

# A Case for Employing Syllabus and Curriculum Design Techniques while Creating English Language Courses for University Students in Japan: Based on Existing Research and Anecdotal Evidence

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## Introduction

Teaching has long been considered a noble profession, not only because it requires its practitioners to be well-educated and knowledgeable, but also because teachers are supposed to have the best interests of their students at heart. So much so that they sacrifice the possibility of earning a higher income in more lucrative industries for the sake of enlightening minds. Most teachers continue to be so motivated and feel deeply for the cause of imparting quality education to their students. With such good intentions as intrinsic motivation, why does this divide in student performances and teacher expectations exist? The answer probably is not simple, and any attempt to simplify it would surely be foolhardy. However, some patterns are clearly visible when comparisons between more successful and less successful courses are made, namely overly large class sizes, a disconnect between teachers' expectations and what is being taught in the classrooms, student boredom due to archaic teaching practices, and so on. Some of these problems are not easily fixed while others are more manageable. While this can certainly be said of inexperienced tertiary level educators, it is surprising to note that such issues persist in courses designed by more experienced faculty members.

It is often the case that, while English language instructors at the tertiary level in Japan possess a Master's degree and have perhaps completed a relevant course such as TEFL or TESOL in their home countries, this may be the limit of their professional development. By this the author seeks to note – as observed during her relatively short time teaching in Japanese universities and working as a volunteer with teachers'

organisations – that ongoing professional development does not occur as a matter of course at Japanese universities, and as such is not pursued as widely by their language teaching faculty members as their counterparts in other countries. This de-emphasis on continued, lifelong learning bears mentioning in that its effects are evident in curriculum development as it occurs here (and at times does not). This lack of priority, in turn, demotivates curriculum developers who might find it easier to produce “fun” activities rather than ones that have been proven to be hard work for the students and can also be – for lack of a more suitable term – a hard sell in faculty meetings. Perhaps inadvertently, where curriculum development is pursued in earnest, it is at times undermined by those who seek to implement it. Anecdotal evidence exists here that indicates the top-down implementation of curriculum development. In most cases, junior faculty members are responsible for creating and updating curriculum under the guidance of senior faculty members who probably have no direct involvement in the classroom implementation of the course beyond the commissioning of it. When such factors are in play, despite the best intentions of everyone involved, the new courses often end up as modern replicas of previously taught ones simply because the most familiar is also the least risky.

Another facet of this dilemma is that the decision about how big a class should be lies with a department’s policymakers, and to a certain extent, deciding what should be on the syllabus is also not in the hands of a teacher. This is perhaps due to the requirements of any given course as prescribed by the Japanese Ministry of Education. However, university lecturers or instructors do have the right to customise their respective courses’ syllabi based on the requirements outlined in those guidelines. Here exists a fundamental disconnect between the intentions for curricula of those in academia charged with creating syllabi and the requirements established by Japan’s Ministry of Education that are duly enforced by those in charge. The lack of connection generates myriad issues for educators trying to provide the best possible instruction to the students having witnessed the struggles of the learners firsthand.

English language learning in Japan is almost as integral a part of the society as Valentine’s Day, which is celebrated in schools, homes, and offices with much enthusiasm despite the actual meaning becoming lost in translation long ago. Anyone who has lived in Japan for any significant period of time has seen *Eikaiwa* schools hidden in nooks and crannies of even sleepy little neighbourhoods. *Eikaiwa* simply means “English conversation.” Of course, the big schools also advertise their services

