Issues in Power-Up Tutorial in the Schools of Foreign Studies and World Liberal Arts

Brian R. McNEILL

Abstract

Power-Up Tutorial (PUT) is a compulsory program for first-year students at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies (NUFS). While the form of PUT varies within each School at NUFS, this paper sets out to describe certain issues, both historical and current, within the Centre for Language Education and Development's (CLED) PUT program. Specifically, the Department of British and American Studies pioneered this PUT program, and the current program is the natural progression from that original program as set out in 2003. Over the last 16 years, when an aspect of the program has had need of attention, the original concepts of PUT have been revisited so as to better inform the choice of direction for the next academic year. This paper will review some of these issues with the goal of demonstrating the dynamic nature of the PUT program.

INTRODUCTION

Power-Up Tutorial (PUT) is a compulsory course for all first-year students within the Centre for Language Education and Development (CLED), in the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FFL) at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies

(NUFS). PUT was created in the 2003 academic year to address the need for students to have increased direct interaction with a native-speaking teacher using the language of their department of study, English. The original goals of PUT were somewhat simple: provide the opportunity to interact with a native speaker, promote students' increased confidence in using their L2 to interact with native speakers, raising the awareness of students to current world events and world issues through shared readings, discussions and written responses, provide focused feedback on phonemic decoding, and raise students' awareness of the great variety of accents and cultural orientations within the native English-speaking world. Over the last sixteen academic years, the PUT program has been a constant success, being very popular with first-year students, and has provided for them the motivation and encouragement needed to succeed in both the study of English and the study of cultural aspects of the country of their program of choice.

While the PUT program has operated continuously, there has been constant change in the program as we have addressed weak points and sought to fine-tune the course to the changing needs of our students. Over the years we have had quite a number of full-time tutors in the program, and each tutor has provided valuable input toward solving such issues-of-the-moment, and thereby contributing to the overall success that PUT has enjoyed. This paper seeks to review the issues related to the changes over time, so as to provide awareness that rather than being a static course, PUT can be seen as being a flexible and dynamic course to which a great variety of people have contributed. Some of these issues were only temporary, some issues are now history, while other issues are continual and always in need of attention. The PUT program has most definitely benefitted from each and every tutor who has participated over these sixteen years. The issues reviewed here will be divided into two categories, Organization and Content, for ease of explanation.

ORGANIZATION

The issues related to Organization that will be discussed here are as follows: students per booth, materials format, and the attendance and grading system.

Students per Booth

In the very beginning, much discussion was placed on the number of students per booth, in particular how such a decision would have an impact on student's response to the course versus the total payroll cost of the program. PUT was modelled after certain programs that existed at the time at other institutions, those programs having three students per instructor (tutor). However, consideration was given to having four students per tutor, as this arrangement would provide certain payroll savings. Ultimately, three students-per-tutor was chosen as the best way to meet the overall goals of the PUT program as outlined above, though it is true that in recent years we have drifted to four students-per-tutor. Yet, what are the merits of each?

Three students-per-tutor was initially the choice for the PUT program, as it was seen that the instructor is 'in group', meaning able to interact closely with each of the three students in the lesson. The teacher would pair-practice with each student in turn, which lead to both high student satisfaction and an increase in confidence in students to use their L2 with a native speaker. When conducting discussions, the groups of three students had significant opportunity to express their opinions directly to the teacher, while being able to monitor other students' ideas and input as well. Regular student surveys have continually established this as fact, that students were highly satisfied with their direct interactions with their tutor, and that students felt an increase in confidence in their use of L2. Interestingly, various other institutions such as Waseda University, along with for-profit language schools such as AEON, ECC, and NOVA, all use the three-students-per-instructor format.

