# The Core English Programme in the Schools of Foreign Studies and World Liberal Arts

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This paper has multiple purposes. Firstly, it is to provide an overview of the Core English (CE) Programme at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. Secondly, by providing such an overview of the course it is hoped that other teachers and course leaders may gain ideas that might benefit their own programmes in some way. Additionally, as I am always looking for ways to improve the course, providing this course summary will, hopefully, result in feedback through the provided email address that allows me to develop the programme further.

## 1. The Fundamentals of Core English (CE)

Before discussing the different parts of CE it is necessary to first look at the purpose and goals of the course. The course purpose is what should, and does, drive all other considerations. This section will lay down the fundamental assumptions and beliefs that underpin the course. This is done not only for informative purposes, but as a course rationale that allows the means to better understand and contextualize the more specific activities and other working parts that will be detailed later.

Core English is a course taken by all freshman students within the Faculty of Foreign Languages. As of early 2019, this comprised the following departments:

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| Department of British and American Studies | Department of Chinese Studies |
| Department of English Language Teaching | Department of Japanese Studies |
| Department of World Liberal Arts | Department of French Studies |

Approximately 800 students take the Core English course each year. TOEIC scores among these students range from under 300 to over 900. Among this cohort are students of different national backgrounds such as Brazilian, Peruvian, Filipino and Korean. With such a large and increasingly diverse student population taking the course, and with English proficiency levels ranging to such a degree, it is clear that a more traditional language teaching approach based on the acquisition of certain graded grammatical structures is not appropriate. An approach that can still be relevant to students' wildly different levels is required. Such an approach will inevitably involve goals beyond the acquisition of certain grammar points and vocabulary, as important as they may be.

It is at this point that other considerations become necessary, such as the language learning experiences and disposition of students. It goes without saying that students will enter university with different language learning experiences, diverse educational personas and attitudes to learning English. However, if one is to make a needs analysis of the student cohort, it becomes clear that certain commonalities exist and that they must be considered. The vast majority of students taking CE will, for example, have come directly from a Japanese high school and they will likely have been educated exclusively within the Japanese education system. Again, differences between schools, teachers and boards of education exist, and I do not wish to claim complete uniformity, but having taught at several Japanese high schools, certain traits and beliefs are common.

Such a conclusion is not my own. Any centrally controlled educational system will inevitably develop its own characteristics and, for the Japanese school system, these have been documented at length in numerous articles and books from both Japanese and non-Japanese academics (Anderson, 1993; Azuma, 1998; Bradley, 2013; Cave, 2007; Goodman, 2007; Horio, 1991; Kobayashi, 1976; McVeigh, 2000, 2002; Yoneyama, 1999).

With regards to language learning, I would like to focus in particular on the style of language teaching and the demeanour of students, the latter being partly a consequence of the former. Students entering university will have most likely studied English in high school classes that placed a huge emphasis on form. This form is often drilled through heavily teacher-controlled separated inputs and outputs that confine language use and remove any possibility of authentic use. Focus is on language and not communication, something understandable given that school teachers are largely guiding students towards examinations that demand knowledge of form and accuracy. The risk taking required in communication is often neither allowed nor encouraged as regurgitation of predetermined set forms, rather than positive communicative outcomes, mark success.

With such a generalized assessment of incoming students' English needs and learning experiences, the following points are identified as course objectives of CE:

• To foster an attitudinal shift in the way students view English and language learning.
• To develop fluent and confident speaking.
• To develop knowledge and awareness of certain content areas.
• To encourage students to reflect on their own language use.
• To learn new vocabulary and conversation strategies.

The goals on this list are listed in order of importance. The primary goal is an attitudinal shift from a passive, often can't-do, attitude towards English to one characterised by a growing ownership of English and a belief that English use is neither an aberration that conflicts with one's own identity (Aspinall, 2003; Rivers, 2010) nor is it unachievable as may be believed by students pushed to replicate native-speaker use (Holliday, 2006, 2013). Fixed views of identity can stifle language learning and interlocutions with intercultural Others (Bradley, 2018a) and CE, therefore, aims to shift English away from attachment with a particular group and clearly focus it in the minds of students simply as a skill that, like all others, can be developed and learned through active use.