enthusiastically in train and subway print ads, on the radio, on TV etc. This author herself started her journey in the English language education field within the *Eikaiwa* industry. The school, being a high-end one, was very welcoming and the customer service was excellent. A particular quirk of this segment of the education industry – for it is first and foremost a business – in Japan, is that learners are referred to internally as “clients” rather than students. That puts the instructors in the awkward position in the classroom of acting primarily as salespeople trying to keep a customer happy by any means necessary, as opposed to prioritising the student’s educational needs that sometimes requires conveying of unpleasant truths about the amount of time and effort that a student must devote if they are ever to have a fair chance at attaining their desired results. However, given the extremely competitive nature of the industry, the lessons are highly customised as per the needs of the students as they are usually paying a premium rate for every minute of class time. By contrast, we, university teachers, focus more on aligning our teaching philosophy to what the department and the Japanese Ministry of Education consider to be the most important learning targets that are usually based on years upon years of research and/or experience. Unfortunately, most of these ideas take several years to propagate and often by the time they are finally implemented, the conditions change, sometimes drastically. As a result, implementation can vary considerably even within the same faculty on the same campus of the same university, given that each course facilitator is permitted some measure of freedom in how such standards are applied within their own curricula and classroom contexts. Certain institutions work on updating of curricula in 3-4 year cycles for the duration of which all issues are recorded but nothing is done to address them until the said curricula are due for a review. Such inflexibility can be very damaging in the long run since faculty members also have to constantly jump jobs from university to university thanks to the prevalence of the fixed-term contract system.

In reference to the point stated above, standardisation is necessary to ensure a consistent quality of human resources being produced by a country’s higher education system. Reliability too is improved once all faculty members within a department (at the micro level) and within a country’s education system (at the macro level) are of one mind regarding the need for a baseline set of skills that all graduating students should possess. The difficulty in this area arises when problems and challenges associated with a course are identified through the teaching experience, but changes are

unable to be implemented. Another stumbling block for ideal curriculum design is a lack of extensive research and training before deciding upon a suitable curriculum. It is essential to learn from the experiences of one's seniors. After all, if human beings had insisted on starting afresh every time, without seeking to build on the knowledge of their forebears, no progress would ever have been made. Ideally, all courses in a formal education institution should be created using the research findings, conclusions, and theories propounded by experts in the field of teaching. Unfortunately, native English speakers are often not held accountable for their curriculum design choices due to the inherent assumption of expertise associated with being from a native English-speaking country.

The problem here remains that in this whole scenario, the students are ultimately on the losing end of this arrangement. Not to mention the frustrations that teachers face from their efforts going to waste despite having tried everything in the given framework. Nunan (2013) says that "To my mind, the development of content and objectives, learning experiences, and assessment and evaluation instruments is the beginning not the end of the curriculum development process. This work, which is carried out before the instructional process begins, represents the curriculum as plan and results in syllabuses, textbooks, tests and so on. A second dimension is the curriculum in action as the curriculum is enacted in the moment-by-moment realities of the classroom. Finally, there is the curriculum as an outcome, that is, what students actually learn as a result of instruction. We now know from classroom-based research and second language acquisition research that the relationships between planning, implementation and outcomes are complex and asymmetrical. In other words, the traditional view that planning equals teaching, and that teaching equals learning is simplistic and naïve." (p. 130)

In this author's opinion, the best solution is to analyse curriculum design techniques that have been propagated by researchers in the field of language learning and education, compare them with prevalent circumstances, and implement as many as reasonably possible given the dual constraints of time and departmental policies. In order to further support her point, the writer tried to find works by authors who have worked with Japanese students. However, to her disappointment, curriculum design theories don't feature greatly among the researches undertaken by scholars working within the Japanese English language education environment. Therefore, the author decided to refer to one of the most comprehensive and respected work on this subject

and use it to compare and contrast her experience of working with Japanese universities as an English language teacher.

Following is a summary of steps as suggested by Macalister and Nation (2010) in their book *Language Curriculum Design*, to developing a sound curriculum that is founded on scientifically proven principles of curriculum design.

### **Summary of the Steps**

1. Examine the environment.
2. Assess needs.
3. Decide on principles.
4. Set goals, and choose and sequence content.
5. Design the lesson format.
6. Include assessment procedures.
7. Evaluate the course. (p.28)

It will perhaps be a vain pursuit to attempt to create a syllabus that will suit all needs, and it is not the intention of this author to prescribe such a holy-grail syllabus at this point of her research, if ever. Thus, the author intends to provide her analysis of each stage with reference to conditions in Japan in the following pages.