In fact, four students-per-tutor has now become the norm for our PUT

program. This format is seen as being less optimal than having three students, because the tutor is now seen to be 'out-group', meaning in the pair practice portion of the lesson the tutor is observing rather than actively participating. It is true that the tutor can offer timely feedback to any student, or even join one pair in discussion, but in a majority of cases the tutor is observing, or 'out-group'. In this situation, the lesson may appear to be more fixed, rigid and methodological rather than appearing to be 'free interaction', meaning more like a language lesson instead of a 'discuss with a foreigner' lesson. The worry has been that this will lead to a decrease in the level of satisfaction that students have with the PUT program, and perhaps even a decrease in the gains in student confidence in using their L2, but perhaps several more years of survey feedback will be required before any definite conclusions can be made.

Materials Format

This issue basically surrounds the idea of whether to use a textbook in the lesson, or not. A textbook can provide confidence to students, something 'solid' for them to hang on to, and over the last sixteen years of PUT we have danced around the issue of having a textbook a number of times. Ultimately, we now have an excellent textbook titled *Power-Up Dialogue*, published by NUFS Press. I believe it represents the culmination of the previous fifteen years of progressive development of the PUT program. A textbook can provide a professional cover for any course, with the contents and the expected progress of the course being easily understood by the students. The units of study can be seen in advance, and students can become comfortable with a regular pattern of class activities. Such a situation provides *face validity* for the program, promoting both students' comfort with and confidence in their study.

In contrast, the use of weekly handouts can allow for greater levels of achievement in both student satisfaction and student confidence, mainly by the fact that contents can be created in a timely manner utilizing the most up-to-date feedback

on the overall progress of students in the course, and any particular week's materials can be tailored for maximum benefits. Naturally, two issues must be addressed when using weekly handouts, those being the consistent appearance, format and activity type, along with the issue of timely distribution. To address the first issue, we developed lesson templates so as to unify the font (type, size, and hierarchy), the layout, and the consistent activity flow. For the second issue, we utilized the in-house *Moodle* learning system where students were required to access and download the class preparation sheets. Basically, we strived to minimize confusion by having identical-looking lessons where students could easily recognize the in-class activities and prepare for as such. They could focus their energies on the content of the lesson, as compared to trying to understand what was going to happen in the lesson. In effect, we were creating a textbook which was then delivered unit-by-unit on-line, which brings up the topic of the history of the PUT textbook.

Not every textbook is suitable for a particular program, and regarding PUT we have certainly found that to be the case. In the first year of the program, the we chose to use weekly handouts because everything was an experiment, everything was being tried for the first time, and we could not be sure what lesson components would be a success and what components would not. Lesson activities were designed based on the wide range of original course goals (see above), and we were trying to combine read-aloud with current-events news, supported by language activities and 'free discussion'. The first year of the program was certainly a challenge, with adjustments to the course occurring every month. In the second year, in order to allow for more discussion time through a fixed lesson structure, we moved to the use of a textbook *Tell Me More*. This book had as its core the application of Conversation Strategies as scaffolding to promote free discourse. Unfortunately, being a textbook for regular classes of 90 minutes, we could not use every activity, and some tutors questioned using it at all. Thus, in the third year of PUT, we discontinued the textbook and returned to creating

our own weekly content centered around the newspaper articles and 'speaking skills', meaning the 'Conversation Strategy of the week' and contexts in which it could be applied.

Over the next five years we continued to update and upgrade our Skills Sheets, and often we discussed both the idea of changing to a published textbook to make our lives easier, or the idea of making all the Skills Sheets into an in-house textbook. The limiting factor was the three-year contract of the full-time tutors, along with the staggered nature of their hiring. No group of tutors was concurrent long enough to work through the creation, piloting, testing, revision and then the final publication of the materials in a book format. Week-by-week publication of lessons was the only suitable format. As time progressed, changes in the program led to a four-year contract being possible, followed by the opportune timing of a group of eight tutors all being concurrently hired. That meant a solid team could spend the requisite three years working on a PUT textbook, and voilá, we have *Power-Up Dialogue*, with its eight authors. Though having a textbook has its limitations, in that timely changes cannot be applied on the spot, our current book is certainly perfect for the PUT program, being born of it. In addition, with the goal of 'raising up' new educators, the experience of producing a published textbook will be a wonderful asset for them all in their futures as educators.

