

## 【Practical report】

# Principles for Developing a Coordinated English Curriculum

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### Abstract

This paper describes a range of principles that were developed during the planning and implementation of a coordinated English program at Gifu University. The hope is that it may assist and inform anyone who is considering the introduction of a similar system. Different levels of coordination are discussed, and the potential benefits of a fully coordinated program are described. A number of possible objections to the introduction of such a program are also raised. The article goes on to outline the principles on which the author believes course goals should be set for general English programs at Japanese universities. The importance of staffing is emphasized, and the suggestion is made that traditional criteria for employing part-time teachers may not be appropriate in the context of a coordinated course aimed at teaching practical English skills. One of the most important elements in a coordinated program is the materials, and the author discusses the relative merits of using commercially-produced textbooks and creating materials in-house. Suggestions are also given regarding test design and the standardization of grading criteria.

Key words: coordination, coordinated program, general English, administration, materials development

### Introduction

According to Prichard (2006), all ESL programs exists somewhere on a continuum between complete teacher autonomy and rigid coordination. In general English programs at Japanese universities, the balance is tipped markedly towards the autonomy end of the scale (Amano, 1999; Prichard & Moore, 2016). This is because a core value of Japanese university culture is that each teacher is a specialist in their own field who can be trusted to provide high quality lessons to the students with very little in the way of supervision or oversight. This principle is extended even to part-time staff, since the ostensible reason for employing them is that they provide a way for the university to fill gaps in the expertise of their faculty.

With regard to English education, and particularly general English courses, however, it can be argued that this principle does not apply. For English courses, the primary reason for employing part-time teachers is one of numbers rather than expertise. Most universities require all of their students to take general English classes regardless of their area of study, at least during the first one or two years, and the majority of institutions do not have sufficient full-time staff to handle so many classes taught at the same time. As a result, the education of the students is sub-contracted to part-time teachers with varying degrees of guidance and supervision. In extreme cases, more than 90% of the total number of classes can be taught by adjunct staff, many of whom have little or no contact with their full-time colleagues.

The situation in Gifu University prior to academic year 2016 was that part-time teachers were selected on the basis of qualifications and publication records in their field of specialization, subjected to no oversight beyond the end-of-semester student feedback, and allowed to run their classes in whatever way they felt appropriate. This freedom covered goal setting, materials selection, content choice, and grading criteria. In this respect, Gifu University was not unusual, and similar approaches are taken by tertiary institutions all over Japan, particularly national universities. Even assuming that every teacher is working earnestly to do the best job that they can, however, this system still has a number of serious deficiencies.

The first of these is that the lack of coordination among teachers means that there is no continuity in the education that students receive. In high schools, teachers of third-year classes will be aware of what their students have studied in their first two years, and they will be able to build on that knowledge and integrate it into their lessons. In a situation where there is no coordination, however, this type of integration is impossible, and many teachers end up teaching an English class with no idea of what the students have done before or what they will do after.

Another issue with uncoordinated programs is that in most cases, students have no choice about which classes they take. When English teachers are allowed to focus on their own area of specialization or interest, students may find themselves engaged in activities as varied as translating Shakespeare, studying American history, or singing popular English songs, depending entirely on which class they happen to have been assigned to. This will not be a problem if the content of the course matches the students' needs and interests, but a student who wants to improve their TOEIC score is unlikely to be satisfied with a class focussed on translating 18<sup>th</sup> century English poetry.

Possibly the most serious problem, however, is one of fairness. Teachers naturally differ in both the demands they place on their students and the strictness of the criteria by which they evaluate them. If one student happens to be in a class whose teacher gives everyone a top grade as a matter of policy, this can (and in our experience, often does), lead to complaints from other students who fail their class because their teacher had much tougher requirements.

### **What is a coordinated program?**

Before looking at the arguments in favour of a coordinated program, it may be useful to discuss exactly what we mean when we talk about “coordination.” Coordination involves collaboration and the sharing of ideas for the purpose of improving the quality of the teaching program. Broadly speaking, coordination can be “vertical” or “horizontal.” Vertical coordination refers to the connection of classes that students take in a sequence, such as General English 1, General English 2, etc. Horizontal coordination, on the other hand, refers to collaboration among teachers of the same type of classes. Both of these are important, but the latter tends to be easier to achieve than the former, especially where a large number of part-time teachers are involved. This is for the simple logistical reason that teachers of the same courses are more likely to be at the university on the same day and at the same time, an obvious prerequisite for holding any kind of planning or coordination meetings.