#### **I. Examine the environment and assess needs**

The first thing that must be considered before even beginning to imagine the syllabus is getting a clear idea of the class' composition or make-up. The fundamental factors like the number of students in a class, their ages, etc. are important, but also crucial are details like language ability which include details like, how long they have studied English and where (international school or public school), socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, beliefs that might affect ultimate goals and perceptions, and many others. The importance of considering all these factors comprehensively and minutely can be appreciated by just looking at the first point in the above list: Students in small classes can enjoy more one-on-one time with the teacher; consequently, the syllabus can be created with more teacher-student conversational opportunities in mind.

More importantly, the need for viewing all educational courses as training students' for their ultimate roles as global citizens is becoming apparent. For instance, Tokyo Institute of Technology has been working in association with the Asia-Pacific

Regional Bureau for Education, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO Bangkok) on a research project funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology, Japan (MEXT) to “explore the situation of “21<sup>st</sup> century skills” in the region in terms of integration of education policies (phase I), implementation in school level (phase II) and teacher training (phase III).”

The Yamaguchi-Takada laboratory (n.d.) reports:

Recently, importance of skills and competencies, in addition to academic knowledge and skills, such as creativity, communication skills, and problem-solving skills, are increasingly recognised as a key to nurture human resources that can adapt to knowledge-based society. Such skills and competencies are often indicated as “21<sup>st</sup> century skills”. The growing trend to pay more attention to develop “21<sup>st</sup> century skills” can be seen in Asia-Pacific region. Indeed, multiple countries in the Asia-Pacific region have started to introduce policy and curriculum aimed at cultivating non-academic skills and competencies.

For example, in 2011, for the first time in its history, Australia developed the national curriculum including “general capabilities” that are essential for Australian citizens to cope with the changes brought by globalization and new technologies (Australia national curriculum). In 2008, the Office of Basic Education Commission of Thailand identified the components of “life skills” in its core curriculum, which intends to develop students’ comprehensive capabilities such as decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, creative thinking, communication skills, self-reflection, and empathy.

Macalister and Nation (2010) have listed in great detail certain points for a curriculum designer to consider, for example, a learner’s age should be an important factor in choosing what kinds of activities shall be appropriate for them in addition to the textbooks that can be used for teaching. The table provided in Appendix A proves a helpful guide to any language teacher trying to make a syllabus for a new or existing course. Each and every point should to be considered before finalizing course details.

Needs analysis is not a simple process; rather it can completely change the direction of a course if used incorrectly. Fortunately for university English teachers, this process is made easier in part because one of the main focuses of the students is to get suitable, desired employment upon attainment of their degrees. As was noted by

Hipsher (2006), “most adult students want to learn English for economic reasons and government schools primarily promote the learning of English also for economic purposes. Teaching English in order for both individuals and society to grow economically is adding social value to the societies teachers are working in.”

There is no harm in keeping the economic needs and goals of the students at the forefront when creating a curriculum. In fact, a broader vision of such an endeavour includes businesses – having to spend less time and resources in training the employees – joining hands with educational institutions to ensure the quality of graduates being awarded degrees is on par with industry needs. This would benefit not only the economy at large but also recent graduates as they transition into the role of employees by reducing frustration and bewilderment faced in job interviews. This applies in particular where the individual’s knowledge of the employer’s expectations of them are vague at best. The interviewees are left grappling for answers to specific job-related questions typically asked at interviews, while interviewers, on the other hand, are set the herculean task of finding a self-motivated needle in an otherwise merely adequate haystack. It is apparent that the tertiary education system is not encouraging students to actively seek information regarding the needs of the industries they wish to enter upon graduation. Also evident is a lack of focus on helping students become responsible, productive members of society who are able to make decisions and deal with unfavourable situation proactively. This is especially apparent in the way many soon-to-be graduates cannot state what position they would like to attain in their employment, but merely that they wish to become “a salaryman.” As such, students at present seem to overwhelmingly prefer to settle for attending interviews with little to no preparation or concept of what to expect rather than conducting their own research concerning the needs of the employer who is about to interview them. Cookie cutter approach to employee training and mass recruitment/intake every April. All new hires undergo the same training regardless of their respective majors, university degrees or work experience.