Attendance and Grading

Natural parts of any university course would be the attendance-taking system and the grading system. PUT is no exception, and both have needed their share of attention so as to properly and appropriately execute their functions. In the beginning, in 2003, there were a maximum of 24 students in any given slot, so the taking of attendance at the entrance door was the natural method. As students entered, their name was ticked off on the roster and they were assigned their booth for the day. Grading was a somewhat simple task, as attendance was

really the only criterion and the course was set as pass/fail based on attendance and submission of a final report. Naturally, a student with insufficient attendance failed the course, but it soon became apparent that a small number of students were of a low-performing nature and there needed to be some kind of accountability for their lack of effort.

In this light, preparation became both an important and necessary requirement for the class, and in each slot, as students entered, their homework was inspected. Complete preparation was necessary for admission to the PUT classroom, and students with incomplete preparation were immediately tasked with doing that actual work in a private workspace prior to being permitted to join the lesson. In such cases, attendance was recorded as 'late'. This solved the problems caused by under-prepared students, and the criterion 'Preparation' became a part of the PUT grade.

Generally, students are very eager to participate in the PUT lessons, and with such a positive environment it is no wonder that PUT is a very popular course. "Generally" does not mean everyone, of course. Once we had established 'Preparation' as a criterion, many tutors began requesting a system in which they could report non-performing students and have them penalized in some way for upsetting or disturbing their lesson. Each year, there are a small number of students who for some reason or another do not wish to participate, or do not enjoy participating, in the lessons. Our response was to create a reporting system in which tutors could report on students who did not participate in their lessons, or in some other way upset the lesson, so that they could be both counselled where needed and/or given a non-pass grade should it be a borderline grading situation. Yes, someone could now fail PUT based on in-class performance.

Further to this, it became apparent that counselling needed to play an important role, as there could be a variety of reasons for a student's non-performance. It could be due to simple attitude, which required a disciplinary response, or it could be due to such things as the student being overly shy, quiet, having a

genuinely low level of English, having a bad day due to illness or lack of sleep, or even having a borderline personality disorder such as Asperger's Syndrome or being Bipolar. It was never as clear cut as one might think. Thus, a student's reported non-performance had to be categorized, and the response from the tutors in subsequent lessons tailored to the case. In all cases, it was the goal of the tutors to support each student in whatever way they could, so that each could feel comfortable and safe in the PUT classroom and thereby participate to their fullest capability. Positive encouragement at all times, with understanding. In this way, non-performance in a PUT lesson was now categorized into two elements, 'Participation' and 'Attitude & Effort', and tutors reported to the Head Tutor any case of non-performance so that a particular student could be given appropriate counselling in future lessons.

In the 2015 Academic year, certain reforms were implemented within the FFL which included both the change of grading system for PUT from pass/fail to letter grade, and the requirement for proportional grading, meaning defined limits for the number of students receiving an A or A+ grade. At the same time, enrollments in specific time slots of PUT had grown to over 40 students, which now required as much as 10 minutes of the 45-minute class time for homework to be checked, specific students counselled, and the attendance recorded. Clearly, the system needed streamlining.

Our response was to create a system of digital attendance-grading in which students were awarded 'points' in each lesson of the term, and the cumulative total of points was converted to a number grade for input to the on-line Portal grading site. Digital attendance made use of a card reader at the door where students 'beeped' themselves in, that attendance recorded in a spreadsheet database. In each slot, students in need of counselling could be noted in advance, and when they 'beeped in', the system would identify them to the tutors at the door and the student would then be taken aside for counselling. As for grading, students were evaluated by their tutor in each lesson for their Preparation, Participation, and

their Attitude & Effort. After much discussion, a comparative grading system was chosen as the method most suitably matched to the proportional grading requirement of the faculty. Preparation was scored objectively based on degree of completion, and in the other two categories the students were ranked, with a score of '5' being given to the 'best' student in that slot, a score of '4' being given to the next best, and a score of '3' to the remaining students. In the case of exceptionally poor preparation, participation or attitude & effort, a tutor could award a score of '2' or '1' as appropriate, which resulted in a 'flag' for that student to receive counselling in the following week.

