
A close look at the effects of the current Courses of Study on Kanagawa University students' English learning

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Abstract

The present study tried to investigate the difference between 2005 and 2006 Freshmen of Business Administration at Kanagawa University in their attitude toward their own English learning. It was expected that the current Courses of Study, which introduced the five-day week system and approximately 30% of reduction in contents of each course subject at high school in 2003, might have influenced 2006 Freshmen's past English learning. The data from a questionnaire given to 2006 Freshmen and those from Shite (2006), which had carried out the same questionnaire and procedure as the present study with 2005 Freshmen were compared and analyzed with regard to three points; their motivation for learning English; their English ability; what they want to learn and what they do not in a university English classroom. It was found that 2006 Freshmen appeared to have more confidence in their English ability and higher proficiency than 2005. Another finding was that although the majority of both Freshmen thought their past English learning was uninteresting, more 2006 Freshmen demonstrated practicality than 2005 in their attitude toward English learning. Moreover, contrary to 2005, 2006 Freshmen tended to prefer learning productive skills such as conversations, which might be attributed to the emphasis the current Courses of Study placed on the development

of practical communication abilities. Further studies would be needed to validate the findings.

Introduction

It is widely said that Japan has been facing the problem of youth's deteriorating scholastic proficiency (Komatsu, 2002; Ikai, 2003; Sato, 2005). As a matter of fact, the results of an international survey of academic ability such as PISA2003 indicated the tendency for Japanese children's academic ability and motivation for learning to decline. Although numerous factors are involved in the outcome of learning, it would be plausible to say that one of the factors that caused this problem is the Courses of Study guideline, which has been revised by Ministry of Education every about ten years since 1958.

The Courses of Study are established according to laws and ordinances and provided as the standards for educational courses in all schools. The objective and contents of each course subject are stipulated under their influence (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, and Science and Technology, 2007). Thus, they exert their authority to much extent not only on the process of authorization of textbooks but also on classroom teaching in terms of what and how to teach.

The current Courses of Study has been implemented at elementary and junior high school since 2002 and senior high school since 2003. What is to blame is that with the aim of avoiding the cramming knowledge and allowing children "room to grow" (YUTORI), they introduced the comprehensive five-day school week system, which was accompanied by approximately 30% of reduction in contents of each course subject.

Mochizuki (2001) summarized the main features of the current Courses of Study for foreign language instruction at high school. There are seven features:

1. Foreign language instruction became compulsory.
2. A main objective is to develop students' practical communication

abilities through foreign languages.

3. Language activities should be conducted by integrating the four skills.
4. The word “international understanding” was left out of the overall objectives of foreign language instruction.
5. A grammar point to be learned is not allocated to each grade and subject as in the 1989 version of the Courses of Study.
6. The number of English subject was reduced from 7 to 6.
7. The total number of English words to be covered was reduced from 2000 to 1800.

It is not only students but also teachers that are influenced by the Courses of Study. As many researchers pointed out (Takahashi, 2004; Saida, 2006), what teachers have been the most worried about seems to be that the great emphasis on the development of students’ practical communication abilities (feature 2) may hamper students’ acquiring fundamental grammar and lexical knowledge (feature 5&7).

In the 2006 year, freshmen at university were expected to be the first students that had taken high school class subjects under the influence of the current Courses of Study. That is, the ones who entered a university in 2006 had learned at high school in a different way from those in 2005 with regard to quality and quantity. Although only a few empirical studies prove that the youth’s academic ability is deteriorating due to the current Courses of Study (Saida, 2006), it would be worth investigating the difference between 2005 and 2006 Freshmen in their learning. Shite (2006) conducted a survey with Kanagawa University students, a portion of whom were freshmen of Business Administration (BA) in 2005, to examine their views on their English learning and their motivations. The present study intended to replicate Shite (2006) partly in order to explore the difference between 2005 and 2006 Freshmen of BA at Kanagawa University in their attitude toward their own English learning. Moreover, it was expected that the effects of the current Courses of Study on their attitude would be observed.

