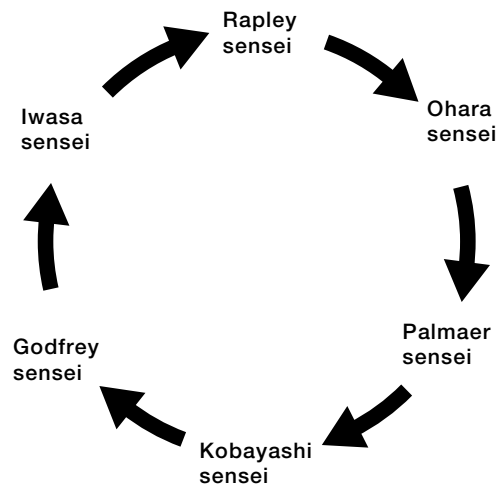


Fig 1. 2nd Grade presentation assessment rotation table

student presentations concentrated on the skills focused on in lessons leading up to that time. For each practical assessment teachers were provided with an explanation sheet that detailed points to focus on in the presentations, thus improving assessment objectivity.

Although the course was very successful in its first year, some minor changes were made for the 2009 academic year, they were as follows:

- In response to comments by students in the annual course review, students from 2009 and on are given the practical assessment dates and topics earlier than the students of 2008, meaning they have more preparation time than those students in the inaugural year had.
- Six random, small in-class tests have been added to promote student punctuality. The tests are based on topics that students have been focusing on up to the administration time and are completed by all second grade students simultaneously. The students are not informed of when the tests will be held. All tests begin at

the start of class and only last five minutes
 - if a student arrives after this time they
 are ineligible to take the test and forfeit
 1% their year mark.

The assessment for the course is as follows:

In-class attitude 4%
 Small in-class tests 6%
 End of term tests 40%
 Practical assessment (presentations) 50%

5. Conclusion

The new second grade EFL course introduced in Kawasaki Medical School was very successful at targeting one of the students' biggest second language needs; public speaking skills. It provided the students with skills they could use in their future, increased their English speaking confidence and also promoted a more positive attitude towards EFL. The course also achieved assessment equality through the application of an innovative practical assessment procedure that clearly reflected the true abilities and efforts of the students. While in its inaugural year, 2008, this course enjoyed great success and it continued to evolve with an extended preparation time given to the students for their practical assessment and the addition of six random, small in-class tests. One of the ways I promoted this course was by suggesting the skills students would be given were not only applicable to English but could also be applied in Japanese. It was therefore of great personal satisfaction to me when this important point was re-emphasized by a student who wrote in the 2009 annual course review:

I think I gained many presentation skills and points this year that are useful not only for English presentations, but for

presentations in Japanese too.

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