It was then the task of the full-time tutors to input the daily scores into the grading database, where the cumulative scores would be converted by means of a formula into a numerical grade for the whole course, with the top-point-receiving 10% of students being awarded an A+ level grade and the next 20% being awarded an A level grade. This system has been in place for four school years now. Our digital attendance-grading system is not without its flaws, but to date it has proved to be satisfactory to all the concerned tutors.

Bachelor's holding or Master's holding staff

In Japan, teaching at the college level requires a minimum of a Master's degree. In the initial year of NUFS, with the hiring of a large number of instructors for this new program, there was the problem of finding enough suitable candidates. As it would be a pass/fail program and that grade assigned by the program director, it was seen that Bachelor's holders would suffice as instructors who were not directly responsible for grading. With this decision, PUT became known as an entry-level course for college-level teachers, and a new goal of 'raising' new teachers was added to the program. We could hire new-to-college-level teachers and/or new-to-Japan teachers, and guide them in their development as instructors in higher education. This was a somewhat controversial decision, and the system it created carried on for many years, though recently we have revised

the hiring criteria to require a minimum Master's level of education. But was are the merits of these two groups, as seen through the lens of PUT?

Reviewing the records of the employees who have taught in the PUT program over these past sixteen years, it can be seen that almost all of them have been Bachelor's degree holders. Many came to NUFS after serving as Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) in the government's Japan English Teacher (JET) program. These people were hired in their home countries, and worked as junior high school or high school English teachers (ALT) for one or more years, before moving to NUFS at the end of their work contact. Others came to NUFS from teaching in private schools, a few came to NUFS from private Language Schools, and a small number were hired from overseas. The common point was somehow they were recommended to NUFS by a current or former NUFS employee, and that they were not eligible for regular college class teaching as they had no Master's degree. This is true for both part-time and full-time serving PUT staff.

Generally, these staff had little or no formal training in Education or Language Teaching, and had been surviving on whatever skills and techniques they could acquire on the job. In this sense, they were well suited to the small-group interaction practice which is the mainstay of the PUT program, along with the solid support of the full-time teachers for both training and advice. Most staff had taught in public schools with large classes and low-level students, so they were quite overjoyed to be able to interact closely with the intermediate-level PUT students at NUFS. In addition, generally for these tutors, the PUT payment was their best paid work. With these two key items, comparatively high pay along with enjoyable work time, teaching in the PUT program was the best day in their work week. Thus we continue to have a high retention rate of part-time staff, and very few workplace issues.

Master's degree holders, in contrast, are somewhat different. A review of the records of the Master's degree holders shows a somewhat different picture. These staff tend to be 'all-around-town' part-timers, who work at a number of

colleges teaching a large number of classes. They tend to teach large-group classes, and have the freedom to decide and create their own content for courses. They can, and are perhaps expected to, apply their own knowledge and expertise in creating and conducting their own independent lessons. For this, they are paid standard college-level wages. This places them in a somewhat different perspective when teaching PUT at NUFS. There have been numerous instances where a Master's holding staff was not satisfied teaching our set material, but insisted on teaching their own material which they thought was 'better'. In addition, these teachers were not accustomed to interacting directly with individual students, as in their own large classes they functioned as facilitators of activities rather than as participants, a requirement of PUT. They sometimes even resented that they had to talk with students. Finally, as the payment for PUT is only 90% of the standard college-class wage, the PUT lessons were the lowest-paid work in their workweek. Thus, in contrast to the Bachelor's holders discussed above, for these Master's holders PUT was a course in which some had to teach materials they did not necessarily like, to interact directly with students which they found demeaning, and it was their worst-paid work in their work-week. Clearly, these factors can explain the many conflicts we have had over the years with the Master's holding staff.