In the Japanese university context, a number of different levels of coordination can be identified:

Level 1: Sharing of information among teachers without any top-down guidance or expectation of immediate change.

Level 2: General guidance on the content and aims of specific courses.

Level 3: The adoption of a common syllabus and core teaching materials.

Level 4: Agreement on grading criteria and the coordination of tests.

The main advantages of the first level of coordination are that teachers can share ideas and learn from colleagues without feeling that they are losing their autonomy. Nevertheless, some university teachers regard even this as an imposition and feel that it questions their professionalism. Some may also feel that this breaches the principle of absolute autonomy and represents a first step in a general move towards a coordinated program. For these reasons, a suggestion of even this level of collaboration can lead to fierce opposition.

Level 2 appears to represent a higher level of coordination than Level 1, but in many cases, this does not reflect the reality of the situation. This is because this “general” level of coordination can create the illusion of a coordinated program without the necessity of dealing with the complications and political fallout that would accompany a real one. In recent years, private Japanese universities have found it necessary to provide a higher quality of education in order to compete for a dwindling number of students (Cooper, 2014), and even national universities have come under pressure to increase accountability and efficiency in order to attract funding from the Ministry of Education (Yamamoto, 2014). Reaching a general agreement (or having one imposed from above) regarding goals and aims allows the institution to claim that it is coordinating its program. The reality, however, is that when guidelines of this nature are put in place, teachers are often left alone to carry on as before while simply paying lip service to the curriculum

requirements when writing their syllabuses. Nevertheless, if administered and supervised appropriately, this level of coordination can represent a major step towards a university-wide English program.

The move to the next level is the one that generally faces the most opposition, and it requires a far more significant input in terms of the time and effort required for both preparation and administration. Choosing materials that suit every teacher is an almost impossible task, and many will be pre-disposed to dislike a book simply because they are being required to use it. One way to deal with this problem is to involve the teachers in the selection of the materials or, where possible, in their development. (See below for a further discussion.)

The highest level of coordination requires teachers to administer the same tests and assign grades according to common criteria. This provides the maximum level of fairness for students, but it also requires the greatest investment in terms of time and effort on the part of the course designers and administrators. This is the level of coordination that has been set as a target for the Gifu University English Center.

### **The benefits of coordination**

In a general English program, there are four principle stakeholders: the students, the teachers, the university administration, and the faculties to which the students belong. Implementing a fully coordinated program brings different benefits for each of these.

The main benefit for students is that a coordinated program removes the “lottery” nature of class assignment. If every student buys the same textbook at the same price, studies the same content, takes the same test, and is evaluated according to the same criteria, then it matters much less which teacher’s class they end up in. Students will also be more motivated to study if they sense a progression in their study, and if they are aware that every teacher shares the same goals. Finally, most students will receive higher quality lessons as the nature of a coordinated program facilitates the ongoing development and improvement of every aspect of the course, from the upgrading of the materials to the refinement of the testing procedures and grading criteria.

Some teachers react negatively to the idea of a fully coordinated curriculum because of the initial disruption and the investment of time and effort required to learn the new system. Once these hurdles have been cleared, however, many find that teaching in a coordinated program actually makes their lives much easier in many ways. For one thing, teaching English 3 will be much simpler and more productive if you have a clear idea of (a) what is expected of you, and (b) what the students did in English 1 and English 2. You will also have much more opportunity to share ideas and collaborate with other teachers who are teaching the same course, which naturally creates an environment more conducive to professional development. Finally, part-time teachers who worry about having their contract renewed may feel more secure knowing that they are delivering exactly what the institution requires.

For university administrators, there are a number of practical benefits to having a coordinated English program. At Gifu University, one of these has been the switch from asking all part-time teachers to submit different syllabuses for each class to having one common syllabus for every course. A coordinated testing system also means that office staff do not have to ask each teacher when and how they are going to conduct their tests, and the use of common materials removes the need for communication between the book store and individual teachers. In many ways, a lot less administrative effort is required when every course is being taught in the same way and everyone knows what everyone else is doing.

In general, university faculties simply want to know that their students are receiving a high standard of English education. Having a coordinated program makes it easier for them to understand exactly what their students are being asked to do and the level they will be expected to achieve. In many universities, faculties also offer specialist English courses that aim to build on the foundations provided by the general English program. The introduction of a coordinated general program means that it is much easier for teachers to design and teach these courses as all the students will have learned the same material and practiced the same skills in the same way up to that point. Our experience at Gifu University has been that the faculties were highly supportive of the idea of introducing a coordinated program for this reason.