## **II. Deciding the principles, setting goals, and choosing content**

Some general principles can be applied to all courses. Macalister and Nation (2010) recommended the following principles based on educational theory and research:

The first group of principles deals with content and sequencing. That is, they are concerned with what goes into a language course and the order in which

language items appear in the course. The aim of these principles is to make sure that the learners are gaining something useful from the course. It is possible to run a language course which is full of interesting activities and which introduces the learners to new language items, but which provides a very poor return for the time invested in it. This poor return can occur because many of the lessons do not contain anything new to learn, because the new items have very little value in the ordinary use of the language because they set out interference conditions which result in a step backwards in learning rather than a step forwards.

The second group of principles deals with format and presentation. That is, they are concerned with what actually happens in the classroom and during the learning. Most practically, they relate to the kinds of activities used in the course and the ways in which learners process the course material. It is in this aspect of curriculum design that teachers may have their greatest influence on the course.

The third group of principles deals with monitoring and assessment and to some degree evaluation.

In each of these groups, the principles have been ranked in order of their importance, so that the first principle in the group is the most important of that group, the second principle is the next most important and so on. (p. 45)

One of the most important points in the above-mentioned quotes is that having interesting things, games, fun activities, and so on in a course do not necessarily ensure continued learning. In fact, it has been observed that most courses provide very little value addition in terms of new skills and language that students learn. It is a well-known fact that Japanese students start learning English in Junior high school and may even take English classes in elementary school depending on the parents' inclination. In addition, by and large, most students who enrol in English language degree courses are expected to have passed other English language proficiency tests like Eiken, TOIEC, etc. Ideally, a minimal level of grammar understanding and vocabulary possession is assumed when making a curriculum for university students. Therefore, very little time is spent on systematic language learning and the primary focus is on acquiring conversation and communication skills. Granted there are reading, listening and vocabulary classes but there is hardly any correlation or cooperation amongst teachers to avoid repetition and ensure progressive learning. The fact is that most students are not able to confidently apply grammatical principles they learned

during their school years in speaking and communicating. According to Yoshida (2013), “Currently the emphasis is on getting children accustomed to the English language through simple verbal communication, such as singing songs and playing games, rather than teaching grammar and reading and writing skills.

The education ministry is now considering upgrading the lessons for fifth- and sixth-graders to full-fledged language classes, including written English, a ministry official told *The Japan Times*, noting these classes might take place three times a week.”

As long as university courses are developed with the presumption that grammar must be treated as ancillary to the communication tasks, the students will not be able to independently apply the communication skills they learn in class to unfamiliar situations. Everybody knows the basic principles of sentence-making like SVO, i.e. Subject-Verb-Object pattern, but anything more complicated than that and the students find it difficult to manage communicating their views incoherent English. Consequently, many English language course teaching communication skills do not arm the students with the most elementary tools to speak fluently.

As remarked by Macalister and Nation (2010),

The use of “game-like” activities can be a powerful tool to vary the methods by which students are asked to acquire a new language, particularly with regard to vocabulary repetition and retention. The addition of a challenge or competitive aspect to a learning task is especially prevalent in Japanese university classroom contexts and favoured by students for its similarity to high school activities, and the fact that in the students’ minds the word “game” is often equated with “fun” and seen by them as a means to avoid more serious, traditional forms of study such as reading, writing and listening tasks. So, despite the short-term improvement in student engagement when games are introduced, they quickly see diminishing returns as the high repetition inherent in them (especially when used repeatedly throughout a course) inevitably wears thin with the students and reaches a critical point at which they can become demotivating for students and actually counterproductive. Thus the liberal use of games should be avoided and the same games should not be used too often so as to retain student interest in the longer-term. This concern must be kept in mind by instructors so as to avoid falling into a pattern of recycling the same activities *ad nauseum* in lieu of setting up tasks with more learner-centred goals. (p.96)