At this point it is necessary to mention the role of content. CE places great emphasis on content as it is the discussion and development of content that allows students to constantly engage with the language by placing it within meaningful communicative exchanges. A focus on content also fosters greater cognitive maturity in students and a greater awareness of their language goals and challenges (Lightbown, 2014). Though many, if not all, language courses have a subject of discussion that provides a context for language use, this is not the same as a focus on content. The role of content in CE is much more central; developing content knowledge is as much a purpose of every unit as the development of language ability. Indeed, the very purpose of content is to drive language learning by providing a real purpose for English use that removes a sole focus on linguistic elements and places it firmly on meaning and successful communicative acts. Without placing emphasis on content, this would be much more difficult to achieve.

However, it would be wrong to characterize CE as a fully content based language course. A purely content based approach has no predetermined language syllabus (Thornbury, 2006) yet CE contains elements which closely represent communi-

cative language teaching (CLT). A glance at the materials will show that there is significant scaffolding through graded readings, discussion prompts, vocabulary work, discussion preparation sheets, conversation strategy development, and so on. It would, perhaps, be more accurate to describe Core English as a mix of content based language teaching and CLT approaches.

The content is chosen to be interesting but also highly relevant to students. The four subjects of the first semester are:

Unit 1 – University Life
Unit 2 – Food and Health
Unit 3 – Living Overseas
Unit 4 – Japanese Culture

The topics are also selected to be familiar to students and allow them to express opinions and experiences relating to the topics, but also be deep enough to enable students to learn new information, discuss things from different perspectives and engage in research to uncover additional aspects. Ultimately, content offers the possibility of authentic and meaningful language use through the development of knowledge and awareness of different subject matter. With focus on the subject and not simply on linguistic elements, focus is firmly fixed on meaning and the successful communication of information and ideas.

## 2. The Working Parts of Core English
### Structure of a unit
Having detailed the rationale for the course, its objectives, and the approach that has been chosen to work towards these, this section will present the different parts of a CE unit.

Each unit contains the following main parts:

- Introductory discussion questions
- Reading 1
- Listening questions
- Imaginary dialog sheet
- Listening transcript
- Reading 2
- Project brief
- Checklist
- Recording preparation sheet
- Recording reflection sheet

Each element of the unit is there to prepare for the next and to build upon what came before. This is true in terms of content knowledge and language. Each unit is taught over six classes. An example of a typical skeleton unit plan for these six classes can be seen below.

| 1 | Topic introduction. Discovering what is already known using the introductory discussion questions. Sharing initial opinions, views, etc. |
| 2 | Reading 1– comprehension work, content discussion, vocabulary work. |
| 3 | Listening – listening comprehension, discussion, conversation analysis. |
| 4 | Reading 2 – comprehension work, content discussion, vocabulary work. |
| 5 | **Project** – Students communicating their own research findings. |
| 6 | Quiz, **imaginary dialog** sharing, **recorded conversations**, conversation **reflection**. |

As can be seen, the development of the content comes from the text, teacher and the students themselves. Classes 2, 3 & 4 feature content information that is presented to students via readings, video and audio clips. Classes 1, 5 & 6 are student driven and focus on the sharing of information students already know or have researched about the topic.

Several elements of the course have been highlighted in the skeleton unit plan above. While all parts of the unit are there for a purpose and mutually support other parts, the highlighted elements are especially important as they provide

much of the impetus for the unit as well as being the course components (along with short quizzes) that are graded. The grading system will be discussed in more detail later, but for now I will outline the key aspects of a unit.

**The Recording and Reflection**

**Purpose**
- To reinforce content learning.
- To encourage fluency and the uptake of vocabulary and conversation strategies.
- To encourage students to be reflective of their own learning and language use.
- To highlight that effective language use is best judged by their performance in a communicative exchange of information.