Research Questions

In order to examine the effects of the current Courses of Study, the following question was addressed: Are there any differences between 2005 and 2006 Freshmen at Kanagawa University in their views on their English learning? Moreover, the question was investigated with regard to three points: 1. their motivation for learning English; 2. their English ability; 3. what they want to learn and what they do not in a university English classroom.

Methodology

Participants

The participants were the first-year Kanagawa University students of Business Administration (BA) in 2005 ($n=76$) and 2006 ($n=72$). The data for 2005 and 2006 Freshmen and those of 2005 Freshmen were compared and analyzed. The former data derived from Shite (2006), which employed the same procedure as the present study. According to the results of the placement test, which students take before a semester begins, they are allocated into a certain level of English proficiency slot so that they study with peers whose proficiency levels are similar to each other. The type of class the participants belonged to is as in the following table. Both 2005 and 2006 Freshmen groups consisted of the four different level classes.

The levels of the classes targeted

Business Administration				
Period \ *Level	Tue: 2nd	Tue: 4th	Fri: 1st	Fri: 3rd
Advanced-a				
Advanced-b				
Intermediate-a		●		
Intermediate-b				
Intermediate-c	●			
Intermediate-d				
Intermediate-e				●
Intermediate-f				
Beginner-a				
Beginner-b				
Basic-a			●	
Basic-b				

The mark '●' is a kind of class the participants belonged to.

*Proficiency levels decrease in an alphabetical order.

The participants were to be taught by the researcher. So he had not met them before. In the first class of the spring semester, the researcher conducted a questionnaire with them. They were willing to participate in the present study although they had not been informed of it in advance.

Procedure

The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire during the first ten minutes of the first English class in each year's spring semester. The data for 2005 Freshmen came from Shite (2006), which carried out the same questionnaire and procedure as the present study in 2005. The questions had been derived from the questionnaire administered by Matsuda *et al.* (1993) at Obirin University and arranged for the current study. Since the open-ended questions designed to help the researcher

get to know more about students for his instruction plan were discarded as unnecessary qualitative data, the current questionnaire, written in Japanese, consisted of the following five types of questions, four of which had a rating scale (see Appendix for reference to its example):

1. Do you like English?
2. What do you think of your English proficiency?
3. What do you think of the English classes you had taken by the time you graduated from high school?
4. Do you have any qualifications of English?
5. What do you or don't you want to study in a university English classroom?

The first three questions were expected to draw some inferences about the participants' motivation for learning English. The next question was to indicate their English ability and the last was to show what they hoped to learn or not to learn in a university English classroom.

Results

All the data from the questionnaire conducted in 2006 and from Shite (2006) were quantified and analyzed. Table 1 shows the participants' view on English in terms of if they like or dislike it.

Table 1. The students' views on English

	2005	2006	TOTAL
I like English.	36 [47.4%]	33 [45.8%]	69 [46.6%]
I dislike English.	40 [52.6%]	39 [54.2%]	79 [53.4%]
Total	76	72	148

The total data reveal that about 53% of the BA students disliked English. Although there seems to be no big difference between 2005 and 2006 in

this respect, the proportion of the ones who disliked English was a little larger in 2006 than in 2005.

Table 2 shows that how confident the BA students were in their English skills.

Table 2. The degree of the students' confidence in their English ability

	2005	2006	TOTAL
confident	1 [1.3%]	1 [1.4%]	2 [1.4%]
somewhat	13 [17.1%]	12 [16.7%]	25 [16.9%]
not very	34 [44.7%]	41 [56.9%]	75 [50.7%]
not at all	28 [36.8%]	18 [25.0%]	46 [31.1%]
Total	76	72	148

Overall, the majority of the BA students (50.7%) were not very confident in their English ability and about 30% of them were not confident at all. That is, about 80% of the BA students had a negative attitude toward their own English ability. Only a few (1.4%) of them had confidence in their English ability, which was observed in both year groups. The comparison between 2005 and 2006 indicates that the greater degree of negativity was shown in 2005 Freshmen than in 2006 in that about 12% more students thought they were not confident at all in 2005 than in 2006.