### **Objections to coordination**

Any attempt to introduce a coordinated English program at a Japanese university is likely to meet with strong resistance, particularly as most teachers tend to prize autonomy (English, 2010; Veugelers, 2004). Although it may be popular with younger, less experienced instructors who welcome the extra guidance (Hoy & Spero, 2005), coordination is unlikely to be received as well by older teachers who have developed their own way of teaching and would prefer to be left alone. This is understandable, and it is the primary reason why many institutions shy away from the challenge of moving beyond Level 2.

Another issue is that some teachers may feel threatened by an emphasis on practical English or English for communication if their field of expertise is literature or linguistics. While they may feel qualified to translate Shakespeare or explain the mechanics of complicated English grammar in their own language, many will have no experience of teaching practical English and feel, quite naturally, that a move in this direction is likely to endanger their job security.

A move towards a coordinated curriculum may even face opposition from teachers who are not directly involved in it. There are two possible reasons for this. The first is that some may see it as a slippery slope, worrying that even if they are not required to follow the new curriculum immediately, that situation may change at some point in the future if the new program turns out to be successful. The second is a philosophical objection to the idea of any kind of outside interference in university-level education. Inevitably, the decision about whether to implement a coordinated program in the face of the inevitable

opposition will be a political one that can only be taken at the highest levels, and it will usually involve a prolonged period of consultation and negotiation.

### Setting goals

Setting the goals of a program can be a very difficult task, but it is also the most important. Without a clear vision of what you are trying to achieve in each course, it will be impossible to make informed decisions on key points such as material choice, test procedures, and grading criteria. At Gifu University, the course goals were guided by four key principles:

1. The content and focus of each course should be clearly different from classes that the students took in high school.
2. There should be a strong focus on skills as well as knowledge.
3. The goals should be set in such a way that no student will be able to pass without intensive study and practice, but that every student should be able to pass if they are willing to put in the necessary effort.
4. The goals should be realistic and take into account both the students' level and the total amount of class time available.

The reason for making English courses at university as different as possible from the classes students took in high school is that most Japanese university entrants bring with them a negative view of English based on years of studying complicated and not particularly useful grammar in order to pass tests (Matsuno, 2018). Making it clear to students from the very first lesson that they are going to do something quite different at university is an important first step in changing their attitude. Most students appear to believe that they have “failed” at learning English even though they have passed the entrance examination, so it is crucial to persuade them that this new challenge is one at which they have a chance of success. The best comments we receive from students are those along the lines of “*kore nara dekiru kamo!*” (I might be able to do this!)

For the productive skills of speaking and writing, making university classes clearly different from high school classes involves focussing on skills rather than knowledge. For the receptive skills of reading and listening, it means teaching them things about those skills that they have not studied (or even been made aware of) before. The productive skills of speaking and writing do not receive much emphasis in high school English education for the simple reason that they are not required for the national entrance examinations. Focussing on these at the university level marks a clear step away from the English education that students have received before. Listening and reading, on the other hand, are taught and practised extensively, but there are many important points that are either under-emphasized or overlooked

altogether. Some examples are the role of pronunciation in developing good listening skills and the skill of reading for gist.

Most university English classes in Japan have students with a wide range of ability. This can be problematic for course designers, which is why some choose the option of dividing the students into ability levels at the beginning of the academic year. One problem with this approach is that less motivated students will often deliberately perform badly on the placement test to make sure that they get placed in what they perceive to be an “easier” class. Another issue is that restrictions of time and money mean that it is usually only possible to test receptive skills, grammar, and vocabulary knowledge at the placement stage. Unfortunately, this provides no useful information on a student’s ability or potential for development when it comes to using English for communication in the real world. Focussing on productive skills and areas that students have not studied in high school levels the playing field, making it possible to set the same goals for every student, and making streaming unnecessary.

The final point about goal setting is that all of the goals must be realistic, since beginning with aims that are obviously unachievable will result in failure for both the students and the program. The process of setting the goals may involve educating faculty heads and administrators who, if asked, will generally say that they would like the students to be able to read English academic papers in their field, give conference presentations in English, and add at least a hundred points to their TOEIC score. As every English teacher in Japan knows, of course, none of these things is possible with courses of 15 weeks, classes of 30 students, and a requirement that most students should be able to pass the class at their first attempt. No English program has any chance of success unless it begins with realistic aims and expectations from all of the stakeholders.