The recorded pair conversation is typically 6 minutes long and features in the final class of the unit. It is mentioned here before other unit elements because it is the culmination of the unit in that it allows students to reflect on what they have discussed in class. In the timed discussion, students endeavour to include information from class texts, their own opinion, the opinions of others, as well as information brought into class discussions by themselves and classmates through the unit research project or other means.

Though the recording itself is not graded by the teacher, students are required to complete a short reflection task for homework that is assessed. This reflection task requires students to watch their conversation and comment on the level of content they discussed, their use of language, their interaction with their partner and to identify three particular areas in which their discussion could be improved. Points are awarded on the level of substance and introspection students' reflections demonstrate as well as the accuracy and appropriateness of their proposed conversational/rhetorical changes.

**Imaginary Dialogs**

**Purpose**

- (Preparation) To provide the chance for students to create a conversation on the theme of the unit prior to the recording.
- (Review & Recycle) For students to use the vocabulary, content, conversation strategies of the unit in a conversation of their own design.
- (Feedback) For teachers to assess how the unit language is used and give some individual or class-wide feedback. Imaginary dialogs are particularly useful for checking language because the language used is considered and written rather than spontaneous and spoken. Therefore, any language issues that emerge from students' work are likely to be errors rather than mistakes. Errors indicate an incorrect understanding of function or form whereas mistakes, typically found in spontaneous production, are the result of real time use where students know the correct usage but simply made a mistake during production (Bradley, 2018b).

An example imaginary dialog (ID) is provided in each unit. This is given in the form of a listening exercise and the accompanying script. Students work on the ID throughout the unit with the deadline being the final class. Working on the ID throughout the unit allows students to add content, vocabulary and conversation strategies as the unit progresses, but also allows for constant editing and reaffirming.

In the final class of the unit, as a final means of preparing for the recorded conversation, students share their IDs in small groups. The sharing of each other's conversations prior to the recording not only primes students for the conversational task further for by reading through (usually) three conversations of the topic, it also offers increased exposure to the vocabulary, conversation strategies and content thereby increasing the chances of uptake. As part of this ID

review, students provide comments to the writer on all aspects of the conversation prior to submitting to the teacher.

**CE Project**

**Purpose**

- To encourage students to research independently.
- To supplement the content of class with material chosen and presented by students
- To give each student an individual bank of information to discuss in their recorded conversation.
- To encourage fluency and foster an understanding of language that places the effective communication of meaning above a focus on form.
- To make students active and responsible participants in the development of unit content.

All students receive the same project brief in the CE textbook and prepare their presentation out of class over the course of the unit. The briefs require students to engage in independent research, but do so in ways that guarantee students will be bringing very different information to class. First semester examples of this are students researching the pros and cons of moving to live in different countries (Unit 3), or interviewing an elderly member of Japanese society about the cultural changes they have experienced in their lifetime (Unit 4).

Given that the project is a required part of every unit, students' presentations are typically short, being usually between 3–5 minutes depending on the brief and class situation. Students use this time to clearly present their findings and respond to questions.

To reduce the anxiety often associated with presentations, to increase language

use and uptake, and to increase class cohesion, students give their presentation multiple times on a one-to-one basis. In addition to the positives listed before, this format also results in greater audience feedback, participation and questioning, as well as ensuring that all students are actively engaged at all times. Following the presentations, students pair with a new classmate who saw entirely different presentations and summarize the information they heard for their new partner. All of this makes presentation classes extremely active and ensures the maximum value is achieved from students' independent research in both a content and language development sense.

The repeated nature of presentations affords teachers ample opportunity to view all student offerings and take notes for feedback on either a class-wide or individual basis. As a graded element of the course, teachers focus on the appropriateness of content in terms of relevance and depth, and the degree to which this is successfully communicated to the audience.

**Grading**

Assessment in CE strives to be formative at all times, even for methods that may appear to be purely summative. IDs and presentations are assessed by teachers, but also provide the basis for targeted feedback and the revisiting of specific points as needed; even vocabulary / content quizzes provide teachers with information on student uptake that can be addressed in subsequent classes of the unit.