Table 3 shows what the BA students thought of the English classes they had taken by the time they graduated from high school.

Table 3. What the students thought of the English classes they had taken by the time of high school graduation

	2005	2006	TOTAL
interesting	14 [18.4%]	15 [21.1%]	29 [19.7%]
uninteresting	46 [60.5%]	27 [38.0%]	73 [49.7%]
uninteresting, but useful*	14 [18.4%]	20 [28.2%]	34 [23.1%]
others	2 [2.6%]	9 [12.7%]	11 [7.5%]
Total	76	71	147

*useful for university entrance examinations

Overall, about 50% of the BA students thought the previous English classes were not interesting. When the third category, 'uninteresting, but useful for university entrance examinations' is taken into account, about 73% of them considered the English classes to be uninteresting. However, the comparison between 2005 and 2006 Freshmen indicates that about 23% more 2005 Freshmen thought the previous English classes were uninteresting than 2006 Freshmen did. Moreover, in both of the second and third categories, it was found that about 79% of 2005 Freshmen and 66% of 2006 Freshmen thought the classes were uninteresting, but about 20% more of the 2006 Freshmen who thought so considered them to be useful for university entrance examinations than the 2005 Freshmen did. The two comparisons seem to infer that 2006 Freshmen tended to demonstrate practicality in their previous English learning compared to 2005 Freshmen. As for those who thought that the previous English classes were interesting, there seems to exist no big difference between 2005 (18.4%) and 2006 (21.1%). That is, about a fifth of each year group seemed to have been satisfied with their past English learning at classroom.

Table 4 shows the number of students who had a qualification of English.

Table 4. The number of the students who had a qualification of English

	2005	2006	TOTAL
Eiken 2nd	0 [0.0%]	1 [1.4%]	1 [0.7%]
Eiken pre 2nd	11 [14.5%]	14 [19.4%]	25 [16.9%]
Eiken 3rd	18 [23.7%]	12 [16.7%]	30 [20.3%]
Eiken 4th	0 [0.0%]	4 [5.6%]	4 [2.7%]
Eiken 5th	0 [0.0%]	0 [0.0%]	0 [0.0%]
others	3 [3.9%]	0 [0.0%]	3 [2.0%]
Total	32 [42.1%]	31 [43.1%]	63 [42.6%]

About 43% of the BA students had a qualification of English. Most of the qualifications were Eiken (Test in Practical English Proficiency). The qualification that the most participants possessed was Eiken 3rd (20.3%), followed by Eiken pre 2nd (16.9%). A close look at the difference between

2005 and 2006 leads to the notable fact that the majority (23.7%) of 2005 Freshmen had Eiken 3rd while the majority (19.4%) of 2006 Freshmen had Eiken pre 2nd. Since taking a qualifying examination is not compulsory, it is impossible to assert that there were more proficient freshmen in 2006 than in 2005; however, it seems that there was a tendency that there were more high proficiency students in 2006 than in 2005.

Table 5 shows what the students wanted to learn in English classes and what they did not. In addition, Table 6 shows the top five things they wanted to learn and the top five things they did not want to learn.

Table 5. What the students want to learn and what not in a university English classes