The argument against the active teaching of grammar in class emphasises the fact the students learn grammar at school extensively, albeit in Japanese and can usually identify most grammatical principles easily. However, the ability to actually use those grammatical patterns is rarely taught in classrooms in schools or universities. Macalister and Nation asserted that (2010) "... in the Japanese language learning context, a linear lesson progression rather than a module-based approach would seem most effective." (p. 82) Therefore, it is important to make sure that each course deals with the progressive building of students' capabilities in each class. The focus should be on bringing the average capabilities of the class to the level where progressively more complicated tasks and activities, when introduced, work to build upon the existing skills of the students. In general, courses containing appropriate amounts and types of language-focused learning achieve better results than courses which do not include such learning. (Macalister and Nation, 2010, p. 65)

Willis and Willis (2007) (as cited in Macalister and Nation, 2010) point out that opportunities to focus on language arise naturally during a task cycle. The teacher may highlight necessary vocabulary at the outset, learners may focus on the language used to convey their meaning during the task, and the teacher may close the cycle with a focus on form. All the same, if a task-based syllabus is used it is particularly important that there are other ways of checking the coverage of content, particularly vocabulary, grammatical items and types of discourse. Good curriculum design involves the checking of courses against a range of types of content. (p. 90)

### **III. Assessment**

As has already been observed, specifying goals is an essential element of a well-designed course. Ideally, placements tests should be done before inducting students into a course and bridge courses can be provided for students that fall short of the required proficiency level. All classes see a variation in abilities amongst the students, but without a placement test, this difference can make consistently achieving course goals a challenging task. Once the course starts, there should be tests to check if achievement goals are being met.

According to Macalister and Nation (2010),

Short-term achievement is more easily assessed if there are clear performance objectives for some of the learning goals. A performance objective is a state-

ment consisting of five parts (Brown, 1995) (as cited in Macalister and Nation, 2010). It describes (1) who should achieve the objective (the subject), (2) what the person should be able to do (the performance), (3) under what conditions the performance should occur (the conditions), (4) how the performance will be tested (the measure), and (5) what level of performance must be reached (the criterion). (p. 123)

A class' assessments must be decided keeping in mind how the students will be assessed, that means deciding whether oral or written assessments, or individual or group assessments are necessary. This requires a consideration of how much class time will be dedicated to the students' work on specific assessment tasks, and, perhaps more importantly, what competencies must be demonstrated by students before a passing grade can be awarded. Similarly, decisions must be made regarding what denotes generic competency levels in common usage, as in the difficulty scale of Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced, etc. This will, in turn, necessitate a discussion of whether students will require scaffolding in order to reach required competency levels at various stages throughout a given course.

Assessment protocols should be considered prior to textbook selection or finalising a syllabus, in particular with respect to what competencies a curriculum designer wishes their students to achieve by a course's end.

This will result in a more student needs-oriented course that in turn will, ultimately, result in more students acquiring practical skills, rather than simply completing individual tasks on a week-to-week basis that are mostly disassociated from one another.

Universities around the world have different ways of assessing a student's performance; from marks system in India to GPA in the USA (REFER). Many language degree courses rely on continuous assessment as opposed to a final exam. Continuous assessment is definitely the best way to judge how much a student has learned over the course of the year and how their communication ability has improved. The only roadblock is the kind of assessments used and the grading rubric. If the goals and objectives of a course are not clear, to begin with, the assessments can be a hit or miss. Students need to know exactly what is required of them at each step and what they can do to achieve that. For instance, if a course's in an Academic Writing course, students should be made aware that A Requirements Analysis document should first be drafted containing all pertinent information concerning a class' profile such as

students' age range, sex breakdown, cultural background, their majors and current English skill level.