As a course that is taken by many hundreds of students across different departments within Nagoya University of foreign Studies, there must be consistency of grading. Although the grading focus of each assessed element has been mentioned briefly in the sections above, extensive grading rubrics are available for CE teachers in the course guide they receive. These rubrics cover each element of the course and offer teachers support and clarity in grading while also

ensuring a certain level of course-wide calibration that is needed for the greatest level of fairness possible.

## 3. Outcomes

The outcomes of CE must be judged according to the goals the course set out to achieve. Though there is always room for improvement and refinement, the first three years of Core English can be regarded as a success. A key goal of CE is to change and develop students' attitudes to English, English learning and English use at a fundamental level. Rather than being receivers of language, students have begun to own English and increasingly view it is a vehicle for the expression of meaning. Evidence of this comes in multiple forms, but perhaps the most salient barometer of success is direct student feedback. Both standardized university feedback surveys and bespoke CE feedback surveys strongly identify CE as a course that students value highly and enjoy greatly. Ultimately, the impact of the course can be seen in the students' own words on the comment papers they complete at the close of the course. In response to the simple question "What things were good about this class?" many replies similar to those shown below were common.

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| *You never denied what we said. Therefore, I could speak English with **confidence**. I was given reflection times, so I could find what's my bad point and improve it.* |
| *I could speak English with **confidence** because there were a lot of opportunities to speak English. I think getting used to is very important.* |
| *The lessons are interesting. Even if the topics are serious, the how it is was interesting. I like how the class is **interactive**.* |
| *We can use English **proactively**. Additionally, thanks to your explanation we can easily understand for this class.* |
| *I gained **confidence** in my English. I like to talk with my classmate.* |
| *I had a lot of **opportunities** to talk with friends and teacher. I could improve communication skills.* |

*Language used is the student's own.

As can be seen, confidence was a word students often used indicating that the goals of creating a can-do attitude and ownership of English are being met. Students also often pointed to the interactive nature of classes and the large amount of language use time as course aspects they particularly appreciated.

These views were not only expressed in post-course surveys; they were common themes present in students' comments after watching back their first and final recorded conversations at the end of the course. Here, students could clearly see their development in both their attitude towards English and their skill in its use. This is even more the case when we consider the difference in difficulty of the subject matter berween their first and final recording; students talked about university life and the switch from high school to university in their first recording, and the different strategies employed by advertisers in their final recording.

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| *The first conversation I looked really nervous, the conversation wasn't smooth, no reactions, sometimes stopped. The last recording we could talk smoothly, react a lot. It is more like a conversation.* |
| *I got to speak English better without stopping. My reaction skills improved. I could feel how my English skills have improved.* |
| *First recording I used a lot of Japanese such as etto, nayakke and something. I think I improved. Now, I can talk to my friends smoothly. I'm happy to watch my growth.* |
| *I've improved. Now, I speak more proactively than unit 1. Also, I became able to help my partners. Conversation becomes smooth. At first, we used Japanese a little, but now we can talk in English.* |
| *In the first recording, I watched paper because I didn't have a confidence to speak English. However, in the latest recording. I could decide what to say. In the latest recording, we could start the conversation more naturally than the first one with small talk. I came to expand the conversation.* |
| *Compared to our first speech, I improved a lot when it comes to pronunciation, grammar and reactions. I was also able to speak without matching the level of my partner. We are able to speak naturally.* |

*Language used is the student's own.

As I teacher, I wholeheartedly concur with the opinions expressed above. Students' growing comfort and confidence in using English is clearly visible. By having English as the carrier of meaning in class and by placing greater emphasis on successful communicative outcomes rather than correct use of prescribed forms, students became active language users and develop a can-do attitude. Although the uptake of vocabulary and conversation strategies aids in this and were also developed over the duration of the course, the attitudinal shift that occurred is, in my view, paramount. By transforming their view of English and seeing themselves as English users, and able ones at that, I believe CE sets important ground work for all future English classes that students will take during their university careers and beyond.

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