For these reasons, I have always supported the hiring of Bachelor's holding staff, as with the proper training and support, their enthusiasm for teaching in PUT represents a huge benefit for the students, for the program, and for NUFS. More than half of the full-time PUT tutors have gone on to do MA degrees and enter the college-teaching profession, and two have even completed PhD level studies. These people speak very highly of their humble beginnings in the PUT program, and we are very glad for their enthusiasm for teaching.

CONTENT

The issues related to Content that will be discussed here are as follows:

phonemic decoding and current events versus cultural events.

Phonemic Decoding

Phonemic Decoding is a fancy name for a relatively simple activity, read-aloud. It is basically word-recognition training, in that the student attempts to read aloud a short passage, and the native-speaking teacher gives immediate feedback related to pronunciation, word-form, word derivation, word conjuga-tion, word collocation, pronoun reference, and/or lexical cohesion chains as they may see fit. Such training seeks to raise students' awareness of the connection between the spoken and written forms of a word, and it was felt that the environ-ment of the PUT lesson with three students and a native-speaking teacher was ideal for such an activity.

As the initial content for the PUT lesson was to have current-events news article items, it was a great opportunity to include phonemic decoding as a part of the lesson. At the time, in 2003, katakana-style speech was still rampant among first-year students, and improvements in pronunciation, along with word recognition, was seen to go a long way toward developing the language skills of our students. Over the years, however, improvements in high school English programs have manifested themselves in our new students having much better pronunciation skills as compared to before, and the tutors began to see that the time invested in the read-aloud activity could be better spent in discussion or other output-focussed activities. Ultimately, in the 2015 academic year, read-aloud was discontinued, and currently is not a part of the PUT lesson.

Current events versus Cultural events

A constant question for educators seeking to introduce content to their lessons is the orientation or nature of the topics they choose. One of the initial goals of PUT was to include a current-events discussion segment in the lesson, for it was felt that young people needed to develop their awareness of current domestic and

international news. With this in mind, enrollment in PUT included an English-weekly newspaper subscription, and each week select articles were to be read and discussed. The initial plan for PUT, for cost reasons, was for one issue of the newspaper to be used over two lessons. Two articles per lesson meant that four articles needed to be selected from each bi-weekly issue. While it is natural to assume that the most important news items appear on the front page, there are always certain gems included in the middle pages, and our newspapers were no different. In those years, the second Gulf War had recently ended, and the Afghanistan War was just getting underway, so these war stories tended to fill the front pages of the newspapers. Perhaps once in a while discussing war might be interesting and beneficial to students' world knowledge, but every week? Perhaps not. Other than war, government scandal and American politics were the regular fodder. Within the paper, however, were the local domestic news items along with articles on seasonal and cultural events and activities. These articles quickly attracted our attention, in contrast to the international news on the front page.

Over the first few years of PUT a regular comment was that culture-based articles were much easier to use than current-events, as you could get students to participate actively in discussions on international festivals and holidays, international foods and clothing, foreign music and film, and celebrities. These topics can be seen to be perennial in nature, and students are able to discuss comparisons and express opinions with ease. In short, we were able to get much more out of them by using culture topics versus current-events topics, both domestic and international. Thus, the content of PUT can be seen as related to supporting the development of cultural sensitivity, cross-cultural awareness, and how current Japanese culture is situated within a world context.

SUMMARY

This report has sought to highlight the idea that rather than being a 'static'

or 'fixed' course, over the last sixteen years the PUT program has been very dynamic and evolutionary. Through what may be considered a natural task, we have worked to revise, fix, augment and otherwise improve upon what has been used before, so as to have a program that is best suited to meeting the ever-changing needs of our students. I have touched on a small selection of issues related to the organization of our program as well as the content included, and with these examples I hope the reader can grasp the full nature of the challenges faced by the tutors in the day-to-day operations of the course along with the administration of such a large program. That Power-Up Tutorial remains such a highly popular course is in no doubt a credit to the many instructors who have both participated in its operation and contributed to its development. We look forward to yet another great year for PUT, and the challenges that it will bring.