	2005		2006		Total	
	○	×	○	×	○	×
Conversation	41 [53.9%]	9 [11.8%]	47 [65.3%]	6 [8.3%]	88 [59.5%]	15 [10.1%]
Listening	45 [59.2%]	7 [9.2%]	46 [63.9%]	5 [6.9%]	91 [61.5%]	12 [8.1%]
How to read newspapers	42 [55.3%]	6 [7.9%]	35 [48.6%]	8 [11.1%]	77 [52.0%]	14 [9.5%]
Translation from E to J	34 [44.7%]	9 [11.8%]	35 [48.6%]	12 [16.7%]	69 [46.6%]	21 [14.2%]
How to write letters	26 [34.2%]	15 [19.7%]	25 [34.7%]	12 [16.7%]	51 [34.5%]	27 [18.2%]
Translation from J to E	28 [36.8%]	9 [11.8%]	25 [34.7%]	14 [19.4%]	53 [35.8%]	23 [15.5%]
Grammar	40 [52.6%]	9 [11.8%]	33 [45.8%]	11 [15.3%]	73 [49.3%]	20 [13.5%]
Reading long passages	32 [42.1%]	15 [19.7%]	28 [38.9%]	13 [18.1%]	60 [40.5%]	28 [18.9%]
Songs	32 [42.1%]	15 [19.7%]	27 [37.5%]	12 [16.7%]	59 [39.9%]	27 [18.2%]
Movies	45 [59.2%]	5 [6.6%]	45 [62.5%]	5 [6.9%]	90 [60.8%]	10 [6.8%]
Pronunciation	36 [47.4%]	5 [6.6%]	30 [41.7%]	10 [13.9%]	66 [44.6%]	15 [10.1%]
Discussion	15 [19.7%]	32 [42.1%]	12 [16.7%]	35 [48.6%]	27 [18.2%]	67 [45.3%]
Debate	8 [10.5%]	33 [43.4%]	10 [13.9%]	39 [54.2%]	18 [12.2%]	72 [48.6%]
Speech	6 [7.9%]	45 [59.2%]	8 [11.1%]	41 [56.9%]	14 [9.5%]	86 [58.1%]
Others	3 [3.9%]	0 [0.0%]	1 [1.4%]	0 [0.0%]	4 [2.7%]	0 [0.0%]
Total	433	214	407	223	840	437

Table 6. The top five things they want to learn and they do not

	2005		2006		TOTAL	
	want to learn	not want to learn	want to learn	not want to learn	want to learn	not want to learn
1	Listening & Movies	Speech	Conversation	Speech	Listening	Speech
2		Debate	Listening	Debate	Movies	Debate
3	How to read newspapers	Discussion	Movies	Discussion	Conversation	Discussion
4	Conversation	How to read newspapers & Reading long passages & Songs	How to read news papers & Translation from J to E	Translation from J to E	How to read newspapers	Reading long passages
5	Grammar			Reading long passages	Grammar	How to write letters & Songs

The overall data indicate that the BA students had a preference for receptive skills such as listening and reading and had a tendency to avoid handling productive skills such as speech and debate. There seems to be no big difference between 2005 and 2006 except for "conversation." The majority (65.3%) of 2006 Freshmen chose "conversation" as what they want to learn the most a university English classroom whereas it falls into the fourth rank for 2005 Freshmen.

Discussion

The majority of 2005 and 2006 Freshmen of Business Administration at Kanagawa University did not possess a positive attitude toward their English proficiency. The rationale behind this seems to be the fact that the majority of them possessed Eiken 3rd, which is designed for junior high school graduates, and no one but one student possessed Eiken 2nd, which is for high school graduates. Their past English learning seems to have influenced their attitude as well. About 73% of the BA students thought the English classes they had taken by the time of high school graduation were uninteresting. As a result, their negative attitude may have led them to think they do not have a preference for this subject.

In addition, the overall data show that the BA students seemed to prefer studying receptive skills to productive skills even though the importance of English communication has been widely accepted. The result is similar to Matsuura *et al.* (2001), which reveal that the majority of the university students were in favor of receptive skills whereas the majority of the university teachers preferred teaching involved in communicative setting.

A close look at the difference between 2005 and 2006 Freshmen seems to indicate that there seemed to be no big difference between them in their attitude toward English learning. However, some notable phenomena were observed. Compared to 2005, 2006 Freshmen took a less negative attitude toward their English ability. Moreover, thinking back of their previous English classes, 2006 Freshmen tended to demonstrate practicality in

learning English. Although a large majority of both year groups considered the English classes to be uninteresting, a larger proportion of 2006 Freshmen who thought so considered that the classes were useful for university entrance examinations than 2005 Freshmen. In other words, 2006 Freshmen had more “instrumental motivation” in order to pass university entrance examinations (Dornyei, 1990).