## **Human resources**

At the university level in Japan, there is a tradition that even part-time teachers are expected to have a post-graduate degree and, preferably, a number of publications in their field. The thinking behind this is understandable, but it can lead to perverse outcomes when those qualifications are given priority over teaching credentials and ability in the target language. For example, a lecturer with a post-graduate degree in American history may have done all of her post-graduate work in Japanese, and it is quite possible that her own level of English might be barely higher than that of the students she is being employed to teach. Overall, expertise in academic areas such as literature and linguistics should not be viewed as a qualification for teaching English as a foreign language (Barker, 2014).

If a coordinated program is to be successful, it is vital that the teachers who will be asked to deliver it have the necessary skills, relevant experience, and appropriate qualifications, such as a CELTA (Crocker, 2007). In cases where they do not, the program planners will need to ensure that sufficient teacher training is given, and ongoing support made available, for all teachers who need it. At Gifu University, we found

that some teachers were excited by the opportunity to develop skills that could improve their employment prospects, whereas for others, the perceived threat to their professionalism and identity was too great for them to overcome. These teachers voluntarily left the program. In some contexts, however, solving this problem can become a serious political issue, particularly since the introduction of the five-year rule for part-time teachers at Japanese universities (Rivers, 2013). Nevertheless, it will need to be addressed if a coordinated program is to have any real chance of success.

## **Material selection and development**

Material selection is one of the most important elements in the development of a coordinated program (Hutchinson, 1987), as the coursebook can be seen as the “visible heart” of any ELT program (Sheldon, 1988). Assuming that all of the teachers are using the same material, the textbooks will determine both what the students learn and the range of skills and knowledge on which they can be tested. The designers of a coordinated English program have a choice between using commercially-available materials or developing their own. Both of these options have benefits and drawbacks.

The main benefit of using commercially produced textbooks is a guaranteed level of quality. In addition, most books come with supplementary materials, including teacher’s guides, audio, video, and online activities. There are, however, a number of restrictions that this option brings to the program. The first is that when it comes to teachers and textbooks, one man’s meat is another man’s poison, and it is extremely difficult for any group of teachers to reach a consensus about which books to use. Another problem is that it may not be possible to find a book that exactly matches either the timetable or the goals of your program, especially if you use books that have not been designed specifically for the Japanese university context. Of course, using commercial textbooks saves an enormous amount of time and energy compared to developing your own, but care must be taken to ensure that the most appropriate books are chosen. It should also be noted that obtaining the views of both teachers and learners is essential (Rubdy, 2003).

The in-house creation of all teaching materials solves all of the problems listed above, although it will be virtually impossible for most teachers to match the quality of a professionally produced book. Nevertheless, if you are writing for your own students, you can design the correct number of lessons with exactly the right amount of material at an appropriate level of difficulty. Furthermore, teachers can pilot the material with the students who are actually going to use it, and changes can be made to reflect their feedback. Even after the materials are produced, the fact that they are produced in-house means that they can be developed and improved every year based on feedback from both the teachers and the students. Involving teachers in both the creation and the development of materials provides a valuable source of professional development for many, and every teacher is likely to feel a stronger sense of investment in materials they had a hand in creating. The main problem with developing materials in-house is that the



process requires an enormous investment of time and effort (Block, 1991), along with a requirement for a considerable level of expertise on the part of the designers. Based on our experience at Gifu University, however, this option is preferable wherever possible for the reasons discussed above.

## Tests and grading

One of the key concepts of a coordinated program is fairness in both testing and grading. Where teachers are free to test in any way they like, some students may end up purely by chance in a class where the teacher assigns grades based on completion of a simple task such as making a video, while others might be required to take a difficult test that requires a great deal of additional study and/or practice. This is clearly unfair, and it is likely to lead to complaints from the students who feel they have been unfairly treated.

According to Harmer (2015), “tests have a really powerful effect on what happens in classrooms” (p. 410). For this reason, tests actually make an excellent starting point for the design of a coordinated English program. This is because it is impossible to design tests without thinking very carefully about goals, so the development of both can take place in tandem. Once the test procedures have been set, materials development and issues of teaching methodology follow naturally. In our experience at Gifu University, the most important criterion for our tests have been their “washback” effect (Bailey, 1996). This term refers to the effect the test has on the way that students approach their classes. If a test is perceived as being too easy, absenteeism and behavioural problems such as speaking Japanese and sleeping in class may be observed. If it is too difficult, however, teachers will struggle to motivate students who believe they have no chance of passing. The aim, therefore, should be to create a test that no student could have passed at the beginning of the semester, but that every student is capable of passing at the end provided that they have studied the material and/or done the necessary practice.