## Conclusion

As is evident from the above discussion of steps involved in curriculum design using the theories propounded by eminent researchers in mind, the process of designing a syllabus starts from analyzing the environment alongside learners' needs and concludes with evaluation of the success of the course goals leading to the implementation of the findings in the new syllabus. Thus, the process repeats endlessly and cyclically. In the absence of such, expecting the students to be able to communicate fluently without gaining confidence in the basics of a language can, most generously, be characterised as optimistic. How can a student be expected to run the hurdle race of English proficiency before they even learn how to maintain balance while standing on their own linguistic feet? It is a well-known fact that Japanese students begin learning English in junior high school or earlier, but that knowledge has probably made the university curriculum developers believe that students are capable of performing tasks which require a certain level of communication ability. The problem increases in magnitude as time goes by and students move from year to year with most of the issues in their language usage skills still unaddressed. So much so that by the time they leave the protective bubble of the university environment, the gap between what the world expects of them and what they have been trained to do becomes a chasm that is almost impossible to bridge. Hence the need for the *Eikaiwa* industry – it exists to fill the gaps left by the formal education system with little success, unfortunately. Thus, compounding the problem to the degree that many people develop a phobia of and a deep angst regarding learning the language.

It is like that one brick left loose in the foundation of a building that makes it impossible to ever attain structural integrity. In conclusion, several types of research, previous and ongoing, have sought to address the issues faced by curriculum designers while creating courses for university students in Japan and many more need to be undertaken to devise a plan that fits the peculiar circumstances that exist within the Japanese education system. The least we, as lecturers or instructors, can do is to be aware of the realities on the ground and not presume a class' skill level based solely on paper certificates and test scores.

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## Appendix A

<i>General constraints</i>	<i>Particular constraints</i>	<i>Effects on curriculum design</i>
<b>The learners</b>		
How old are they?	Are the learners interested in all kinds of topics? Can the learners do all kinds of learning activities?	Take account of learners' interests Use appropriate activities
What do they know?	Do they share a (first) language? Can their first language be used to help learning? What previous learning have they done?	Use teacher-centred activities Use some translation Use first language pre-reading activities Use reading input
Do they need English for a special purpose?	Will they use English for a wide range of purposes? Do they expect to learn certain things from the course? Do they have expectations about what the course will be like?	Set general purpose goals Include expected material Allow learners to negotiate the nature of the course
Do they have preferred ways of learning?	Are they interested in learning English? Do they have to learn English? Can they attend class regularly?	Use highly motivating activities Include relevant topics Recycle activities Use a spiral curriculum
<b>The teachers</b>		
Are they trained?	Can they prepare some of their own material? Can they handle group work, individualised learning . . . ?	Provide ready-made activities Use group work activities . . .
Are they confident in their use of English?	Can they provide good models? Can they produce their own spoken or written material? Can they correct spoken or written work?	Provide taped materials Provide a complete set of course material Use activities that do not require feedback
Do they have time for preparation and marking?	Can the course include homework? Can the course include work which has to be marked?	Provide homework activities Provide answer keys
<b>The situation</b>		
Is there a suitable classroom?	Can the arrangement of the desks be changed for group work? Is the blackboard big enough and easily seen?	Use group work activities Use material that does not require the students to have a course book

Is there enough time?	Can the learners reach the goals in the available time? Is the course intensive?	Set staged goals Provide plenty of material Set limited goals
Are there enough resources?	Can material be photocopied? Can each learner have a copy of the course book? Is there plenty of supplementary material? Are tape recorders etc available?	Provide individualised material Use teacher-focused material Match the content to available supplementary material Develop audio and video taped material
Is it worth developing the course?	Do learners meet English outside class? Will the course be run several times?	Provide contact with a large amount of English in class Put time into preparing the course

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Environment constraints and effects (Macalister and Nation, 2010, p. 17)