The data regarding a qualification of English appear to lend some support to the above findings. There were a larger proportion of the participants who had a higher level qualification than Eiken 3rd in 2006 Freshmen group. In fact, the data for qualifications do not provide a precise picture of how proficient the participants were because the fact that one does not have a qualification does not guarantee that they are incompetent. Nevertheless, it would be safe to say that 2006 Freshmen’s less negative attitude toward their English learning seemed to be ascribed to their higher proficiency than 2005 Freshmen’s.

The last point that should be mentioned is what they wanted to learn in a university English classroom. Although an overall tendency was that the BA students preferred learning receptive skills to productive skills, what 2006 Freshmen wanted to learn the most was English conversation, which counters Matsuura *et al.* (2001), whereas it was in the fourth highest position for 2005 Freshmen. This might be attributed to the effect of the current Courses of Study, which emphasizes the importance of English communication to more extent than the previous versions.

As for the problem of youth’s deteriorating academic ability, 2006 Freshmen were not as incompetent as expected. Rather, they had a tendency to have more positive attitude toward their English ability than 2005 freshmen. It would be reasonable to think that the effects of something new usually take more time to become noticeable; therefore, it might not be feasible to identify the effects of the current Courses of English on university students at present.

Furthermore, caution must be exercised when the results are interpreted since the number of the participants was small and statistical methods

were not used. In addition, the participants' background information was neglected. Some 2006 Freshmen may have studied at prep school for one year after graduating in 2005 so they were not influenced by the current Courses of Study. Another possibility was that some studied at a private high school, where the national guideline does not have to be followed. Further studies would be needed to explore the cause and effect relationships regarding the current Courses of Study.

Conclusion

The present study intended to pay attention to the effects of the current Courses of Study on Kanagawa University 2006 Freshmen's English learning. Although it is not feasible to identify the effects without using a sufficient number of participants and statistical methods, some notable differences between 2005 and 2006 Freshmen were observed. Contrary to the expectations, 2006 Freshmen tended to possess a more positive attitude toward their English ability than 2005 Freshmen, and the data regarding a qualification of English seem to lend a support to this finding. In addition, compared to 2005, 2006 Freshmen demonstrated practicality in learning English to more extent even though they thought their previous English learning at classroom was uninteresting. Moreover, 2006 Freshmen seemed to prefer learning productive skills such as "conversation" to receptive skills. Only this aspect seems to be attributed to the effects of the current Courses of Study, which focus the most attention on the development of practical English communication ability. Although some methodological flaws can be detected, it is hoped that the present study took a first step toward the understanding of the effects of the current Courses of Study on university students' affective variables in language learning.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

該当する番号に○をつけ詳しいことは()に記入してください。

A. 英語は好きですか。

1. はい 2. いいえ

理由 ()

B. 自分の英語能力をどう思いますか。

1. 自信がある 2. ふつう 3. あまり自信がない 特に () が苦手
4. 全く駄目

C. 高校までの英語の授業をどう思いますか。

1. 面白かった 2. つまらなかった 理由 ()
3. 面白くは無かったが受験には役に立った
4. その他 ()

D. 英語の資格 (TOEFL、TOEIC、英検等) を持っていたら書いてください。

例 (TOEIC 505 点)

E. 大学の授業でやってみたいことには○、やりたくないことには×をつけてください。

この授業に限らず全般的に答えてください。(複数回答可)

1. 英会話 2. リスニング 3. 英字新聞の読み方 4. 英文和訳 5.
英文レターの書き方 6. 和文英訳 7. 文法 8. 長文読解 9. 英語
の歌 10. 洋画 11. 発音 12. 英語でのディスカッション 13.
ディベート 14. スピーチ
15. その他 (具体的に)

F. この授業は Listening & Speaking を扱いますがどのような内容を期待しますか、

また具体的にどのような技能を身につけたいと思いますか。

例 (英語で日常会話ができるようになりたい。)

Thank you for your cooperation.