Another core principle of a coordinated English program is that students who are taking the same course in order to receive the same credits should take the same test. Without the inclusion of a common test, it will be extremely difficult to ensure fairness of grading, as even with the best intentions, there will always be differences in the levels of difficulty of tests produced by different teachers. Even when a common test is used, care must be taken to ensure that the grading criteria are standardized as much as possible. For test questions based on multiple-choice answers, this will simply mean assigning grades to particular score ranges. For any test that requires subjective assessment, however, time and effort will need to be spent on making sure that teachers are all assessing students in the same way. This is particularly true for the productive skills of speaking and writing. Grading these fairly and equitably requires both planning and teacher training.

For the Gifu University English Center program, the first step in achieving these goals was to produce grading rubrics that were both easy to interpret and detailed enough to allow teachers to grade accurately. Creating rubrics that met these requirements involved a certain amount of trial and error, and

as with the materials, it was crucial that as many teachers as possible were involved in the process. The second step was arranging the training necessary for teachers to familiarize themselves with the rubrics and practice until they reached the point where they felt comfortable using them. This was done first with a core group of teachers in order to refine the system as much as possible before introducing it throughout the program.

Even with these procedures in place, it was still necessary to develop a system for reviewing grades after they have been assigned. Our approach to this is to mark papers in teams until every teacher feels confident in their ability to apply the same standards consistently. When all the grading has been done, course administrators and a group of full-time teachers review a sample of tests to make sure that no one has been overly strict or excessively lenient in their marking. This procedure obviously involves a lot of time and effort, but we expect that this will decrease naturally as the program matures and teachers become more familiar with the standards.

### **Management and administration**

Designing a comprehensive English course is a major challenge in itself, but no matter how well it is done, or how much expertise is involved in the planning, even the best program will fail unless it is implemented and run efficiently and effectively. This requires a great deal of planning, and it also requires teamwork and coordination between the course designers, the administrators, the teachers, and the office staff. This can be a challenge in many institutions, particularly larger ones. At Gifu University, extensive consultation with, and support from, the office staff have been key elements in the success of the program.

In addition, mechanisms for teachers to provide feedback, and for that feedback to be incorporated into the program, must be established at the outset so that everyone feels invested. Regular meetings and feedback sessions need to be scheduled in order to achieve this aim. At Gifu University, three levels of meetings are held on a weekly basis. The first is a management meeting involving the director, the course administrators, and sometimes the office staff. This focusses on day-to-day management issues, staffing, and long-term planning. The second is a meeting of all full-time teaching staff. The main topics discussed at this meeting are the materials, student feedback, and testing procedures. The third meeting covers similar ground but also includes any part-time teachers who want to take part. (This meeting is scheduled at a time where the largest number of them will be able to attend.) Through these meetings, a constant stream of communication is maintained among everyone involved with the planning, management, and implementation of the program.

### **Conclusion**

The planning and implementation of a coordinated English program at Gifu University involved a lengthy process of consultation, negotiation, and preparation. There was some strong opposition to the idea, mainly from full-time teaching staff who were concerned about the loss of autonomy that such a program might entail. A number of part-time staff also chose not to renew their contracts because they felt that they would no longer be able to teach in a way that allowed them to stay true to their educational philosophy.

During academic year 2017, recruitment took place for three new full-time teachers who would work with the two existing full-time supervisors and the director to create the core of the new English Center. In addition, new part-time teachers were hired to replace those who had indicated that they did not wish to renew their contracts for 2018. Planning also began for the new courses. For the first year, the new program has been implemented by a core group comprising all the full-time staff and five of the part-time teachers. This is being treated as a pilot phase with a view to bringing the whole general English curriculum under the umbrella of the English Center from 2019.

Since its introduction, it has become clear that having a coordinated program has brought a number of benefits for all the stakeholders: students are receiving a high standard of education that is both fair and equitable; teachers have more opportunities for professional development; and many administration procedures have been streamlined. Of course, the introduction of the new system has not been without problems, but based on our experience, I would recommend this path to any other institution that is considering it, provided they have the necessary expertise to plan and administer the program as well as the political will to push through what may be some unpopular changes.

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